



Goren Avery
Highlands Bar and Grill
Birmingham, Alabama

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Interviewer: Eric Velasco
Transcription: Diana Dombrowski
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Project: Highlands Bar and Grill at Work

[00:00:00:00]

Eric V.: This is Eric Velasco for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm conducting an oral history interview about Highlands Bar & Grill with Goren Avery. A waiter at Highlands since the day it opened on November 22, 1982. He is the star in Highlands Dining Room. Over the last thirty-seven years, he has served and worked with generations, and seen Highlands evolve into one of the nation's premiere restaurants. Mr. Avery—"Red Dog" to his bosses and co-workers—has been personally lauded for his work and played a major role in Highlands being named Outstanding Restaurant by the James Beard Foundation in 2018. Today is June 10, 2019. We're in the formal dining room at Highlands. Please introduce yourself, Mr. Avery, spell your name, and give us your date of birth for the record.

[00:00:48.09]

Goren A.: Yes. My name is Goren Avery, and I've been working for the Highlands Bar & Grill since 1982. It's been an amazing time working here for these last thirty-six and a half years. Just a little bit of history about how I got started in this business, back in [19]72, I was working at a place downtown—it's no longer available now, or it's no longer open—it was called the Downtown Club. It was a nice light kind of a luncheon thing back in the early [19]70s and how I got my start as a waiter assistant. Back then, they call it a busboy, where you bus the tables and you got to change off the tables and so on. [Laughter] So, it was an interesting time for me, not knowing I was going to stay into the business for this many years.

[00:01:57.00]

Eric V.: You weren't long out of high school at that point, were you?

[00:01:59.25]

Goren A.: Exactly. Excuse me. Finished high school in [19]71, and so, got into the grocery business as a cashier, as a sack boy. So, got out of the grocery business and got into the restaurant business in [19]70 – [19]73, [19]72. So, later on, maybe in [19]75, I applied for a job at the Hyatt Regency downtown. That was a restaurant on the top floor. The name of the restaurant was Hugo's Rotisserie. Beautiful, beautiful restaurant on the seventeen floor of the Hyatt resort downtown. Now it is called the Sheraton Civic Center. Same location, just totally different atmosphere. In that particular time, [19]75, I met a young man by the name of Frank Stitt. This is my friend, my mentor. [Laughter] The chef at the Highlands Bar & Grill that has put this thing together here at Highlands for the last thirty-six-and-a-half years. We met, [19]75. Frank was a food and beverage manager. Also, he was a wine steward. Frank was some of—just about whatever you wanted him to do at the Hyatt at that time, he was very, very sharp at what he did, as far as the restaurant world. I was a waiter assistant/busboy. Shortly after that, I worked my way up to a waiter in [19]75, [19]76. Shortly after being a waiter assistant for two weeks, I was asked to be trained as a waiter on the floor of the dining room. From that day, I polished my skills as a waiter, and later on in [19]75, [19]76, I became what you'd call a captain, which is what you do—a captain goes around at the tables that you are assigned to by another waiter to cook your food for the guests.

[00:04:34.03]

Eric V.: Tableside cooking?

[00:04:34.05]

Goren A.: Tableside cooking is a good word to call it. At that time, it was flaming dishes, all day, all night long. Dishes like Steak Diane. Dishes like wonderful entrees, Shrimp Scampi. Entrees people loved back then, Steak Diane. Other favorite choices, Chateaubriand. We have this peppercorn steak. We had all these wonderful—and I was responsible for fixing these amazing dishes and desserts, as some people would call it, old-school Bananas Foster. Cherries Jubilee, Flaming Jubilee, and some of the other amazing dishes like the Baked Alaska.

[00:05:22.12]

Eric V.: Because at the time, that was fancy dining.

[00:05:23.08]

Goren A.: Everything that you ordered was fixed at your table. Fancy dining. White tablecloth. Beautiful, flaming dishes. People loved the show. Then I was very, very good at that. So, I moved around from the Hyatt, I went to a place called the Relay House. The Relay House was also a private—it actually was a private resort, which was a private bank membership club, only had to be a member. It was also on the seventeenth floor of a Bank-for-Savings Building downtown, where I was a captain for awhile and a waiter there. And when Frank Stitt decided that he wanted to open up a restaurant in

Birmingham, he left the city of Birmingham in maybe [19]80, [19]81. He traveled around, just about all over the world, learning and getting all of this information and all of this research on what he was trying to do to open up a restaurant for Birmingham. He wanted it to be perfect. He wanted it to be really different. And in the earlier part of [19]82, I got a call from one of his friends that knew me and wanted me to come over at Five Points South and check out this building that Frank had found, that he was trying to get ready to be open as a restaurant. It blew my mind. I said, "Get out of here. My friend is going to open up a restaurant. I am so happy for him."

[00:07:02.18]

Eric V.: Had he talked about that any when you guys were working together?

[00:07:06.04]

Goren A.: Did not say a word about it. It was just kind of a surprise. I knew he had left the city and had been gone for a while and then came back. I got a call, I came over, and he showed me a piece of paper of what he was trying to introduce to Birmingham. I'll never forget it. It was some things I had never heard of or ever saw, never imagined having in the South.

[00:07:29.21]

Eric V.: Like what?

[00:07:32.11]

Goren A.: Things like, something that's called a Baked Grit Soufflé, which is one of our most popular appetizers on our menu today. [Interviewer's note: the official name is Highlands Baked Grits.]

[00:07:41.14]

Eric V.: For those who haven't had the joy of growing up in the South, how does one normally make grits?

[00:07:46.23]

Goren A.: Normally, in the South, I have grits almost every morning with bacon and eggs. What you do, you get this instant grits from the store, and it takes about five minutes once you get the water boiling. You pour in the instant grits and you add butter and cheese; a little bit of salt. You let those grits just get simmered and simmered until they're thickened and creamy, and then you serve those grits after about five minutes with some nice cheese, eggs, or some bacon or sausage, and some homemade biscuits. But this particular grit is so different than what I was raised on. It's more like a soufflé, which is baked in a ramekin, and the grits are ground especially for the Highlands Bar & Grill from a little area in Wilsonville, which is right in Harpersville [Interviewer's note: McEwan and Sons]. Matter of fact, it's a lot of nice, local farms out there. As I speak now, I think I know for a fact that there's a lot of farms out there that we are getting the corn from, like Wilsonville. Even Frank Stitt has a nice, local farm out there now that he has been establishing. [Interviewer's note: It's called Paradise Farm.] So, all these local farms around the city are producing some of the best product. So, we got some of this

ground, yellow corn from Wilsonville, ground for us, and we bake these grit soufflés in a ramekin. This is yellow corn. I was raised on white corn. So, you bake this amazing baked grits in a ramekin, and what's so different about this dish: around the base of the plate, you've got a variety of sautéed mushrooms. I mean, you've got button mushrooms and chanterelles and cremini and shitake, all these beautiful mushrooms that's also local and just-dug. You have this amazing strips of prosciutto. You have this fresh-picked thyme that has a lot of perfumed flavors from just very herbal— herbs, the thyme. Then you have some shaved Reggiano Parmesan cheese just right on top of the grits. At the finish, just light lemon butter sauce. People go crazy about this dish. So, that was one of the dishes that I was introduced to.

Secondly, red and golden bell peppers that had been roasted on the grill, roasted until the skin is super dark. You pull that skin off, open up that pepper, the red and golden pepper—you de-seed these peppers, take the seeds out, and add some diced black olives. And the dish is called Roasted Pepper Niçoise, which has black olives and garlic and olive oil and cornichons and capers. This is a stuffing that was in these peppers with goat cheese and a chiffonade of basil as a finish, with a little bit of extra virgin olive oil. I had never seen anything so pretty.

And so—Frank was showing us these dishes, the people he was trying to hire – myself, Dolester Miles—which is now an amazing pastry chef—Verba Ford, but she's no longer with the company now. [Interviewer's note: Dolester Miles was named Outstanding Pastry Chef in 2018 by the James Beard Foundation, the same year it named Highlands

the nation's Outstanding Restaurant in its 10th year as a finalist. Miles and Verba Ford are cousins.]

I'm just mentioning some of the people that started him off. Clarence Young, the cashier. There's another couple of guys and girls that's no longer with us, A.B. Barganier, George Pearson, Wayne Russell, may he rest in peace. So, out of the twelve or thirteen employees that started with Frank, there's only maybe two or three original employees still around: myself, Dolester Miles, Frank Stitt, Clarence Young. To be precise, there's four of us still hanging around.

[00:11:48.25]

Eric V.: For thirty-seven years, that's amazing.

[00:11:50.28]

Goren A.: [Laughter] And so, I really, really have learnt so much about what I do and what I love doing. Frank is an amazing teacher, and also, the thing about working for Frank and his wife, Pardis, they are so dedicated to what they do. They always instill, or always push: Ask a lot of questions. Ask a lot of questions. If you don't know something, ask a lot of questions. That's the only way you're going to learn. Don't be shy. There's not a stupid question in this food business or wine or whatever spirits. There's always something to fine-tune yourself, once you ask questions. Once you ask these questions, sometimes you just kind of do some research. Over the phone, now. You can find out a lot of information about things on Google; just ask your question and it pops up. That way, you can make notes and keep yourself in tune, because sometimes, guests will call

you out on something. You will get a guest to call you out on something, because nowadays, people are using their phones to research something on the menu. If you're not sure about what you are saying, you're going to get called out, and you're going to be embarrassed about it. Because you better know what you are doing, and that's why it's best to do some research, because you are going—in these days, now—to get called out. I have been called out and it made me do better. It made me sharpen my skills so, when a question come up about where this goat cheese is coming from or where this cow's milk cheese is coming from, you need to know what's going on.

[00:13:32.10]

Eric V.: Because that's the thing. You don't need to just know the ingredients or the phrases, who's producing and everything.

[00:13:40.07]

Goren A.: Who's producing. Who's bringing the fish to you guys fresh every other day. From the Gulf. We're having dinner with this young man and his name is on the menu quite often. His name is Greg Abrams, fisherman. Started off a small businessman; now, very, very large—and in charge— of the South. He brings it from the Gulf. As soon as he gets it on the trucks, iced down, brought to Birmingham within three or four hours. He'll stop by several nice restaurants that want to get some really good quality seafood: Bottega, Highlands, Chez Fonfon, Bottega Cafe and other nice restaurants around this city, maybe three times a week. [Interviewer's note: the Stitts own and operate Highlands, Chez Fonfon and Bottegs's café and formal dining room.] Monday, Wednesday, Friday, I see

this truck out front, from the Gulf. That's as fresh as you're going to get your seafood living in Birmingham unless you go get it yourself. So, this guy has been providing us with this seafood for the last thirty-six years. Amazing guy. A good friend of Frank's. And we are very blessed to have him to bring that amazing, quality seafood here to us.

[00:14:57.25]

Eric V.: He's been around since the beginning, right?

[00:14:58.12]

Goren A.: At the beginning, Greg Abrams, like I said, very small. Small truck, he came himself.

Now, his sons—he got two sons involved in delivering the seafood—and so it's a big business for him now. He's doing very well, and he's very dedicated to what he does. If the seafood is not right, he's not going to try to sell you anything that's been frozen or has been mashed. Sometimes, you get seafood from local places, it's just not fresh. It may look fresh, it may smell fresh, but it's not. It's all about the touch. It's all about the eyes of the fish: the brighter the eyes, you know, it's a certain thing that you look for in a fish.

The eyes are really bright and kind of got this little color and shine about the eyes, means that the fish is really, really fresh. If you got a fish that they eyes are all grey and lookin' just really bad, that fish is not fresh. So, it's kind of a trick that I learned. I heard Frank Stitt mention it several times, and also the sous chef: "Look at those eyes." It tells the story about how fresh a fish could be.

[00:16:08.22]

Eric V.: What happens if the fish isn't fresh or it's been previously frozen?

[00:16:12.27]

Goren A.: First of all, it has a certain texture too it. Sometimes it may be too soft. That means that it's got too much water, it's been frozen and unthawed and it doesn't taste good. It starts getting stronger flavor. We also will cook up a piece of fish and if we're not sure about it, we check it out before we serve it to the guests and make sure that it's up to our standards. If it's not, we'll send that fish back, or we'll just get credit for that piece of fish. Sometimes, you have a piece of fish that, after a day or two, it goes bad quickly. It depends on what kind of fish. The stronger-flavored fish – pompano, salmon – you have to be very careful. Those are the strongest-flavored fish, and those fish sometimes can go bad quicker because the fat content, and the aroma of the fish will get very powerful if it's not sold within two days at the most. So, we only order enough of those fish to last for that day. It's okay to sell out. That just means that you go to another fish that's going to be even fresher than what you had before you sold out.

So, the thing about ordering seafood: never order too much of seafood, because if you don't sell it, you have to rotate it out, and then it eventually is going to go bad, and that means you're losing money. So, you've got to be smart about how much to order and what kind of fish to order and how much at one time. But I really, really have been so blessed to be able to continue to do what I enjoy doing for all these years. Like I said, Frank and I has been good friends. As a matter of fact, he's kind of like my younger brother, which I very seldom see, which is in New York, that also started working here as a bar back, back in the early [19]80s, late [19]80s. He moved on to New York, and he is

working at an all-private boys' school in Rochester, New York as I speak, as a cook in the cafeteria for these young kids.

My career is going to continue to go for as long as I feel like I can do it, for a few more years. [Laughter] I been sayin', I've been talkin' about retirement for the last five years.

I'm always not going anywhere, just something to kind of keep me on my toes.

[Laughter] I think that if I don't do it, I'll probably just be sitting around, trying to think of something else to do to keep my mind occupied, because I do see and enjoy a lot of the guests that comes in, and they expect to see me, as well.

[00:19:01.14]

Eric V.: It's been a graduate-level learning experience for you, too.

[00:19:04.09]

Goren A.: You know, I've always thought that I knew everything about food and wine. Coming up as a young waiter in Birmingham, there was not too many different wines. There was not too many different places to go. So, like I was saying, the earlier part in the [19]70s, it was only the Relay House, the Hyatt. If it wasn't a private club, it was a place that they call in the South, a "meat-and-three." Which means a restaurant that has three vegetables and one meat, a slice of cornbread and some mediocre tomatoes, some mediocre onions that's been just dehydrated. So you get all these little small businesses around town that's so-called meat-and-three back then, but it was not fresh. It was only frozen vegetables. It was cornbread out of a frozen container. Even the tomatoes came out of just some sorry grocery store.

[Interviewer's note: Many of the meat-and-threes, like Niki's Downtown, which closed in 2019 after nearly 60 years in business, and Niki's West were Greek-owned businesses that opened near farmers markets and served fresh vegetables. See the Southern Foodways Alliance oral histories, Greeks in Birmingham, for more information. But it's true that when Highlands opened, Stitt had trouble finding the quality he wanted and had to build a network of local farmers who meet his demands. Chef Stitt likes to talk about how, at the beginning, the only place he could find organic grits was at a local health-food store blocks away in the Five Points South community, still open, called Golden Temple.]

It's so different now to get fresh product that tastes so much better from all these local farmers that Frank has found and researched, and some of the people that he knew before he opened up the business that had farms in Cullman County—Frank is from a little town called Cullman, Alabama, that he grew up and was raised and had a lot of friends that had a lot of property. [Interviewer's note: Stitt's father was a physician.]

They had a lot of farms. They had cows and pigs and what have you, so he was very familiar with fresh product back then. [Interviewer's note: Stitt found inspiration in his time working at the modern-day progenitor of farm-to-table cooking, Alice Waters' Chez Panisse. She introduced Stitt to the famous cookbook author, Richard Olney, who helped inspire Stitt's connection between the food Stitt grew up eating in Alabama and the food Olney ate in France during his pre-Highlands sojourn that Mr. Avery mentioned earlier.]

But trying to research and get all your people together to get this fresh product, and how much do you have? Can you supply me with this much of this or this much of that?

Because you have to have a certain amount to be open for that day, and has to have this

product coming in every other day because you need this product. People expect nothing but the best as far as flavors. Some of these herbs and some of these vegetables and some of these proteins—I mean, it just, I've seen things come in just-dug out of the ground. The farmers come in all muddy and dirty and they got their hands dirty, they just dug these potatoes and beets and what have you.

The things you learn. The things you see coming in the back door, and when I come to work at 3, I'm looking at things that came in the back door. I'm asking questions. "What is this?" "What kind of fish is that?" "What kind of vegetable is this?" It's just a lot of fun to learn and to pass it on to other people, like the guests at your tables.

People come in here, they don't have a clue about the food that we have. They're not familiar with it. They've heard about the Highlands for years, they've eaten all around this city, they always thought they could not afford to come here, could not afford to come here, but you know what, I've been to a lot of the restaurants in this city since opening up in [19]82. I've been around. And I don't go out much, because I work at night and I'm a very good cook, but to have been to some of these places that has recently opened in the last ten years, very beautiful restaurants, very nice atmosphere. But you know, it's not just about the food or the atmosphere. It's about the whole twelve yards, nine yards, what they call it. When you go into the restaurant and be acknowledged the way our guests are acknowledged; when they walk in that door, somebody's on you within seconds. You don't have to look around and wait for somebody to come to you. You don't have to worry about where's the maître d' or, nobody's going to say, "Hello?" That's the small things that people look for when they go out to a restaurant. First of all, being acknowledged. And you get that first drink, you know? Very important to get them

something to drink, and when they get something in their hand to drink and they're looking around while they're drinking, they say, "Oh. This is a nice place, you know?" The drink has to be really good. We've got some of the best bartenders, fresh-squeezed juices. The drinks are always amazing, always different spirits coming in every other month. Different gins, different bourbons. Different wines that we get, every other month. It's something different. It's something that you have to research and do and learn and talk about. I mean, I never thought that, out of all the years of so many thousands and thousands of different wines and thousands and thousands of different ports and different courses that you will hear about. Every other week, Frank is getting different things, researching, and we're talking about different sherries and rums. I was raised on just one or two particular rums. Now, there's fourteen, twenty different, amazing rums from the Caribbean with different flavors— milder rums, not so strong and in-your-face. Some of these gins, very nice, botanical gins; very smooth, not so juniper, not so berry-type of gins. Just so many different things now that you can learn and pick up on.

[00:24:27.00]

Eric V.: You give such wonderful descriptions. And yet, you haven't touched a drop of alcohol in twenty-plus years.

[00:24:35.13]

Goren A.: It's been twenty-six years since I had a drink. I enjoy drinking; back then, almost too much. It got the point where I was going to a table saying, "Good evening." And my

friends, I always call the guests by name because that's what we got known to do, everybody should do. People like to be called by name, so.

At that time, I had a nickname. They called me “Red Dog,” which is just a dog of a man, red-complexioned, dog of a man, I was a bad dog. I had a lot of fun chasing girls and chasing skirt tails and what have you. So, Frank introduced me as, "This is my friend ‘Red Dog.’ He is going to be taking care of you tonight." As far as when Frank first opened up, he was very good at, he knew a lot of people and he came out from behind the scenes in the kitchen. He talked to some of the guests that he knew, and Frank cooked from the beginning and been cooking and cooking, putting these menus together. So, every time he come out to the floor, he said, “You're being taken care of by this old waiter," or now he can call me an old man or Red Dog, which is my good friend.”

So, it's just a good story, and it's been stuck with me—there's a drink named after me because I stopped drinking years ago. It's called the Dog Juice because of my previous name, Red Dog, bein' a bad dog. Now I'm a good puppy. But I drink this juice that's called Dog Juice consisting of fresh-squeezed pink grapefruit juice, fresh-squeezed orange juice that the bartender just squeezed. Amazing. And a splash of cranberry juice, little squeeze of lime. This is shaken up and served in a martini glass with a wedge of orange, so it's like a martini. It's fruity, it's beautiful. [Interviewer’s note: Chris Conner, who invented the drink, talks about its origins, as well as Highlands’ so-called “Temperance Menu” in his oral history interview that is part of this package.]

If some people look at that drink and think, "What is that?" It has no alcohol, quite naturally, but it can be served with some spirit, like some people like my juice with vodka. I would suggest it with a nice grade of vodka; Tito’s, I prefer to recommend that

drink, some Dog Juice with the vodka. But it's really, really been very popular to the kids and some of the people that don't drink. There's a lot of non-alcohol drinkers these days; people just don't care to drink, so I recommend one of the “Temperance Drinks,” the Dog Juice, the Ginger Lemonade, the Agua Fresca. All these amazing drinks that we do and change up the fruits seasonally, so we always got something for everybody. If you don't drink, we got something for you.

[00:27:33.14]

Eric V.: In fact, the Temperance menu starts the cocktail menu.

[00:27:35.21]

Goren A.: Exactly.

[00:27:35.21]

Eric V.: On the menu at Highlands.

[00:27:37.01]

Goren A.: Exactly. You start off with that. Like I said, if you don't want to drink, we can find something on there for you. If not, we've got some of the best iced tea, some really good iced tea. It's not that old weak, watered-down iced tea. It's very good.

[00:27:53.26]

Eric V.: Mint simple syrup.

[00:27:54.10]

Goren A.: Mint simple syrup, which is just mint and simple syrup. It's just classic way of sweetening your tea. And people love it. They come here for the simple syrup. It's made perfectly; you have to taste that mint. It really makes the syrup kind of a light green because of the mint leaves have been steeped in this syrup for thirty minutes or more, so you get this amazing mint flavor, and it sweetens your tea a lot quicker than what you would if you did dry sugar. So, we offer that every single day, mint simple syrup. Now that I nose around town, a lot of people—if it says 'syrup,' that means it's thick. If it's not thick, it's just sugar water. So it's a difference. You can get sugar water from behind the bar, but if you want simple syrup, you've got to cook it down on the stove, mint, sugar, the ratio of water, made it cook slowly, it's gonna turn into a syrup once it sits for an hour. Once it cools off, it's gonna be a syrup. Not too thick, not too thin. But the reason they call it syrup, because it pours like a nice syrup.

[00:29:05.04]

Eric V.: Boy, the kitchen must smell wonderful then.

[00:29:07.21]

Goren A.: Amazing aroma. Then other things going on: every day, every day those guys are back there prepping. They're getting ready for dinner service. Those guys get here at 11 o'clock in the morning. The waiters get here at 3. Those guys has already been here for hours. They are working, they are moving things around. They are changing things up.

Frank is very dedicated. He's very particular about, when he walks up behind you or on the side of you, if you're not doing something right, if you're not doing something up to his standards, he's going to call you out. I would suggest you look at him and listen to him and learn. Put it in your head, next time you come around, if you're doing the same thing wrong, he's gonna call you out again. If you're not gonna do it right, then you've gotta go somewhere else. This business is not for everybody. Some people just don't want to listen. They don't want to learn; they can't take criticism. If you can't do it here, then you're in the wrong business, because you're going to get called out. All we're trying to do is make sure you're doing it right and sufficient every single time. If you don't do it right, you're going to get called out by the guests, and then you are going to feel bad. After a while, everybody start—word get out that the Highlands is slipping or they're not up to their standards, and we don't want that to happen, because we are not that kind of restaurant.

I have been to places that you go the first time, it's good; you go back the second time, it's different, totally different; the third time, it's a disaster. But I can guarantee you, you come here, you're going to get good service, going to be a good, nice atmosphere. The atmosphere's going to be nice from the beginning to the end. You're going to be greeted and you're going to have people saying, "Good night," like you just had a wonderful time from the beginning to the end.

[00:31:08.14]

Eric V.: Like they've been at your house.

[00:31:09.05]

Goren A.: Yeah. And people really enjoy that. They want to be—when they walk out the door, it's like nobody says good night. It's like, "Eh, nobody said good night." It's kind of a let-down. So, we try to run our butts to the door to catch you on your way out. Sometimes, you may miss one or two, but most of the time, I'm here every night late, saying, "Good night, I'm glad you had a great time. Thank you guys for dining with us when you could have went to other places in the city, but you chose to come to the Highlands. We really, really appreciate you dining with us, and please come back." So, just to say, "Good night." Just say, "Good evening." Like I said earlier, the first drink, the first acknowledgement, when you acknowledge a person like this, it really makes them feel good. So, I go to places, stand up thirty minutes, me and my daughter, me and my granddaughter, and no one ever says, "Hello, good evening." You're standing there and you're standing there. That's not the way to run a business. People will walk out and not come back, and then word- to-mouth get out that this place sucks. So, you've got to be on your game. People come into your restaurant to spend money. They come in and spend money to have a good time, and so you've got to make sure you treat them right, from the beginning. I don't care what time it is; they come in at 11:30, they get the same kind of service that they would if they came in at 5:30. That's the way it should be.

[00:32:30.24]

Eric V.: It's dinner only here.

[00:32:32.07]

Goren A.: Yeah. Now, lunch? Oh, my God. Oh.

[00:32:37.14]

Eric V.: When you started, were you working lunch or dinner? Or both?

[00:32:38.23]

Goren A.: When I first started, Frank wanted to do lunch. So, some of the items that I was showed back then, I mentioned some peppers, roasted peppers. I mentioned baked grits. But man, to move on, he had things like smoked trout for lunch. A great little appetizer, smoked trout, smoked in-house. We smoked the trout in-house, out back. Nice little smoker that we had got, Frank had got hold to. So, it smoked the fish so perfectly; smoked trout, fillets.

We made this *capellini* pasta, it's an angel hair pasta that we make. We kinda cook that pasta to a perfect temp. And then we put some extra virgin olive oil on this pasta, and then we put a chiffonade of basil underneath that pasta, fresh horseradish sauce that we made from fresh-grated horseradish, a little sour cream, a little homemade mayo. All this is arranged on the plate, and you put this smoked trout on top of that pasta, and the chiffonade of basil, and you put a little bit of this amazing—it's kind of like trout roe, which is beautiful pearls of trout roe that's shining, just sitting on top of the trout. So, as you cut into that trout and get some of that pasta and some of that roe and some of that basil, and extra virgin olive oil – the flavors—“Where do you get these ideas, from chef?” I always say, “Chef?” He said, “Well, you know what? Research. Research.” So, he has a lot of knowledge, man.

Just so many of the other entrees and appetizers. The beef carpaccio was another standard. I never thought I would eat something raw like that, I mean, shavings of raw beef. The eye of the round, that they trim this eye of the round from this amazing beef. So, it's eye of the round, it has a little bit of fat, a little bit of lean, so you trim it down to what you want. You wrap it in cellophane, you freeze that piece of beef until it's solid as a rock. They take a deli slicer at the lowest dimension; the lowest dial—

[00:34:58.07]

Eric V.: Just as thin as you can get it.

[00:34:58.09]

Goren A.: Shave it thin, talkin' about really thin. As soon as you shave it after it's frozen, it automatically just turns soft, because it's so paper-thin and it's so unique and beautiful. You lay it on top of this horseradish sauce that we make in-house on a platter. Once you get that platter filled up with all that beautiful beef, you top it off with some arugula, fresh arugula from the ground. Just somebody just dug arugula from Paradise Farm. Pardis it's her farm—that's Pardis's farm, 'cause it's named after Pardis, Paradise. That's where the name comes from, Pardis.

[00:35:37.14]

Eric V.: This is the Stitt's farm.

[00:35:40.23]

Goren A.: Stitt Farm, uh-huh. So, all this fresh arugula. This particular carpaccio is a classic: the arugula, the horseradish sauce on the base, the shaved parmesan cheese, the cracked pepper, a little bit of olive oil. So, that's a very classic dish. People are like, "My God, this is one of the best things." They also, back in the [19]80s, you didn't have a lot of people eating a lot of raw food because they was very afraid, you know. They talked about, "This'll make you sick. This is too rare." And everybody was eating everything well-done and medium-well, so, as you get further into your life and years go by, you kind of take some chances. Especially when you come to a good restaurant and people feel confident on explaining to you, "This is okay to eat this raw like this." And we have a—people ask me, "Why is it served raw?" Or, "What cut of beef is it?"

So, you have to know all these things, because people are just afraid. They don't understand about the food the way we know it ourselves, because we are around it every day. So, to make them feel confident and that they can be okay with it, like every entree, every appetizer, if it's raw, we have a little bitty asterisk there to warn you that this meat or beef or veal is going to come out rare to mid-rare, so you know what that means. If you want it bumped up a little bit, we'll be more than happy to cook it longer, but the best way to have it is the way the chef prepares it. Some people will go for that, and some people will not. But you don't get an attitude with them; you just let them do what they gotta do, as long as they're happy. But you try to instill them into trying things differently. The way they have tried them in the past. You try to semi-teach them the correct way to eat something. I would have never eaten a beef carpaccio if I was not introduced to that, never in a million years, because I was always told by people in my family that you don't eat rare meats. [Laughter] It's just not good for you. But come to

find out, it is good for you, when the product is right. So, it's a lot of things you've got to consider, man.

That lunch menu was like, my God. We had a crab cake. I'll never forget a crab cake special, Thursday, for lunch. It was one of the best Maryland crab cakes I think I ever had. Coming from the South, there was no crab cakes. There was only—crabs, called it claw meat, and some of the imitation crab that you see in stores now with the red dye. I don't know if it's called krab legs or snow or whatever, that is what they were calling crab cakes and using that particular meat, which sucks. To get a good crab cake, you've gotta give some good crab meat. Lump crab meat; jumbo lump. You've got to pick it, you've got to make sure there's no shells, you've got to toss it with lemon juice and you've got to get all the shallots and all the flavors, the breadcrumbs, nutmeg, and lemon juice and breadcrumbs, egg, to make this cake. It has to be really made perfectly.

The crab cake on Thursday was one of the best-selling entrees ever. I mean, local, local, just amazing lump crabmeat from the Gulf. Like I said, we make this cake, sautéed, golden brown, served with a nice, tossed salad back then. Sometimes, it look—a bed of creamy grits with some cherry tomatoes for color, like red and golden cherry tomatoes with the crab cake and some *haricots verts*, which is French, little tiny green beans. It was a beautiful dish, wonderful flavor. A lot of lump crab meat. And people came just for that on Thursday. Friday, we had a wonderful vegetable plate that was just all fresh, local vegetables, and Wednesday, we had a chicken sauté, a chicken breast—boneless chicken breast—sautéed golden brown with the breadcrumbs. It was a classic as well.

So, every day, from Tuesday to Friday we had a daily special that was just amazing. I learned a lot. I worked lunches for seven years, from [19]82 to 1990. Bottega opened up,

so they gave us a break here from lunch. [Interviewer's note: Bottega's formal dining room opened in 1988; the café two years later.]

Once Bottega opened up, Highlands stopped serving lunch; Bottega Cafe started doing lunch. Later on, we opened up a restaurant next door to Highlands. It's called Chez Fonfon, in 2001. They are doing so amazing. That place rocks. That place got it goin' on, that's all to it. You gotta get there early. [Laughter] In the evening if you want to get you a table or a seat: 4:30, I would suggest. For morning, you have to be there at 10:30.

[Laughter] They open at 11, 10:30/11. You need to be standing outside. That place rocks. I mean, the food, the flavor, the atmosphere, service. Nobody can do it like that. I've never seen a restaurant—Chez Fonfon is, by far, every day, super busy. Highlands, every night, super busy.

We got a big award we won, a big James Beard Award that we had been waiting for and trying to get for the last ten years. Last year, it happened, and it's been so remarkable to the city and to all of our guests, and to have waited to get this award, after going up for ten years. Every year we didn't get it, it made us even more powerful. It made us even more demanding; it made us even more people coming, because we are on the list in the South. It's just like, you don't see anything like that in the South. Restaurants get looked over. People don't seem to care about it; they don't have it going on in Birmingham. It's just a little meat-and-three town, but not realizing, there's some real nice, classy restaurants that have opened up in Birmingham over the last fifteen, ten years. Really has blossomed. I want to share—I would say, by far, we did kind of start this thing off in the South, fine dining the way it should be. Without all the commercial foods back in the day. Sunday dinners, the trucks that you see delivering the food to somebody's restaurant.

But you couldn't do anything about it because that was the only thing that was available—until now. You have no excuse. If you want to get fresh, you've got to pay a little bit more for it, but it's going to really make your life a lot better. People are going to really enjoy your food better. They're going to taste all the different flavors on your plate. In other words, you got to really—and people spend money. And people don't mind spending money if they're being taken care of, if they come to a good place.

I have been to places, the food's bland, mediocre, the waiter never comes back after they drop the plate off. They never ask you, "Are you enjoying your dinner?" Or "Are you enjoying your particular appetizer, be specific on what you're having?" They just kind of get lost, they just don't seem to understand. You always should go back to the table once you serve a dish. I don't care whether it's a drink. Is the cup of coffee hot enough? Is the espresso done right? Whatever you're serving, go back within the next several seconds, and find out whether or not that particular item that you served is up to standards, because you don't know unless you ask. They're not gonna tell anybody else. They're not maybe gonna complain at that time. But somewhere down the line, if you don't continue to ask, you're gonna miss something. People are gonna, "Ah, it was okay. The coffee was cold, okay?" You wouldn't have known that, unless you asked. "Oh, it was nice, but the waiter never come around, and he never talked to us. He talked to other tables." People are very funny about that. They're thinking that you are paying them more attention than you are them, and so people get a little jealous because you're not spending as much time with them as you are other tables. The reason for that: some people don't like to be talked to. They want to dine, They want to be left alone, so you have to what you call "reading a table," which I've been very—I'm good at doing that, because I guess I've been doing it so

long, I can look at you before I approach your table and figure out a way. "This is how I'm going to approach this table." Okay?

[00:44:49.22]

Eric V.: What's going through your mind as you're looking at a table?

[00:44:52.05]

Goren A.: I'm looking at a table saying, "Okay, okay. They're in their forties." I'm going to go up to the table, I'm going to approach them different than if you were eighty years old. I cannot come at you, you're eighty, saying, "What's up? What's up, what's up?" [Laughter] But then when you're forty, you're in your thirties, walk up to the table, "Man, it's so nice to have y'all here. What's up, guys?" Ladies and gentlemen, whatever. It's just a different approach. You have to treat people how you want to be treated. Older people want to be treated, okay, they're old, but they don't want you to come up, like, too fast. Can't be too slow. You have to kind of gradually work your way in to the older generation. Newer generation, they want you to have fun. They want you to be more relaxed, not so uptight. It makes them nervous if you're nervous, so if you walk up to there like you're stiff, they feel like you don't know what you're doing or you're not confident in what you're confident of what you're fixing to talk about. First of all, you always start off with, "Okay, I have these special drinks I want you all to try, or consider, something different than what you've been drinking." Most people set on what they want – Ah, Scotch and water. They don't tell you sometimes what kind of Scotch. Some people ask you, "What you got new?" And some people only go with the old school. Every year, we got

something to offer you, that's always a different drink. It's always something you can get that you probably, "Oh, this is good. I like this."

We were speaking about wine last week. Frank was talking about how people are so stuck on the same thing. You cannot get people off. "Give me a glass of cabernet." "Give me a glass of chardonnay." Or "I want a glass of pinot noir." They don't understand, there are so many different types of pinot noir, so many different styles of cabernet, and so many different types of champagne. Everything has a purpose; everything has a different flavor, and taste, and profile. To learn about all this stuff, we go through a lot; grower's champagne, where they get the grapes from, they don't borrow grapes from different vineyards. It's all grown on the premises. So, it makes the champagne taste better when you got people taking care. People mashing their own grapes now; they're stomping grapes by foot. Unheard of. The old school has come back; people crushing the grapes, gently crushing them by foot. So, just little things, you try to turn people on to something different. People say they want a sweet Riesling, they really don't want it, that's all they know. They feel confident in having a sweet Riesling, but you want to try something a little summertime, something that's not so sugar, so much sugar, something that's different than the average Riesling. Instead of a German Riesling, try something like an Austrian Riesling. Just change it to a Grüner Veltliner. Somebody said a Grüner Veltliner, but it's just a nice—the Grüner is the grape, it's amazing flavor. It's not super sweet, but it has the amazing aroma. So, trying to turn people on to different things, it's hard. Some of the older people would not, they're gonna stay with what they know—"Cabernet it is." But the younger generation are branching out. They will try whatever you recommend. They always say, "Goren, bring me what you want me to have with my dish."

[00:48:14.28]

Eric V.: How often does that happen?

[00:48:14.28]

Goren A.: A lot. Now it's happening a whole lot more, because people are really kind of,

"Okay, I'm gonna let you guys take control. The veal, how's it served? Mid-rare, that's the way the chef recommends it, that's the way I want it. What would you recommend with my wine, with my dish?" "I bring you a nice glass of wine and should I bring you a list, or should I choose it for you?" Now, people are saying, "Well, I tell you what, you take care of that for me. You just bring me what you think I should have." It makes me feel good. Once they try that wine with that dish and it works out, they say, "You know what? This is an amazing combination. Thank you so much."

[00:48:57.29]

Eric V.: Are you describing ahead of time what's going to be there—

[00:49:00.03]

Goren A.: Yeah, right.

[00:49:00.07]

Eric V.: Like these wonderful descriptions you're giving us?

[00:49:04.09]

Goren A.: Exactly. A lot of time, you have something like lamb, a lamb dish. Lamb has flavor.

Lamb has a little bit of gamey-ness to lamb. So, you need something with a wine that has body, okay? You don't want to serve a glass of pinot noir with the lamb dish, it just doesn't work.

[00:49:25.04]

Eric V.: It gets lost.

[00:49:25.05]

Goren A.: The pinot—a little light, it's too light. You need something like a Vacqueyras, something from the Rhone region, something like a cabernet. Something like I said, Rhone or Chatauneuf-de-Pape. Mancina, which is some of these wonderful wines from Spain. A glass of Rioja, something big enough to accommodate that nice powerful flavor of the lamb. We got a rabbit dish, deboned, stuffed with greens and breadcrumbs and garlic, and some giblets, all the rabbit giblets. You need a wine that's gonna pick up on that liver, the kidneys, okay? The hearts. All this, the whole giblets of the rabbit all wrapped up, rolled and wrapped with bacon and roasted all. Flavor, you need a wine with flavor. You need a wine that's big enough, you need peppery. You need a nice, tannic wine. Nothing that's thin, because it's not going to pick up. So, you have to know that. People go and say, "Oh, man, I did not know that." So, they don't know. So, you're teaching your guests. And they're listening to you, and then you walk up to them once you serve that glass of wine with that rabbit or duck, they say, "Oh, my God. This

combination of flavors are fantastic. How did you know that?" Because we have wine tastings all the time.

[00:50:45.28]

Eric V.: But that's what I was starting to get into earlier. It's been a quarter century, so how do you pick up on these wonderful descriptions and combinations?

[00:50:55.19]

Goren A.: We have a couple of guys that Frank's been knowing for years, and Pardis that comes in from time to time. When they get this new venture, they get a new wine that's come in from Spain, or we just recently tasted a white Rioja, which is very unusual, a white Rioja. Normally red. But Rioja Blanc, white. We tasted it last week. Amazing flavor. And so, from Spain. And you turning people on, even though wines now, your nineteen- or twenty-dollar glass of wine, fifteen-dollar glass of wine, you know what? It's not even about the price. It's just people are enjoying life, people are spending money. But you've got to make sure you know what you're talking about, because you serve up with a nineteen-dollar glass of wine, you better make sure it's a good glass of wine. [Laughter] Because nineteen dollars is up there, but it doesn't matter if it's good, if it's gonna work with that dish. People sometimes don't even, you tell them how much this glass of wine costs—that's very important to let them know; we got wine that's twenty-five dollars a glass, champagne, twenty-five dollars a pop. You gotta let them know how much that costs before you ring it. "Matter of fact, I've got a twenty-five dollar glass of champagne,

would you like to try it? It's a beautiful rosé. It's a Laurent Perrier." French rosé. But you just don't bring it without saying it's twenty-five dollars.

[00:52:19.26]

Eric V.: Or suggest it with—

[00:52:23.19]

Goren A.: Yeah. They may say, "You know what? I didn't want to pay that kind of money for that glass of champagne." You know? See, be careful. Tell 'em. They're going to tell you to yea or nay. Or you suggest, if they get two glasses or three, suggest a bottle of wine or a bottle of that same wine. If you get another glass, that's fifty dollars you've already spent, so why not get another bottle of the wine and the champagne? That way, you save money. So you have to suggest that; they don't know about that. They don't think about that, they're here to have a good time. You've got to guide them. I've had people, "Give me four chardonnays." "Why don't you get a bottle of wine?" "Okay, huh." You gotta think. You're saving money. Four glasses would equiv—almost a whole bottle of wine, depending on how the waiter serves the wine. You don't fill up a glass to the rim, it don't look good. You give it a classic pour. So a bottle of wine, for four people, two rounds, okay, on that bottle of wine. That's it. You're gonna have to get another bottle of wine, because they've had two glasses but not filled up. Always gotta be careful about that. They'll tell you, "Bring me another bottle of wine," because it's just so good. But you try to suggest that instead of all those glasses of wine. Six glasses of the same wine, you need a magnum of wine. You gonna have more? Get a mag. That will really take care of

the table. That's gonna last you all night. So, suggesting and making sure people are being taken care of, that's the whole thing. I'm still—I'm still learning, and I keep saying I'm going to get out of here and call it quits. I mean, if I can continue to do it for twenty more years, I would. I've had some—I've had a little bit of health issues, but not really major. I've had some pneumonia issues, I have pneumonia during the winter and sinus infections, so it made me kind of felt like, "Eh, it's time for me to let it go," or to step back a little bit and relax, try to do some things in my life which I never do. I never travel. I don't do many things.

[00:54:33.13]

Eric V.: You don't like to fly, for one thing.

[00:54:33.13]

Goren A.: I don't like to fly. [Laughter] But I have flown. Like Pardis told me, "You don't have to do anything." But I've always been that way. I'm going to start doing things differently, because I am getting older. I'm not really burnt out, but I feel like some time, I just feel like it's too fast for me now that we are so popular and so busy. I do speak to a lot of people—a lot, I mean every night. I have to go, and when I walk by a table, people are looking at me like, "That's that guy. You can tell; that's that guy." My picture is here, my picture is there. I got write-ups, I got documentary. It's just amazing, the accomplishment that I have been through, and so very, very blessed to be here and to have sharpened my skills as far as me not drinking and partying like I used to. Waking up hungover and didn't want to go to work and calling in sick. So, I've sharpened my skills as far as that on

my life. I really enjoy being here. When I'm not here, I have a lot of people to take care of; my mom, my girlfriend recently had a stroke, I got a sister that had a hip replacement. So, it's a lot of girls in my world, and I'm a very dedicated family kind of guy as far as being in charge and taking care of business. That's what I do. My father's been deceased for the last thirty years. He worked hard. He was a hard-working steel mill kinda guy. Working all the steel plants. And my mom never worked, never had a job a day in her life, and she couldn't afford to—I mean, she couldn't, because she had to raise these kids. My father left her pretty well-off, but she's been lost without him in her life.

So, going back to that time with my father, a great grill master, I learned how to grill. We sold a lot of food. I'll never forget, as a fifteen-year-old, seventeen-year-old young man, my father put this big grill in the front yard. It was made out of a drum; it was called a fifty-gallon drum. He would put these two drums together, and he welded these two drums together, made a hundred-gallon pit. So, we cooked these chickens and barbecued ribs and Boston butts and pork shoulders. Every time Alabama had a football game at Legion Field—now it's Smithfield—we sent barbecue to fans going to the game.

[Interviewer's note: Until the 1980s, the Tuscaloosa-based University of Alabama played its "home" games at Legion Field in Birmingham's Smithfield community. It was home to the annual Auburn-Alabama game known as the Iron Bowl until the 1990s.]

Plates, sandwiches, slabs of ribs, chickens, to the guests—to the fans, I'm sorry. Frank stopped by, when Frank and I first became friends, before he opened up a restaurant. Him and his first wife stopped by my father's place. I was a young pup, me and Frank just working at the Hyatt. I'll never forget, "Frank, come by! Come by the house. We sell this amazing food every game." So, Frank and his wife went to a game and stopped by, got a

sandwich or two, came in, used the bathroom or whatever. It's just a thing that my father did and made some good money doing it. So, I learnt, and I watched. Then, when he passed on, the legacy continued. I did it myself. Made a lot of money. Lot of money. Every weekend Alabama played a game at Legion Field.

[00:58:18.06]

Eric V.: That was their home field at the time.

[00:58:18.06]

Goren A.: That was their home field. You've got seventy-five thousand people going to a football game, parking everywhere in the area of Smithfield. Smithfield, that was the only thing they had going for them. Legion Field, the games, the parking. People made money, until it got to the point that people started breaking in people's cars, and they started taking stuff out of these people's cars that's drove from Auburn, had drove from around the city. It got to be a point where it was not worth doing it. So, Tuscaloosa decided to open up, just get a nice stadium. So, they built the new stadium and all the games was transferred from Alabama to T-town. So, we lost that nice volume of money. But I continued to do my grilling for guests, tailgate parties. Sometimes people'll call me, even now. "Goren, can you get me four or five slabs of ribs and chicken, baked beans, so we can have a nice party before we go to the game." So I deliver the ribs to them or they'll come by my house and pick 'em up with the sauce, the trimmings, whatever. But I'm a very good grill man, and now that I've been working here, I'm a very good cook. I'm a good cook; I like cooking the food that we serve here. The thing about it,

trying to get the product, that's the problem. You cannot go to the store and get the things that we have here. You've got to either buy it here, if you can, or go to the Pepper Place, which is a wonderful little market on Saturday morning. There is a place called the Pepper Place, which is atop the Dr. Pepper Building, which consists of all these fresh vegetables every morning. Saturday morning, there are people from different farms that's offering their product, and people go out early that morning and shop. So, if you don't get it from there, it's going to be hard to find good product. It's a great place. It's a great thing they started several years ago. [Interviewer's note: Operated and developed by an heir to the Sloss Furnaces family – once one of the main steel mills in greater Birmingham – Pepper Place started its Saturday-morning farmers market in 2000, and is the inspiration for nearly two-dozen pop-up farmers markets now operating in greater Birmingham. As a member of Pepper Place's board of directors, Stitt played a role in launching the market and is one of its chef champions. Many of his restaurants' vendors have stands there, and both Frank and Pardis are regular customers.]

So, everybody talks about the Pepper Place. So, that's where everybody goes to get fresh, different vegetables that you can't get, and fruits, and what have you. Local farmers, and some of 'em are what you call—organic. You know? You may not see them for a long time. You've got organically-grown this, you've got heirloom tomatoes. You've got heirloom different fruits and vegetables. It's just a lot of stuff you're learning, it's a lot of things out here now.

[01:00:57.05]

Eric V.: And really, Pepper Place, in a lot of ways, owes some of its success—a fair amount of its success—to Highlands Bar & Grill and Frank Stitt.

[01:01:04.21]

Goren A.: Exactly. Exactly.

[01:01:05.13]

Eric V.: Because of the lot of the people who are selling vegetables to the public that day are also supplying these restaurants.

[01:01:12.03]

Goren A.: Exactly. So, it's just a good thing for them to do, and it's also a lot of the local farmer's markets that has always been established. As a matter of fact, there's one on Old Finley Avenue that's been there for hundreds of years. That was the first farmer's market in the city. [Interviewer's note: Others farmers markets operated in the city before the Finley Avenue market opened in the 1950s, and the meats-and-threes tended to operate nearby. It is a fulltime farmers market, open 7/365.]

A lot of the locals, like my father, went to the farmer's market on Saturday and picked up bushels of peas and beans and corn. So, we had to shuck all this stuff and share these peas and beans. And that's been a long time ago, but at a farmer's market, you can buy a lot for a little or nothing. But the thing is getting it home and getting your family involved in shelling the peas or shucking the corn or the okra. But then, back then, it was just so mediocre. It was a just a whole—it's a difference. People don't realize this, there's so

many different types of okra. So many different types of farm that just produces so much massive of this particular product. So, you don't want that okra. You want okra that coming from a little small, local farm that's really not so much. It's not so big, it's not dried out. You've got soft skin, so baby okra. [Interviewer's note: This is the Stitt effect on food in Birmingham. Stitt created a network of small farmers who grow food to his specifications, especially boutique varieties like Fairy Tale eggplant and heirloom produce. They formed the core of farmers market vendors at Pepper Place and elsewhere.]

I mean, it's different than old okra that's been around so many years, the same old stalks versus the new okra, which is from a local farm that's dedicated. Good soil and soft skins; bright, bright, beautiful color. So, I'm very dedicated to when I go to the store, "Oh, I don't want this." I'm picking; I'm touching because I'm spoiled. I been here too long. I'm looking for that great avocado or that wonderful tomato. You can't find tomatoes in the store. You gotta go, you gotta get these tomatoes from a local farm like, you know, Chandler Mountain or Sand Mountain or some of these beautiful heirloom tomatoes that we get every year. Beautiful tomatoes that's very very different varieties. They got zebra stripes, tiger stripes, LSU purples—all these different names for all these tomatoes.

[Interviewer's note: He likely is referring to Cherokee Purple heirloom tomatoes, one of Stitt's favorites.]

It's just . . . juicy, sweet, succulent. It make you go crazy. But to find that, you gotta know somebody. And then, that's why I give Frank the credit. All the research that he does to reach out and to search, go online. Likely a shipper website that he get all this wonderful personal information, and then he gets it, and then he brings it in. Then we try it. The

thing about Frank that I like, he let us try different things before we even sell it; before the guest comes in, we've tried it. So, give us a chance to—"Oh, man. This is amazing." That way, you can talk about it with some confidence. Like, "Man, we just tried some of this squash blossom." I mean edible blossom. "Deep fried in a tempura batter with a basil aioli on the base of the plate." It's an edible flower, stuffed with the farmer's cheese; it's like a ricotta cheese that's made in-house. Just stuff that flower, edible flower, with that ricotta cheese that has a little bit of basil and chives and lemon juice, a little touch of cream. When you deep-fry that flower and you serve it with that sauce on the base, the crunch, the flavor, it's just fantastic.

[01:04:49.14]

Eric V: So, describe this kind of session where Chef Stitt or Zack Redes brings out a dish. Walk me through that. [Interviewer's note: Redes is the chief de cuisine at Highlands. See his interview in this package.]

[01:05:01.09]

Goren A.: So, what happens, when Frank does the menu, when Frank gets the menu together—for instance, tomorrow— today is Monday. Tomorrow we may have a nice, different appetizer tomorrow, so who knows? I don't know, I haven't seen the menu for tomorrow yet. But I can imagine it's going to be great like it was last week. It's going to be some things that's on there, it's going to be some things that may come. So, what Frank does— see, Frank does a lot of cooking, even at his house. He may be creative at his house. He's so good at what he does; he put things together at home. You know, "Okay. I'm gonna try

this on the menu at work.” You come in, he'll tell Zack, "This is what I want to do." He shows Zack what he wants to do. He puts it together, so Zack's looking at him, Chef and Zack lookin' at it. Then Zack will bring the rest of the guys over. He says, "Let's put this dish together." So everybody workin' at it. Everybody gettin' their thoughts, everybody lookin' at it, okay. "It need this." "It don't need that. It needs to take away this." "Take away that; there's too much of this, too much of that." So, whatever it needs, it's fine-tuned back there before it's served. So, when we get here at three, we set up four-thirty. We start having meeting about the menu, we go over the menu. Some of the newer dishes that's coming around, and sometime we'll touch on some of the older dishes that's been around, like some things never come off the menu. The grits, the beef carpaccio, the crab claws, the ceviche, those are classic standards.

The newer dish, he'll bring it out once they get it together. Frank will say, "Okay, well, this is what I want y'all to try once we talk about it." It may be some—it could be shrimp from Bayou La Batre. The West Indies Salad is what they call it, composed of crawfish tails. We've got some lump crab meat that's been tossed in lemon juice and olive oil, a little parsley. You've got roasted red bell pepper, red bell peppers just roasted perfectly. You've got capers sitting around the base. On the base of the plate, you've got this herb aioli, just some fresh herbs in the homemade mayo, that's the sauce on the base. You got the crab meat sitting on top, and you got the peppers, you got capers, you got crawfish. And then Bayou La Batre shrimp, head-on shrimp sitting on top of that, all composed. Just beautiful.

[01:07:31.07]

Eric V.: While he's describing this, are you taking notes, or . . . ?

[01:07:33.20]

Goren A.: We're writing notes down on our menu as we're talking about this dish, so that way the next day, when somebody come in or when a new waiter who may not be here that night, so we'll have a little line-up every day and we'll talk about it. So, for our own notes to keep in our heads when you go to the table, you want to introduce somebody to that dish. It's just kind of like, in your thoughts of writing it down and what you've talked about and what you've learnt that day, that's gonna be in your head for that week. That dish will maybe be on the menu for a week. That way, you know. Once you write it down, and kinda make your little notes, you can just talk about the dish the way you want to.

[01:08:15.14]

Eric V.: At this point, do you know who your tables are going to be? Even the reservation list and all that?

[01:08:17.06]

Goren A.: Yeah. You've gone through the list, you know exactly who's coming in. You know exactly, this is their anniversary tonight. This is a birthday for them tonight. This is, they're celebrating whatever, having a newborn or whatever. We know all of that.

[01:08:32.18]

Eric V.: So, as you're listing all of this, you're also thinking, well, Dr. So-and-so really liked that, but not so much this other person.

[01:08:38.25]

Goren A.: Exactly. That's exactly, that's a great point. Some people just not gonna try anything different. People stuck on one thing. Still today, stuck on one thing. "Just give me a tossed salad." "I want a damn steak and baked potato." Okay, fine. That's fine. But you'll never be able to go—you'll never be able to venture out. Those are the people you can't get. You can't get them, leave 'em alone. It's just that's the way they are. I got some people come in today, been coming here thirty-seven years. Fish beurre blanc. [Laughter] Fish lemon butter sauce. I don't give a rat what you're sayin', what you're tryin' to tell them, fish beurre blanc. Okay? That's just the way it is. He's a great—Mr. Montgomery, his name is Mr. Montgomery. He's about ninety years old, okay? Him and his wife, I love 'em. They sit right here, their favorite table. [Taps the table by the fireplace where we're sitting.] Fish beurre blanc. Roast potato. That's all they want, and they been coming here for years. That's it. Never. Glass of white wine. Same thing every time. You don't mess with that. [Laughter] Other people, new people—I don't mean to say new people, but first-time diners, oh, you got 'em. You got 'em. They come in—"You're lookin' lost." They're lookin' down at the menu. They don't understand what's going on. They're lookin' like, "Oh, shit, what is this?" [Laughter]

[01:10:04.20]

Eric V.: That's one of the things you're assessing as you're walking up?

[01:10:06.03]

Goren A.: You can see it! From a distance. I'm standing over there. When they sit down, I'm looking. I'm looking at 'em. "Oh, okay. Okay. She look like she nervous. He look like he nervous." I'm fixin' to walk over—"Good evening. So nice to have you at the Highlands." We normally don't mention, I normally don't mention, "My name is Goren. I'll be your server."

[01:10:29.22]

Eric V.: Pardis hates that.

[01:10:31.06]

Goren A.: I know. She hates it. [Laughter] You ain't lyin'. I got some people that still does that, just something they do. I don't do it. At the end of the night—"By the way, what is your name?" I say, "My name is Goren." "Man, we are so happy that we had you. We heard about you. We read about you. We thought, we could not believe we got you." It makes me feel good. They say, "We are—we've never had you before, but we finally got you, and we are so blessed to be in your area. Buh buh buh buh." For the ones that know me, oh, shit, it's on. When I come up—"Red Dog!" Boom, high five, fist bump. "Man, what should I have to eat tonight?" I say, "Just give me the menu, man. Give me your menu; I got you." [Laughter] "I said, "You want an appetizer, entree?" "The whole nine, just bring me something." I love it, I love it because they don't know what they're getting. They're surprised when they get it. It's going to be something that they would never do at home.

That's what I do. I'm not going to bring you a steak; I'm not going to bring you a regular salad. I'm not going to bring you a baked potato. [Interviewer's note: One of the toughest transitions for customers from country-club or private-club dining when Highlands opened was it didn't serve steak and baked potatoes.]

You might as well get ready for something that's nice and different, and it's going to make you like, "Oh, God." They love it. End of the night, great time. Great suggestions. Wines by the glass to go with every dish. I've been doing that a lot. I love it, because people will say, "You do your thing." Love it. It makes me feel, it makes my night. We have people comin' in, set menu, five courses. We already know what to do with the portions. People love that. We take care of people; we take care of guests. A lot of restaurants – "We don't do a tasting menu. We're not equipped for that." Well, hell. You got a menu. You're tasting whatever. You get four tastes of different entrees. You get four tastes of different appetizers. You get four tastes of different cold apps, warm apps, cold apps, entree, four different desserts. It's a tasting menu; why can't you do it?

[01:12:42.22]

Eric V.: You got the portions, too.

[01:12:44.00]

Goren A.: Thank you. Hello. You can't do it or you won't do it? "We're not equipped to do it."

So that means you don't want to do it. When you say you're not equipped, that means you don't want to do it. So, we do it because we can do it, okay? It's four tasters of something different; it's all good. But the kitchen need to do know that, and ahead of time.

Somebody call, "I want a tasting menu for four people." We are prepared to do that for you. Not every table gonna get that now, because it's not easy, because you've got all your little, small plates. But you call, make a reservation, "I want a tasting menu for next month," we got your back. Simple as that. [Interviewer's note: Highlands only accepts reservations for a month in advance; since the Beard award, the only way to guarantee a seat is to reserve a month in advance, or show up early for a seat at the bar.]

[01:13:22.04]

Eric V.: So, when a table's putting itself—or a customer, the guest—is putting him or herself in your hands, walk me through the assessment process. Tell me about how you decide what they're going to want.

[01:13:35.06]

Goren A.: It's funny. Good question. [Laughter] Knowing that person. The thing about . . . I know so many of my guests. It's not any night I come in here and have a table that I've never waited on before. That's the thing about my whole career. Every table, tomorrow, I may have four requests tomorrow or in my station. I work with Patrick [Noling], that helps me out when I can't get to everybody, so Pat and I work together so we can touch bases on everybody. Some guy came in, Dr. Thorpe. He comes twice a month. He looks at the menu, says, "Ah. I don't . . . it's a great menu, I don't know what I want. Everything sounds so good. What do you suggest?" I said, "I suggest you put your menu down, let me take care of you, okay? Look at the menu one more time. Is there anything that you really just can't stand?" Look at it, they said, "Nah, look good. Everything." So, I make

my decision. Okay. The other guy across, "I want the same thing. I want you to do the same thing for me." So now, I gotta make sure that I'm focusing on him having something totally different than what he's going to have. The two girls over here, they talking about something, they ain't worried about what they got going on. So I'm gonna bring him a quail appetizer that's been marinated in some red wine, you know? The red wine vinegar, some shallots, coming off the grill. A blackberry farro set, blackberries and farro, quail, pick it up. I'm going to let this guy have—he's never had this before—the Bayou La Batre shrimp, okay? That's gonna be their first course. They're gonna knock it out, they're gonna love it. Okay, now. Seeing how they're drinking and how much fun they're having. Second course, I'm gonna look at him, say, "Hmm. I'm gonna bring him a duck. He ain't gonna do a damn duck at home. He's not gonna make a duck at home." The next guy. "Know what? Bacon-wrapped rabbit." Who would do a rabbit at home? Nobody does a rabbit. Nobody buys fresh rabbit. Oh, just loving this rabbit. So, he, a little glass of vacqueyras. With that duck, I'm gonna bring him a glass of this nice Spain wine from Mencia. So now these guys, they don't know what they got comin' for entree. They have no idea. When I put it down and put the glass of wine down, I gotta explain to 'em why and what I got goin' on. Why it's like this; why this wine's going with this. "Because the liver; because of the bacon, because of the fat." Everything has a purpose. Dessert. "You guys want dessert?" "Yeah, why not? You might as well bring it on." We got this Boston cream pie, which has been around for years. Boston cream pie has been a mediocre pie. It sounds like it's something that's just store-bought, Little Debbie. But by us having the best pastry chef in the nation, Dolester make everything taste good. We got a Boston cream pie on the menu that'll make you slap somebody. We have a roasted

banana desert, roasted banana bar. I mean, a puree of bananas added to a vanilla-base ice cream and a praline crust. The nuts and pralines crushed as a crust. Salty peanuts with caramel sauce, just all arranged on this plate. It's a frozen ice cream dessert, and some roasted bananas that's been brûlée'd, torched, with sugar then torched by flame that just make you . . . this is incredibly good. So, that's their whole dinner. Then they're gonna say, "Well, give me a—I want something to go with this dessert. What would you pair?" So every dessert has a pairing, whether it's a glass of port, a glass of rum, a glass of sauternes—

[01:17:34.24]

Eric V.: And it's saying this on the menu, a recommendation.

[01:17:36.03]

Goren A.: It's on the menu. If they want that. Sometimes, people don't like something too sweet. Sauternes' okay, but sauternes was a thing of the past, nobody ever drink. Now, it's still hard to get people to drink sauternes. It's so sweet. So, what we are suggesting, a glass of champagne with dessert, a glass of cava, which is like a bubbly, which is sparkling prosecco kind of thing, or a wonderful [inaudible] Armagnac, sherry. Rum. Even got this . . . I can't call the name, but just Pappy. Scotch.

[01:18:17.13]

Goren A.: Whiskey. So, that's what's going on now. People are drinking that with dessert instead of a sweet sauternes or, some people still order a glass of port. Then you gotta be

careful about a port. You don't want to—you got ports cost fifty dollars a glass. See, people gotta realize, waiters and waitresses, you don't try to break the bank. That's not cool.

[01:18:42.11]

Eric V.: And it helps with the trust factor with the guests.

[01:18:42.26]

Goren A.: It does! Thank you. When they say, "Check this, oh, shoot, I thought a glass of port didn't cost but eight dollars, I thought you—" No, I'm not here for that. I could have got you one for twenty-five, but this eight-dollar glass of port with your dessert is all you need, and I think people realize that we're not trying to jack you up. A bottle of wine: I get it all the time. "I need a bottle of wine for my table." Now, everybody's having a good time. I say, "What kind of money you want to spend?" That's the first thing I ask. They say, "Hell, a hundred. A hundred." What I do, instead of going hundred-fifty, I go ninety-five. Makes sense. That, in my mind—in they minds—"This guy ain't tryin' to, he ain't tryin' to get me." Wine's gonna be good. Value's good. If you want to step it up, then fine.

[01:19:34.06]

Eric V.: We got the cellar. [Laughter]

[01:19:35.04]

Goren A.: But I'm goin' right here. This is where I'm goin' with you. Not a two hundred dollar bottle of wine 'cause you said three digits, we'll go below it. Not a thirty-eight dollar glass of wine, okay? A twelve dollar glass of wine. You've just got to be smart. And people are going to check—"Damn, I was not planning on spending that much money. Goren, why didn't you tell me the wine cost three-fifty? Come on, now." So, that's what makes me . . .

[01:20:04.24]

Eric V.: So as you're assessing that table that says, "Take care of me," you're looking at trying something new and something unusual they couldn't get elsewhere at another restaurant or at home.

[01:20:16.21]

Goren A.: Exactly. That's what this was all about. You can do a steak at home. You can put a fillet on your grill, okay? You can put a . . . I never sell steak here, ever. I mean, I do for those who want steak. We got a lot of first-time dinners, so we did in this particular era now, because of the award. Before the award, a lot of local people came in. Local. You knew what they wanted as soon as they walk in the door. I see them come and I go into the bar: boom! Scotch and water.

[01:20:49.29]

Eric V.: Before they even order.

[01:20:49.29]

Goren A.: Yeah! Highlands martini. He' wife's probably going to have a glass of champagne.

Right as they sit down to drink, boom! They're gonna say, "Oh, my God." Yeah, they love it.

[01:20:59.17]

Eric V.: I'm home.

[01:21:00.06]

Goren A.: Can't get no better than that. Thank you! Go to another place. They go to the same restaurant in the circle. Some waiters may remember and some don't. I just kinda get that in my mind, I'm fixin' to go ahead and put their drinks down. Now if they change on your butt, that's when you mess—they may change, you never know. But normally, they don't. Now I have one lady that may change on me, so I have to go to her. "What will it be today? You're gonna have a bourbon, you gonna have a glass of white wine?" A Bordeaux or whatever, a Macon? She always get either a Bulleit or white burgundy, so you have to kind of—don't bring her anything until you know, 'cause she changes her mind, but her girlfriends have the same thing every time: Stoli, bleu cheese olives on the rocks. When they sit down, their drink is there. Make them feel so good. They're home. And everything we do, like that. People just like, "Damn."

[01:21:50.07]

Eric V.: So you're not holding off on the others until you've had a chance to talk to the—

[01:21:52.15]

Goren A.: Thank you. Thank you. So, she gonna have to wait. I got them comin', because you change your mind as often as you do, I'm comin' to you. What you gonna do?

[01:22:04.19]

Eric V.: 'Cause you wanna give her what she wants.

[01:22:07.06]

Goren A.: Yeah, exactly. I'm not gonna let you hold them up just 'cause you change your mind so often. But it's not often they do it, it's just a few people every now and then. It makes you feel good; it's a good feeling to be trusted by so many people that come here. I know that Frank called me, he gave me a new name last year, a couple of years: Ambassador. The Ambassador of the Highlands, because when I—it must have taken a year, those three tables, I got that big table back there, that's four tables so I'm scratched out. Pat got four tables, so we both bumpin' heads. I got people out here lookin' at me, want me to come over and say hello. So at the meeting every day, Ryan will say, "Goren, I want you to go by and say hello—"

[01:22:52.02]

Eric V.: Who's Ryan?

[01:22:52.02]

Goren A.: He's the maître d'. Ryan Ford, Matt [Gilpin], those are maître d's and managers.

Every day we have a meeting about who's coming in and what's the special occasion may be: birthday, anniversary, got a new promotion, whatever. We know everything. We know dates, we know everything. It's in the computer. They've been coming here for years. Everything about your life as far as restaurant it's in that computer, okay? We know what's going on before they get here, flowers on the table. They ordered some flowers, so I gotta go up here. I see him lookin' at me from a distance, "I gotta go talk to him." But I gotta time myself, 'cause I got so much goin' on in my head. What I got to do for these tables that I've already got goin'.

[01:23:39.14]

Eric V.: Do you write down orders?

[01:23:43.04]

Goren A.: Not so much. I need to more now that I'm gettin' old. [Laughter]

[01:23:45.13]

Eric V.: That's part of what's goin' on in your head as you're goin' over to talk to somebody else.

[01:23:47.13]

Goren A.: Thank you. And that what make it so exciting, 'cause they say, "Damn, how do you remember all this stuff?" So, I gotta go back and talk to them, but now I forgot what I just got through getting in my head, for years. Gotta focus on that and ne sharp enough so

"Okay. I can't talk too long, 'cause if I talk too long, I'm gonna forget what I just got in my mind for this table." So I'll say, "I'll be back, I just wanted to let you know I saw you. I'm gonna come back and get me some sugar, some hugs, or whatever." Go to the computer, get that goin'. Get it out of my head and then come back. Sometimes, I don't want to go back and say, "Look, what in the hell did y'all tell me y'all wanted?" It's embarrassing.

[01:24:23.13]

Eric V.: Write it down this time, buddy.

[01:24:25.19]

Goren A.: I know, I know. But we're supposed to write it down, yeah. But I sometimes . . .

[01:24:27.24]

Eric V.: Does Mama Pardis ever get on to you about that?

[01:24:31.14]

Goren A.: Nah, nah. That's one thing about—most of the guys write it down. Most of 'em. Pat and I just—I don't know what it is. I think it, we just . . . so many people we know, we just know. Once you look back on what they said, "She told me triggerfish. He told me duck." Then it just comes to you naturally; you don't have to write it down, it just comes naturally to you. But you gotta look at them, and look at, kinda like, you can just—it comes back to you, what she said, you know? You know what she didn't say, you know

that. You know she didn't say shrimp, you know she didn't say quail, you know she didn't say—so you know, you kind of narrow it down.

[01:25:11.06]

Eric V.: Kind of eliminate—

[01:25:13.00]

Goren A.: Yeah. It comes right back to you every time, every time. Appetizer, entree, it pops in your mind. So, it's like they're talking to you again in your mind. You go back, you put that in as soon as you can. Then you go to the other tables that you had not spent any time with and get them kinda going, even though the other waiter's kind of waiting for you to move. But they want you to come over. They want you to recommend something to them like you did the last time they was here and couldn't get you. So, I have to go through that all the time.

[01:25:41.27]

Eric V.: Because really, you're a big part of the experience here.

[01:25:43.28]

Goren A.: A lot of fun. A lot of fun. In the bar, I go in the bar. Pardis says, "Go over there and speak to ... John T [Edge, executive director of the Southern Foodways Alliance] may come in. "Go speak to John T" So I gotta stop doin' what I'm doin', try to find a way to get over there. Hug, kiss, buh buh buh buh, I'm over there twenty minutes, right? In

twenty minutes, a lot could be done. [Laughter] So, Pat got my back, okay? And vice versa. If he have to go over there, I got his back. I go into the computer and look and see at seat numbers, putting things down. You're in seat two, okay? I'm in seat one. When I order something in the computer, seat two. If I can't pick it up, somebody gonna pick it up for me. They see, they know I'm busy; somebody gonna come around and move it out of the way of the bar. It's in the way. Take it to their table, it's at seat two, okay? Very important, numbers. One, two, three, four.

[01:26:38.28]

Eric V.: So you don't have to ask, who got the whatchamacallit?

[01:26:38.28]

Goren A.: Thank you. It's embarrassing. You shouldn't do that. You just put it down in front of them. "Here's your glass of Rioja. Or "Here's your white burgundy."

[01:26:50.08]

Eric V.: Do they have a little map in the kitchen like they do at Bottega? [Interviewer's note: The map lists where seats 1, 2, 3 and 4 are at the table. The orders come in with the seat number listed for each plate. The expiditer later hands them to the waiter or runner, saying which goes to which seat.]

[01:26:52.00]

Goren A.: Yeah. On the board.

[01:26:53.28]

Eric V.: So you can see one, two, three, four.

[01:26:53.28]

Goren A.: What table. Table, who's working on that station—Goren is in station five, Pat is in station four. Tables lined out, seat number, one, two, three, four. Already right there. Framed, signed, sealed, delivered. Right there. Whoever run your ... Zack will bring it out. You know, it's sitting right there. He noted them. If he had to, he could bring it to the table. He know the seat number, he know the table, boom. So, it's all back there. Starts all right there. If he comes to that door, to that window, to that mirror and somebody's standing there, he'll say, "Look, run this to table twenty. Run this to table twenty-one." Boom. "This is seat one."

[01:27:31.27]

Eric V.: Something that he can't stand is watching food sit.

[01:27:32.28]

Goren A.: Oh, hell no. No, no. Can't do it. Somebody gotta run that food. Somebody got to go back there and run that food, and I don't run as much as I used to, 'cause. [Laughter] Just went.

[01:27:45.14]

Eric V.: Experience has its privileges?

[01:27:48.11]

Goren A.: So old man getting' a little winded. [Laughter] I've been spoiled man, spoiled.

[01:27:54.15]

Eric V.: You know, I been coming here for years. [Laughter] I don't think I've ever had the pleasure of sitting at your table.

[01:28:02.29]

Goren A.: I don't think you have either, yeah.

[01:28:03.24]

Eric V.: But. [Laughter] I have never come in when you haven't stopped to talk to me.

[01:28:10.11]

Goren A.: See?

[01:28:11.24]

Eric V.: And gone out of your way sometimes.

[01:28:12.17]

Goren A.: Right, right. See?

[01:28:14.27]

Eric V.: Are there many nights when you don't stop and talk to every table?

[01:28:19.01]

Goren A.: Phew . . . nah. If I walk in this room, I gotta stop. I know it's hard; it's hard. I be like,
"Ah . . . I just can't do it!"

[01:28:32.09]

Eric V.: They're gonna bend my ear for twenty minutes. [Laughter]

[01:28:33.26]

Goren A.: If I don't, at the end of the night, they're gonna come to me. They're gonna come, they're gonna find me. "Where's Goren at? I saw you busy, really miss you, I know you's really, really busy, didn't get a chance to stop by—" Which I could have, I just didn't want to because I know sometime, it messes you up. Okay? It throws you off your rhythm. You're like, "God." You get behind. I got a lotta stuff to do, lotta stuff in my mind. Especially when so many people want to say hello. They just want to 'cause I been here so long. It's like, damn. It's like your friends coming back to your personal dining room to say hello to see you. It makes you feel good. I have some bad days, but when I get here, let it go. Let it go.

[01:29:17.29]

Eric V.: It's show time.

[01:29:18.07]

Goren A.: It's show time. Some people call me, I say, "Goren, you ain't right tonight.

Something ain't right." "Yeah, you got me. I just going through this . . ." I try to, I don't want to talk about it, but then, too, you just gotta let it go. Some people just want to call me, they say, "Let's have lunch together." We have lunch. A lot of people, a lot of guests, they want to have lunch with me all the time. They invite me over to the house, we'll meet at some place, have lunch, talk about it if I need to or just to just be a friend, just to be comforting. Because I have been going through a lot, and I try not to show it. I try to—hell, you get here, you forget it. Then I look at my phone, my sister calls, and Mama this, Mama that, blah, blah, blah. I try not to focus on that. They never call here and tell me anything bad. They just let it—it's nothing really bad, it's just that I don't need that. Don't call me.

[01:30:13.05]

Eric V.: It's a distraction.

[01:30:13.05]

Goren A.: It's stressing me out. I cannot do my work if I find out something is wrong. They didn't tell me Mama fell until after she fell, after Mother's Day. That Tuesday I was at work, so I didn't get a call until I got off of work. "Mama fell." I would've freaked out. I would have had to leave, go find out, "Is she okay?" Buh buh buh. But there's a certain

time, you just can't do it. You gotta be careful on the timing of what you're doing, because it affects your life. Your whole demeanor just changes when things go wrong.

[01:30:53.11]

Eric V.: Well, these people asking after you and actually wanting to go to an effort to find out and talk with you, spend time with you, that goes far beyond the guest-waiter relationship.

[01:31:03.11]

Goren A.: Right, right. Right.

[01:31:04.23]

Eric V.: How does that make you feel?

[01:31:06.01]

Goren A.: You know what, it's just a fantastic feeling to be . . . loved by so many people. I been invited . . . I mean, I been invited all over. I never would imagine. People, "If you come to Amsterdam." "If you come to Italy." "If you come to California." "If you come to . . . New Jersey." I got cards, business cards, numbers of people. "Please call me when you get off the plane. We'll come pick you up. You don't have to worry about nowhere to stay." I get this all the time. My butt doesn't take advantage of it. I just—that's just me. Invited everywhere, anytime, anywhere, because just me being me. I think that people are very sincere about it. I just don't take advantage of it, never. I never have. I maybe never

will. It's just the thought. "You are welcome." "You're gonna use my lake house. Your family. Your girlfriend. For a weekend, the damn place is yours." Just, I never take advantage of it. Just I don't know what it is. [Laughter] I need to do that, but I don't.

[01:32:23.01]

Eric V.: In the early days—this kind of reminds me of something I wanted to ask you about. In the early days, Highlands was New South in the Old South. How did some of the more Old South people treat you as a person?

[01:32:37.09]

Goren A.: Man.

[01:32:39.04]

Eric V.: Because, you know, you're almost more seen as a domestic or a servant to them.

[01:32:44.15]

Goren A.: You know, the old school people—may they rest in peace—this place . . . and back in the old days, say back in the [19]80s when we first opened up, man, I knew. Frank knew. See, Frank and I worked at the top restaurant. The Hyatt was the top restaurant, so you had the chance to meet a lot of the big money people in Birmingham that owned everything. Everybody that owned something went out then. I mean, ooh, the Montgomerys, the Brombergs, the Pizits. All these—the Blacks. All these names that you

see around the city. Or the Orloffs. These people owned businesses downtown before downtown went under.

[01:33:35.14]

Eric V.: Before the suburbs.

[01:33:36.28]

Goren A.: Thank you. Everybody that owned something came out, so I knew everybody personally. They'd been following me around for—as a little waiter assistant. Knew people, people knew me. I did private events, I worked with a couple of guys. Robbie Melvin, he's a caterer. I did some cooking with him and some serving, so I've been to a lot of people's homes to do private events. You meet people, you meet new people at these people's home and the restaurant. So, my name has been out—I mean, Red Dog has been out a long time. Goren or Red Dog, Mr. Avery. And a lot of these people are gone. They're all just old and no longer on this world. But their kids, the grandkids and the granddaughters, the legacy moves on. “My father came here in [19]82. My father came to the Relay House in [19]78, [19]79. My father used to come to the Hyatt, and he talked about you and buh buh buh, and how you was this outstanding waiter. Did all the tableside cooking.” And people remember that. A lot of people gone, but it's the newer generation, their family, the granddaughters, the grandkids. They know me from their Mom and Dad experience of me serving them. So when they come here, they say, "You know what? You may not remember me or you don't know me, but my great-grandfather or my grandfather talked about you so much." Buh buh buh buh. So, it just . . . that gets

me more business and more people recommending to sit with me because they just heard about me. Don't know me personally, but heard good stories and that this is the guy you need to be with. So, Frank said, "You can't get 'em all. You gotta just limit yourself. You're goin' too fast. You need to slow it down, you get tired." Because I do have a lung . . . a lung issue that I have had some pneumonia issues in the past. Get too worked up and too moving around too much, I get tired. So I gotta kind of get—I use an inhaler to take a little puff puff to phew, calm me down. Because I do do a lot of walking, and it kind of wears me down.

[01:35:55.18]

Eric V.: Is that part of the reason for the semi-partnership with Patrick?

[01:35:57.04]

Goren A.: Yeah. That's one reason. Well, first of all, Patrick came here from Hot & Hot, which is a club, which is the restaurant down the street. As a waiter, he was a popular waiter at Hot & Hot, and they was not treating him right. So Patrick decided to apply here for a waiter. He got the job. Within the first day or two, trained with me for a couple of days and some of the other waiters. So, we started working together. Just automatically, things start clicking. So, I saw Patrick talking to my tables and I'm talking to his tables. I knew everybody he knew from, I guess, going to the restaurant. So, he started learning some of my guests. I started learning some of his guests. So, when Patrick is not here or he's taking a break, they will give me Patrick's request tables. When I'm not here on Thursday, they give Patrick my request tables. Vice versa, whatever. If I'm not here, Pat get all our

requests. If he's not here, I get his requests. So, we started that at the beginning when he first started. Then, it became a thing. So, now they call it the Patrick and Goren Show.

[Laughter]

[01:37:11.23]

Eric V.: Not Goren and Patrick?

[01:37:12.01]

Goren A.: Ah, nah, nah! [Laughter] Goren and Patrick. So, Mama didn't like it at first.

[Interviewer's note: 'Mama' is Mr. Avery's nickname for Pardis Stitt]. But it got to the point it got too big. Can't stop it now. It's like, okay. Because she thought that, you know, Patrick was working me hard because sometimes he can talk a little bit longer than myself at a table and refuses to realize that there's other stuff to be done, like need to bus this table or take some of these empty wine glasses off a table, or cocktail glasses that we're supposed to do, not the waiter assistant. Or to be focused on other stuff instead of talking to their guests that's already eating and already been established. Move on. Sometimes, you get into a rhythm; you can't get out of it. Now, I'm good about walking away. He cannot. For some reason, it's—something about it, I don't know why he can't, but he can't. It's hard for him to walk away.

[01:38:06.15]

Eric V.: How do you walk away?

[01:38:07.09]

Goren A.: I just walk away—"Excuse me! Hold that thought." I'll just walk. I'm gone. I don't think about it. "Excuse me!" [Laughter]

[01:38:13.03]

Eric V.: 'Cause they see you spinning around the dining room like a top, anyway.

[01:38:15.27]

Goren A.: He can't do it. He cannot do that. It's just something about—he'd just rather finish the conversation. But you're killing—you're hurting me, you're hurting yourself. 'Cause you've got another table that's just got sat. You've got to break away. And then first, you gotta focus, you gotta look around, you gotta have your head moving. "I'm talking to you about something, but I got another table coming in. I'll be right back." Boom, I'm gone before you even know it. Boom, I'm gone. Ghost. [Laughter] And so, it's understandable. I gotta go. Come back, we may finish the conversation. We may not. But I gotta take care of that table that came in. I already spent some time with you. [Laughter]

[01:38:55.26]

Eric V.: And hopefully you'd appreciate if I do the same when you walk in.

[01:38:56.27]

Goren A.: Yeah. So people will call—[Laughter] I got a call in on me one time. I don't get complaints, but I get . . . somebody called in and say, "Well, we came in. We were sitting

next to ... this waiter that we had. Evidently, he had been here a long time, and he was so busy and popular. He never spent any time with us. It kind of hurt our feelings, 'cause he was not talking—" But he was not talking to me in that way that I would have talked—

[01:39:27.28]

Eric V.: And that's part of the sizing up process.

[01:39:30.06]

Goren A.: It's a psychological, they need to open up. So, I left 'em alone thinking they wanted to be left alone. But I'm jamming with other people, just . . . "Y'all okay? Are you enjoying . . .?" But they're not communicating. They're not really enjoying life or enjoying their dining experience. Like I'm having more fun than they are! And it pissed them off, so they called. "Well, we want to come back, but we want to try him again, because he really was on his game but he just didn't spend any time with us." Because I felt like you guys wanted to be left alone. That's the only reason. You're in my station, I'm trying to get to you, but they wouldn't let me in. They would not let me in because of the way they was acting, okay? Looking at me and not smiling it's different. I don't know how to read you. I'm not coming over with that unless you let me in, in your world.

[01:40:24.19]

Eric V.: Because otherwise, you're just assuming they want to be left alone and do their thing.

[01:40:26.03]

Goren A.: Thank you. Exactly what it is. They did not want to be left alone. They wanted to get in, but I didn't know how to get in.

[01:40:32.21]

Eric V.: What happened when that couple returned?

[01:40:33.14]

Goren A.: They came, and it's, you know what? "I want to let you know, we had you last time, but we did not get a chance—" "What is your name?" And I start telling them. "And I heard people's talking about you, you been here for thirty-six years? That's amazing. And I didn't know why we didn't get a chance to talk to you, but we wanted to be in your area so you can talk to us and make us feel good like you did to the rest of those people." That little stuff like that, you never even imagine somebody would think about that.

[01:41:01.13]

Eric V.: Now, did you know that walking up? You know, they have a complaint, you have a system of tracking these kinds of things and lettin' folks know ahead of time.

[01:41:07.26]

Goren A.: Right. Oh, yeah, I knew. Yeah. It's on the paper, it's like, give them some love. Show them some love! They didn't get the love last time. So, I show 'em love. Shoot, I make 'em eat out of my damn hand. [Laughter] When they leave, they have had the love. They have had the experience. She said, "This second time around was amazing." We kind of

didn't see eye to eye, because they just were not letting me in, and once I start telling them and start getting close and personal with them about the menu, and, "Man, y'all got—you cannot have a baked grit, too. I want a baked grit, and so do he." I said, "No, you do not want to do it like that. Why don't you get something different, let him get the grits, y'all share that. You get something different, that way y'all ain't got the same thing. Make sense?" So you guide them. They like, they love that. They don't like it, they love it. "Why don't you have the—both got baked grits?" Come on, now. I don't play that, I don't play that. Got them, now I got 'em. Okay, entree. Two snappers. NO. No! No. "She's the snapper, you get a triggerfish." I tell you what, now, you—why won't you try this salmon? I got this Copper River salmon. You try that. Dessert, don't even make a decision. I got you. So, you done won 'em over. So, they're gonna say, "Man." On the way out. "We want him." And they're gonna say, "We can't promise you you'll get him, but we'll try." Just pick up on new people, new guests, all the time. I don't tell them my name until they ask me. People come in, they see me, "That's the waiter right there. That's the one you see when you open the cookbook." [Interviewer's note: In Chef Stitt's first cookbook, "Frank Stitt's Southern Table" featuring recipes from Highlands, a portrait of Mr. Avery setting a table is one of the first photos in the book.] On the Highlands web here, they say when you go online, my picture's the first thing you see. I did not know all of that. It doesn't faze me, but that's the way Frank set it up.

[01:42:59.09]

Eric V.: You're all over the cookbook, too.

[01:43:00.20]

Goren A.: See, I never . . . a lot of history, a lot of write-ups. People see my picture. They're talking, they talkin', "That's the guy right there." They want me. I can't get to you; I don't know you. [Laughter] I can't get 'em all, I can't get 'em all. But it's funny how people just . . . they want just you to come by and say hello. I just say, "Well, it's so nice to have you here. I am Goren." "I just wanted to just hello. I know we can't get you, you're too popular, but is there a way you can serve us next time you come?" So I'll talk to Ryan and try to get him—thirty days out, next time they come in, they may get a chance. If you're not in my station, I'll come by and recommend some stuff. That's what I do now.

[01:43:47.25]

Eric V.: The thirty days out is what, for the listeners?

[01:43:51.22]

Goren A.: Man. Thirty days—

[01:43:53.05]

Eric V.: Thirty days is reservation, you can't make a reservation any longer than 30 days out.

[01:43:56.25]

Goren A.: What today is, the tenth?

[01:43:57.12]

Eric V.: The tenth.

[01:43:57.13]

Goren A.: So you want to get in next month? Better make a reservation today, baby. To get in for the July. You feel me? To guarantee a table. You wait another week or two, can't promise you anything. Put you on the waiting list. Put you on the list; somebody may call and cancel, like, "Okay, we can't make it. We made a thirty-day reservation, we cannot show up. Give our table away." Then they'll call that person on the wait list, "I got you a table. You've been waiting. Now, what do you want to do? You still want it?" If not, we go to the next person on the list until that list is gone, so everybody got what they want. Thirty days is a long time, anything can happen in thirty days. Shit, plans change. People call, people cancel out. Wait list. Ryan is what, is the person to go to in order to get to me or Patrick. We have a lot of request tables. Some waiters don't have any. Some waiters get one out of a month. I get two or three every night, every single night. Somebody—tomorrow night, somebody's already planning to come and see me. Every night. Makes you feel good. When I'm on my game, when I'm on, I'm on. When I'm off, I stay at home. [Laughter] Shit. Stay at home. Or try to . . . come in, get a cup of coffee, focus, take a deep breath—'cause you know what you gotta do—you know, it's like anything else. This is what you do. This is what you do for a living, you know? I'm sure you're good at it. I could not do what you do. I probably could, but, you know. [Laughter] This is what I enjoy doing. So, I've always said over the last five years, "Ah, I can't do it no more." Now, eventually, I'm gonna walk away from it. But . . . I don't know. I don't know, I have no time to put on it. I always keep saying for the last year or two, "That's it. I'mma cut

down to two or three days a week maybe." I may do that, go down to two or three days a week instead of four nights or two nights or whatever and just be a part of this action that's still goin' on. I don't want to just sit around and think about what I need to do or think about something to do. Instead, I have something to do if I just stay focused and stay close to my friends and just try to pace myself. Yeah, I think it'll be okay for a few more years. Be sixty-eight very soon. So, hey, who knows? This is a good job. It's a good place to be. It's a good place to be when—to me, it's like family coming to see you. It's not a job. It's an adventure to me. I don't say ... I work hard. I talk a lot. I recommend a lot. I want you to really have a good experience and I want you to tell other friends about us, about me. I mean, about what you had, experiences you had here. What to order, what to try. Try things different. People need to open up a little bit more. Still some people are just—there's a lot of mediocre restaurants out here too that's really tryin' hard. They don't have the experienced staff in front of the house.

[01:47:35.19]

Eric V.: That's the thing.

[01:47:35.19]

Goren A.: That's the thing.

[01:47:35.19]

Eric V.: You can make good food, but it's hard finding good servers.

[01:47:40.16]

Goren A.: You ain't lyin'. It's very hard finding good people to work, period. Nobody wants to work anymore. Nobody wants to do this because of what they say—the hourly wage is still the same, \$2.19 an hour. It's ridiculous.

[01:47:55.08]

Eric V.: So how often are you—

[01:47:56.04]

Goren A.: But you can't think about that.

[01:47:59.22]

Eric V.: How often are you approached by somebody opening a restaurant saying, "Goren, we need you." [Interviewer's note: Many Stitt-restaurant alums now run their own restaurants in Birmingham.]

[01:48:03.18]

Goren A.: A lot. Everyone has to open up. They have called me or have gotten in touch with me. "Can you come over here? Can you work?" Just to be there. "It's gonna be too much for me to try to work somewhere else for lunch and then come in for night." In the day, I would love to do that to try to help out, but I work here for lunch. And I think I'm too old to do that. I think that my day working lunches, double shift, is over.

[01:48:32.26]

Eric V.: Yeah, that's a long day.

[01:48:35.07]

Goren A.: But a lot of people, just knowing what I know and knowing who I know, I think a lot of the new restaurants just wanted me to be a part of the action of their new place. "If you can just come in—" [Laughter]

[01:48:46.22]

Eric V.: It's part of the draw.

[01:48:48.08]

Goren A.: Hey, just show up. You ain't really gotta work. Just come in and just be there . . . walk around a put a suit on or somethin'. People know you're there, they feel good. "Goren is here!" Is he going to be working here? Or is he a part of the action, or he just . . . so.

[01:49:07.10]

Eric V.: You ever been tempted?

[01:49:07.18]

Goren A.: I have. But eh. Like Dean, a guy named Dean Robb, good friend of ours. Worked at Bottega for a long time, opened up Blueprint. Called me. "I need you." "Can't do it, I

can't do it. I can't work lunches and try to focus on coming here at night. It's just too much on me." But that's when they first opened up. He said, "You can just give me two days a week." Still, but I was going through a lot of stuff. But I never really just thought about leaving here, going to another restaurant, because Frank is personal. It's a person thing, it's a good friendship. And I just think that I'll be missed if I left, and not be here at all, just to walk away from it—even when I did have other jobs, like I worked at a place in Vestavia, the City Hall Diner. I was cooking for lunch, for breakfast. Got there at 6:30 in the morning. Burnt myself out. Got here at 2:30 in the evening, 3 o'clock. Leave there at 2. Change clothes, come to work here at 3. So I stressed myself out and I was tired, and I just didn't have the energy to do it. So Pardis said, "Why don't you let that go? Let that go. It's too much for you. They're working you too hard. Making good money, but it's just the stress part of it." Trying to focus on what I was doing here, running late, behind. It was not worth it, so I stopped doing that. City Hall Diner. Now it's called Bistro V, which is just nothing, nothing going on right there. [Laughter] But everybody came there. They knew me from here, and I was the cook. So, they came there for breakfast. Some of the best breakfast food and lunch food at Bistro V at that time. But then, when I left there, the place went to . . . went down. I mean, ain't nobody there they knew. Nobody was focusing, and then nobody cared. The love had just lost.

[01:51:09.15]

Eric V.: So, when you talk about how, when you can't necessarily make it around the dining room—

[01:51:14.17]

Goren A.: Right.

[01:51:14.20]

Eric V.: You'd be tempted to go back into the kitchen. [Laughter] That's not just a joke, you've got the skills to do it.

[01:51:21.07]

Goren A.: Right. I think that if I went back there, and not out here—'cause your legs get tired after a while, you're rippin' and running—to go back there and just to kind of come in a couple days a week, to just dice, slice, and prep, that'd give me something to do if I wanted to. I'm sure that whatever I wanted to do, I can go talk to Frank and Pardis and say, "Look. I want to be a part. I want to go in the kitchen and do some stuff. I want to be at the front door for a day, just one day, one night a week." Dress up just to greet people. They'll love that, walking in the door to see me at the front desk, dressed for success. "My God! You still here?" [Laughter] "I'm not on the floor tonight, but I'm at the door." Saying "Good evening" or "good night." Something, just to be a part of it. I think that'd be something to do. That's another thing, either in the kitchen or at the front door. If somebody calls me and says, "Goren, we are short a waiter. Could you come in for tonight? I know you're workin' part-time, but can you come in and work for that particular waiter?" If they're short staffed, then they can use me as that to fill in the blank. But I think that'll be also something to give me to do. So, my options are very open. I got

a lot of things I could—not just here. Bottega need help. Chez Fonfon too fast, but I could go in there and do something.

[01:52:44.27]

Eric V.: Did you ever do any training with them when they opened up?

[01:52:47.12]

Goren A.: Every one of 'em.

[01:52:47.17]

Eric V.: Um-hm. How long would you be there?

[01:52:49.29]

Goren A.: One day. [Laughter] One day. Bottega open up. First grand opening, I was there.

Boom. Came right back here. Chez Fonfon, first time waiting tables. It was *hard* for me.

Whew, it's too fast. Grand opening, I was over there waiting tables. Boom. It killed me.

Tore my butt up. [Laughter] Came back next day, right back. Cafe, same thing. Boom.

Same guests, people loved it. People knew about it. Frank Stitt, names, food, faces.

People love it. That's why Chez Fonfon right now, super busy tomorrow. You can't

even—gotta stand out there and wait. After you don't get there at 10:30, you're stuck,

because you can't afford to not get there on time because you've got a forty-five minute

wait.

[01:53:44.27]

Eric V.: That would be your shortest wait of the day.

[01:53:46.11]

Goren A.: Yeah. People just lined up outside, "Come in." At 5 o'clock, standing outside the door to get in, to get to the bar to get a seat. [Interviewer's note: Dinner service at Highlands begins at 5:30 p.m. but the bar opens at 4 p.m.] They know at 5:30, it's gonna be full. Here, walk in. 5:30, tables wide open. But people say, "You're not full." But they comin'. Every table has a time. 6:15, 6:30, 6:45, 7. Every table is booked. And then, secondly, once that table get up, that's another table scheduled to go down. All night long.

[01:54:20.00]

Eric V.: 'Cause really, the only seats in the house now that aren't reserved are at the bar.

[01:54:23.20]

Goren A.: B1, 2, and 3. Or at the bar.

[01:54:27.19]

Eric V.: And those are the tables along, parallel to, the bar?

[01:54:29.28]

Goren A.: Yeah. 1, 2, 3. Walk in, boom. At the bar, walk in, boom. Anything, sit down, table wide or tablecloth? That table reserved, every one of those tables. And the bar. That

means you gotta get your butt in the bar at the table, sit down, get set up, tell the bartender, "I'm gonna eat some dinner." They set you up. If you don't, gotta go somewhere else. Bottega Cafe, the dining room, booked. But the cafe is walk in, but [Bottega] dining room, reservation only. Very nice. Very nice. Bottega got good food.

[01:55:09.01]

Eric V.: And they're even busier with the locals now since you get so many out-of-towners here.

[01:55:12.10]

Goren A.: Exactly, exactly. So, when they can't get in here, they go up there. See, the local people can't get in here, so they go to Bottega, which is a little slower—but they'd rather be here, 'cause this started the whole thing off. A lot of my guests call, "Goren, we been trying to get in there. I'm not gonna make a thirty-day out reservation. It's too long. I'm too old. I'm not used to doin' that." So they'll call Pardis. Got some way to get in touch with Pardis, or they'll see Frank on the street or whatever. [Laughter] "Hard as hell to get in there! Who do I talk to?" So Frank said, "Just call Ryan or call the number and they'll take care of you." That's all they do. That's all they can do, because they don't want to get involved in that. But it is all hard to get in. It is . . . some people just not just going to wait, and they're not going to do a thirty day. Some of the old school people, it's just too long. It's not what they're used to. They're used to comin' in the door, walkin' in, sit down in the bar for a while, "We'll find something for you." Back then. Now, that doesn't happen. You gotta do it right.

[01:56:21.07]

Eric V.: That's all the Beard Award.

[01:56:24.06]

Goren A.: Yeah. Before then, it was still busy before the awards, and it got triple time busy.

Triple the business, you hear me? Boom boom boom. Three turns, boom, boom, boom.

[01:56:34.28]

Eric V.: Because what does it say about Highlands that you would be a finalist ten consecutive years, winning at the tenth?

[01:56:40.11]

Goren A.: I mean, hello. Who would imagine? Nobody would imagine that we would do what we did, in ten years, now. I thought we should have got it in five years, but whatever.

[Laughter] But what it did, the longer you on the list, the longer you on that list, the more business you get. Once we're taken off the list, even though we're still busy, they don't tell you how long it's going to last. The energy. This great restaurant, we have did our thing, and we are not falling back—we're still doing our thing—but other places are opening up, true enough. But I don't think there's ever going to be anything like the Highlands in this city.

[01:57:29.29]

Eric V.: Because if you can maintain that level of excellence consistently—

[01:57:33.06]

Goren A.: Yeah, yeah. Right. Exactly.

[01:57:35.11]

Eric V.: Over that time, you're not suddenly going to start sitting on your laurels.

[01:57:38.03]

Goren A.: No. You can't do it. We are not going to let it happen, because we're too dedicated to what we do. That's the thing, dedication. I mean, everybody around here, twenty years, twenty-five years. You know? Fourteen, seventeen. Nobody got thirty-seven years, but still, it's the people that care about what they do. You know, it's not just about Frank and Pardis. Their names are out there. The restaurant is ran by a lot of people. They can't run it by them damn selves. You gotta have good people in the house: the back of the house, the front of the house, the dishwashers, the cooks. Everybody love what they do. They all work together so well. They talk, they laugh, they play. We get behind sometimes goofing around, but when it really comes to being serious about what we do, we can do it. Now, you know, Mama come around. Sometimes, things ain't clean. We gotta dust our chairs off and dust behind the scene and keep the place looking good.

[01:58:39.21]

Eric V.: How often do you have to pull out the Q-tip?

[01:58:40.15]

Goren A.: Shit. [Laughter] She got a whole box of Q-tips she buy every week.

[01:58:45.08]

Eric V.: And what do you do with 'em?

[01:58:45.20]

Goren A.: We go around and find, like the damn sideboard, the places that you can't get with a rag. Toothpick in the grooves. You'd be surprised who'll notice stuff like that. Mama does.

[01:58:59.04]

Eric V.: Why do you call her Mama?

[01:59:00.10]

Goren A.: Mama, Mama is . . . you know what, it's a good question. [Laughter]

[01:59:03.18]

Eric V.: 'Cause Mama can be a lotta things, very nurturing and also the one who whips you.

[01:59:08.23]

Goren A.: Mama has become—we call her Mama because you go to Mama for everything, like your mother at home. You don't go to your daddy, you go to Mama. You need some

money, you go talk to Mama. You got a question, you got some issues, go talk to Mama. Frank don't have time for that. Frank does not have time for that. He has too much other things goin' out, running the farm and worrying about the restaurant, makin' the menu. Mama is also busy, but she has the time for that. We call her Mama because she's like a mother figure. She loves everybody. Everybody loves her. But you go to her. You got a problem, you go to her. You got a problem with an employee, somebody calling you inappropriate name, you go to her. She'll go to Frank. When they need to be signed, sealed, delivered, and you're ready to go, go to Frank. He's gonna make the final decision. It's time for you to go. You no longer work here. He don't hire you, he don't fire you—he hire, Zack does the hiring, Frank does the approving as money. This is what I'm gonna pay my cook, this is what I'm gonna pay this guy. This is what— I sign Goren's check, shit. That's what he does, sign checks.

[02:00:24.10]

Eric V.: She came on the scene here, what, early 1990s?

[02:00:26.01]

Goren A.: Yeah, yeah.

[02:00:27.29]

Eric V.: How did her presence change things at Highlands?

[02:00:31.07]

Goren A.: It's funny you say that. How can I put this? Phew, she is so dedicated to making a restaurant, or restaurants look good. Atmosphere. Colors. Cleanness. Things that people look at that you don't think about. People walk in the front door—the foyer, they call it; the foyer—wipe down every day, dusty. Its an old building. It gets dusty. She's good at that, very sharp. The details. Chair slats.

[02:01:13.05]

Eric V.: The way the tables line up.

[02:01:14.12]

Goren A.: The decor. The candles, opera. The gold. The window. All that's her, all that's her. Every restaurant, all of 'em, that's what she does. Neatness, cleanness, yourself, your uniform, your shoes, your apron. Your vest. Not a stain. No food stain, no nothin'. She check you out, she gonna call you out. Your collar, collar stays. Everything.

[02:01:43.13]

Eric V.: She's paid attention to every little detail down to the jewelry you wear.

[02:01:47.00]

Goren A.: Everything. Smell. Too much cologne, it kills the food. It kills the food. Kills the whole—you walk to the table. "You got cologne on?" Some people come in with too much perfume. It just kills the whole night. You can't even, I can't imagine. How can you wear this kind of stuff when you got to come out to eat? So you're messin' up the whole

table, the whole dinin' room smells it, too. Everybody's lookin' around like, "What is that smell?" People don't realize, perfume and food does not go well together. It's the worst thing in the world. That's why it's very important you just put on deodorant, no shaving lotion. None. No hair tonic. Very important. Mama has brought these places to life. Frances was very good. Frances was amazing, what she did. She was just not . . . fine tuning things, like Pardis. Frances tell you, the maître d's or people who work under her what to do and who to tell, but Mama comes around and actually see it for herself and will call you out on it and get them damn toothpicks—[Laughter] Those Q-tips out. [Laughter] And a rag and wipe. See this? Don't let it happen again.

[02:03:12.05]

Eric V.: And was it all written down before Pardis?

[02:03:16.00]

Goren A.: Yeah. Yeah. Got an employee's handbook.

[02:03:19.12]

Eric V.: But is she the one who created that?

[02:03:21.10]

Goren A.: Yeah, yeah.

[02:03:21.10]

Eric V.: You didn't have that before the [19]90s.

[02:03:23.23]

Goren A.: No, no. A lot of restaurants didn't give a—you walk in some of the old restaurants back then, it was so dusty, man, and chairs like so much thick—nobody was taught that. They didn't care about that. They didn't think it was important. Shoot, you walk in one now, as bright as, as old as this place is, even though there's nobody in here, I can go around and find all kind of stuff right now. 'Cause I know it, I know what to look for. She's taught us that, okay? My place, my apartment, is so sharp, and so clean, that she has instilled that into our lives as well as—

[02:04:00.12]

Eric V.: Kind of like being in the military.

[02:04:01.04]

Goren A.: Thank you. It's both, your workplace—my house is clean. I would have never thought about wiping some baseboards down at home. Now I pull the couch out, I'm wiping behind the couch. [Laughter] Baseboards! Dusty. At my house!

[02:04:14.06]

Eric V.: Will you come visit me?

[02:04:14.06]

Goren A.: I know. [Laughter] Okay. Bathroom baseboards, okay? All the time. I'm doing something detailing around, because man, that's what you do. You come here, it's called side work. Everybody got side work. Mine is butter. I do butters every day. Ramekins, beautiful butters, just nice, soft, spreadable. Everybody got their own thing. At the end of the night, everything gotta be put away, wrapped up, buh buh buh buh. Wiped down. So she come in, like she come in now? She can see something stuck, she's gonna tell the maître d'. The maître d' gonna tell us, write it down. "This has gotta be done before we open tomorrow. It was not taken care of this weekend." So, little small things behind the scenes. She's good at that. Behind that wall, where we work at? There's a little wait station. That's what it's called, a wait station. That's where we work. Clean it up at the end of the night. In the bar, wait station. Clean it up, wipe it down. I'm here every night. Last one, every night. Every night.

[02:05:20.11]

Eric V.: When are you normally walkin' out the door?

[02:05:21.11]

Goren A.: 12:30, 1 o'clock.

[02:05:23.16]

Eric V.: Settin' the alarm, lockin' it up?

[02:05:24.15]

Goren A.: Get here at 3. Makin' sure. I get the last tables. Me and Pat get the last tables, every night. People come in at 10:30. We want them. They know that we gon' give them great service.

[02:05:38.12]

Eric V.: It's the same as if it was 7.

[02:05:40.17]

Goren A.: Thank you! It's important. Same thing.

[02:05:43.09]

Eric V.: What time is official closing here?

[02:05:44.14]

Goren A.: 10 o'clock now. Was 10:30. Now it's 10 o'clock because we was running out of food.

We were so busy during the awards, at 10:30, it got to chaos. When somebody come in at 10:15, we close at 10:30, so we give them to 10:45, you feel me? So, ain't no food left.

Don't make sense. Why would I give you a menu? There's no food. So, I gotta tell you what I got left. It kinda hurts. I want you to have the full experience like anybody that came at 6. We was not doin' that for a month or two, so we backed it up to 10 o'clock instead of 10:30. That means it's 10 o'clock. At 10:15, if you walk in at 10:15, you still can get sat. At 10:30, it's too late.

[02:06:35.14]

Eric V.: So, is that one of the factors of why you're the last to leave, or is this something . . . ?

[02:06:38.02]

Goren A.: Yeah. I think it's something just with us. A lot of that—

[02:06:44.01]

Eric V.: Why is that important to you, I guess, is what I'm trying to ask.

[02:06:41.28]

Goren A.: The seating. The seating. Well . . . all waiters and waitresses, everybody got their own little body language. In other words, so you come in, somebody walk in 10:30. You got some waiters, damn. They don't want 'em. Okay? They got something to do. They got somebody, they want to go or they just want to be home or whatever. Me, I go home. So I'm in no hurry to get out of here, and they know that, so they're gonna get the same service that you get. Because I think that Mama and Daddy know that, okay, Dog will be here all night, I don't have to worry about it. So . . . [Laughter] Now, you got some other young waiters, they want to get home, they got girlfriends and young wives. They might not give you the whole nine yards, twelve yards, whatever. You may just be a little sloppy. You don't come back, you don't check on 'em. You don't seem to give them the love. They sitting by themselves, because they're the only ones left in the dining room. It's not cool, so. That's what me and Patrick do, make 'em feel comfortable. We both will stand there and talk to them, maybe, while they're deciding on dessert. I'll fix some

espresso, cappuccino, 11 o'clock, 11:30. They still haven't decided on dessert. That's what they do. When they come back, late night, "I want Patrick and Goren. So I get taken care of." And some people don't want late tables, so they'll sell—in other words, they give the table away. Next day they come in and sit down, "How bout that table? How long that table stay?" "They stayed all night." "Was it worth it?" "Yeah, they left a four hundred dollar tip." "No!" [Laughter] So, you left four hundred dollars, okay? That's what you're gonna do. That's one thing about late tables: they can make it for you or it can kill you.

[02:08:39.23]

Eric V.: And it's not just locals. How many times have you seen somebody come in here with a suitcase, having just gotten off of a plane?

[02:08:46.21]

Goren A.: A lot, a lot. We keep all the luggage behind the scene. We got spots for that. They just got off the plane, this is the place they be recommended to come. And to get that love at 10:30, man, it makes them feel good.

[02:09:00.21]

Eric V.: Especially after having been in an airport. [Laughter]

[02:09:03.07]

Goren A.: It makes them feel good, and then they're gonna get some good food. We already know that; we got a call. We're gonna get a call from them or whoever. Somebody gonna

make a reservation: "We got four people on the way. Can y'all take 'em?" "Yeah, tell 'em, to come on." They gonna get everything they need. Maybe out of one thing, may not. But the experience that they get, the love they get because they just got in, they probably haven't even hit the hotel yet, they want something to eat. This is the place that's recommended. Boom.

[02:09:39.11]

Eric V.: Now you have, as far as employer-employee relationships go, yours is very unusual with Frank Stitt in that you've known each other, worked together before Highlands opened, and you've been here all along. Describe your working relationship.

[02:09:55.00]

Goren A.: Oh, he's tough. He's tough. [Laughter] He comes in . . . [Laughter] He goes in the kitchen. He looks around. He speaks to everybody, everybody speaks to him. Frank and I does not hang out. We don't go out, have lunch together. If we need to talk about something, we can call each other. I don't tell him . . . how to make a menu or what needs to be taken off or what needs to be put on. We just talk about it among all of us. Frank says, "What is it that I need to add to the menu?" or "What is it do I need to take away? Goren, what do you think? Is it something—anything you want to add, anything I need to consider adding?" So, I give him my suggestions.

[02:10:43.05]

Eric V.: Is this based on your—seeking your experience or what feedback you're getting from guests?

[02:10:47.09]

Goren A.: The feedback we're getting from guests sometimes. We got a dish, man, that's called a pork schnitzel. My goodness. People love it. Simple. People been asking about this, so we told Frank last week, "We gotta get the schnitzel back." We had the duck breast on, bubbles and squeak for a while, it's been great. Schnitzel, simple, pounded pork loin. Breadcrumbs. Mustard. Pommery mustard sauce, creamy grits. Schnitzel with a fried egg. My God. It's gonna be on the menu next week, watch and see, okay? So, he asks me or asks some of the older guys what people's been asking about. So, he'll do it to a certain degree. But it's nothing boring. Nothing . . . nothing that's, sorry, something some old school, he don't like that. He don't like beef wrapped with bacon, okay? A tenderloin, it's called a tenderloin tournedos, kind of old school tournedos. I remember serving that with béarnaise sauce, artichoke bottom, and smothered with a lot of béarnaise. So old school, he don't want that. Anything like a peppercorn steak, a carpetbagger with fried oysters, with a steak—cut the steak open, fry the oysters, steak grilled, once you cut that steak in the middle, put those fried oysters inside and, when you cut into it you got, my God, fried oysters and beef together. It'll make you just crazy. The juice from oysters, the juice from the steak, incredibly good. So things that has been here but has been forgotten about, bring it back, okay? So, we'll do that. He asks about desserts. He asks about cocktails. Very particular about having a nice cocktail, something refreshing. He love mint julips and things. He love the drinks for races, like a Kentucky Derby or whatever the case may

be. He likes to have drinks seasonal like right now, coming up, we're gonna have some fresh peaches. We're gonna make some bellinis. We're gonna have some watermelon margaritas coming up very soon. We're gonna have a chilled drink with some cucumber—not cucumber, yeah, cucumber—gimlet or . . . grapefruit gimlet. Things like that. Just all these nice, amazing, refreshing drinks. So, what he does, he makes sure the kitchen is set and ready for his menu that he's made. He goes next door to Chez Fonfon, make his rounds, do what he do there. He come back and talk to the waiters about what wine that's moving, what wine is not moving. What we need to take away; what wines need to come down as far as price, what wine is overpriced. What are people saying about this price or what are people sayin' about that price? We got wines that cost seventeen hundred dollars a bottle. We got wines that's two thousand dollars a bottle, okay? They don't sell that much, but you got somebody come in, boom, "I want that." So, Frank got wine at home that's aging, that's sitting, that he does not want to release until he get ready. So, he has a cellar there in the basement, and then he has wines here that's sitting that's not ready to be released. So, he talks about that. He says, "Somebody want something special? Call me. I'll come back, we'll get this wine." So, some special dishes. Some people want to just spend some money, some people want to splurge and do something different that's not on the list. We got something for that.

[02:14:23.23]

Eric V.: Because that's one of the things that I think gets lost in all the talk about the food here is, Frank Stitt is quite the wine expert.

[02:14:29.14]

Goren A.: Amazing. I mean, wine connoisseur. He makes the wine list. He makes the damn list out, plus the food list. Plus all the drinks that he decides, the spirits that come in. He approves that, okay? Because that's what he did when we was out there doing all this research, getting all these ideas about what to bring to the table and what people expect. People like different. I mean, we got all these drinks, man, that's so powerful, I'm not really familiar with some of these—the flavor, I don't drink anymore. They got these . . . Amaros, okay? Amaro. Amaro's a very botanical, herbal—

[02:15:13.12]

Eric V.: Bitter, kind of liqueurs . . .

[02:15:13.12]

Goren A.: Yeah, yeah, yeah!

[02:15:14.25]

Eric V.: Liqueurs.

[02:15:16.17]

Goren A.: And they hardly move, because they're different. I cannot imagine somebody drinking them, because it's like diesel fuel, but that's the thing now.

[02:15:24.17]

Eric V.: Chefs love 'em, too.

[02:15:25.12]

Goren A.: Yeah, yeah, yeah! So I tried it today, I said, "Oh, no." Still hadn't got people to get to that. Some people like that; some people do not. But these Amaros are really fantastic, herbal, forgotten-about old school thing that monks . . .they found them, resurfaced, now they are back on track. But some people just cannot do that. So, Frank is really good at that, as far as the wine and the spirits. He don't really get into personal issues with anybody. I've never had a—we'd never had an altercation. [Laughter] A bad time.

[02:16:03.21]

Eric V.: In thirty-seven years, that's amazing.

[02:16:05.12]

Goren A.: I know, it is amazing.

[02:16:06.21]

Eric V.: This is a high-stress, high-tension job.

[02:16:09.21]

Goren A.: We never snap at each other. I think one time I . . . I sold several things to a table that he's staring at, like a six-top. Six baked grits. That makes him crazy. That makes him crazy, which I can understand that. Now, after the years of experience—but you kind of,

like, if you let that happen you're an order taker. You're an order taker. You're not a waiter of interest. All you're doing is taking the order, okay?

[02:16:40.04]

Eric V.: You're not guiding.

[02:16:43.12]

Goren A.: Thank you. [Interviewer's note: As he gesticulates, Mr. Avery hits the microphone.]

I'm sorry.

[02:16:44.14]

Eric V.: [Laughter] It's all right.

[02:16:45.11]

Goren A.: You're not guiding; that's not what he wants you to do.

[02:16:50.15]

Eric V.: And he sure doesn't want to see six of the same thing.

[02:16:52.13]

Goren A.: Hello. It makes him crazy.

[02:16:54.20]

Eric V.: Like you were talking about, when somebody's asking you to order for them.

[02:17:00.09]

Goren A.: Right. Had a table here, eight-top the other night. I had eight people sitting right here. Six dozen oysters. Same kind of oysters. Six dozen. Four, five orders of sautéed morel mushrooms. Five orders of the Beef Tartine. So, all this is same of one thing. Eight people. Now, why not just tell me, "Goren, bring one of a kind!" Everybody can try somethin' different. There's ten appetizers on the list. One of a kind, add the other two in the middle. Listen to me. So they . . . nah. He wanted to take control of the whole table and . . . It was not exciting. It was too much of one thing. Sweat it out. That's where we come in at, sometimes you can't, but this guy always does it, so you know—

[02:17:59.05]

Eric V.: So you know. Let him do his thing.

[02:18:01.07]

Goren A.: Let him go. He's gonna do what he's gotta do. He's ordering for the whole table, and that's what he does.

[02:18:06.07]

Eric V.: It's a power game.

[02:18:08.08]

Goren A.: It's a power. It's a power trip. It bothers Frank so bad to do that. "Five Beef Tartines on one table?! That's ridiculous." He start arguing and fussing. I said, "Chef, that's what he does. That's how he's gonna spend his money." I said, "Let it go. We'll let it go." He's like, "I'm still pissed off at you." [Laughter] He walked up and gave me a fist bump on the shoulder. Boom! Knocked the hell out of me. Other than that, never had a bad word. Never. It's amazing. I don't let it get that far.

[02:18:42.05]

Eric V.: It also seems to be the standard that is expected here: respect, professionalism.

[02:18:48.01]

Goren A.: Respect, and you're gonna get it back. I mean, I . . . I've worked with some guys that try to tell Chef, "This needs to come off the menu." I think it's insulting to tell a chef that. You know, that's not your department. You let him worry about that. You can only give him your opinion. Now, I can walk up to Frank and say, "Frank, this salmon is not up to our standards. It got an aroma." See, Frank may miss something. He may miss something. That's why Lupe is so important. Lupe catches all of that. [Interviewer's note: He is referring to Guadalupe "Lupe" Castillo, who checks in orders and preps in the morning, and works the oyster bar section at night. See his interview in this package.]

[02:19:17.11]

Eric V.: And he's the one sendin' stuff back.

[02:19:21.26]

Goren A.: He's a bad man! Cleaning, tasting, looking, the clearness of the fish eyes and all this stuff. He knows that. You cannot get anything past him. So, Frank is not here in the morning checking that stuff in. Frank is busy. He got people doing it for him. Sometimes, some may slide by. Not much! Not Lupe. Not with Zack. How sharp their noses are, and the taste, and the love, and the compassion for what we get in—

[02:19:54.07]

Eric V.: And they're experienced, too.

[02:19:54.08]

Goren A.: Thank you. So, somebody else? "Okay, we don't care. Just sign the check. Just put it in the walk in." No! Check it, everything that comes in. Everything is checked every day. So, if it ain't right, we can't sell it. We can't sell nothing bad out here. I mean, that's why we sell—86 it. That means, "Let it go." It ain't up to our standards. We have done that several times. Bluefin tuna come in, we thought it was okay. You get the first bite, eh, it's too soft. Bland. Mushy. That means somebody done played us, it's been frozen. It's been unthawed. So, it's on the menu now, but Frank will come out and say, "Goren, we're not selling that anymore." That means it ain't right. He's pissed; I can tell, I can look at him and tell. He's not pissed at anybody, just that it's on the menu, it should have never made it. It should have been checked out before it got that far. You got me?

[02:20:51.12]

Eric V.: Because for him, it's a constant pursuit of perfection.

[02:20:53.17]

Goren A.: Yeah. That shouldn't have been on the menu. So he come out, says, "We're not selling that. Let it go." He don't care. That's what he does. Ain't nothing you do. The baked grits, we sold out just recently, 8:30. Mistake. Young kid, only baked twenty. I don't know what the hell happened to the other twenty; we do forty-five. Other twenty, didn't set. Mushy. Failed. Wap! Frank said nope. "It's hard for us!" Gotta go tell everybody, no baked grits. Every table, gotta go to. Catch it. "By the way, don't even think about those baked grits. I can't do it tonight, baby!"

[02:21:37.15]

Eric V.: And that's one of the signature dishes here.

[02:21:39.20]

Goren A.: They're gonna ask you, "Why?" "No, just . . ." [Laughter] "I don't wanna go into details. I can't do it." Boom. So, that's what we do. That's why we . . . he know I know. I know what's up. I'm not gonna let anything come out of that kitchen. Mama, whew! Plates wiped. "No fingerprints!" She's good at that.

[02:22:01.27]

Eric V.: Just so.

[02:22:02.15]

Goren A.: Yeah. That thumb can't be on that plate. Lock it right there, right there. That thumb is hanging out that way. That's served a lot. You got a rag, you got a napkin. Make sure it's white. She's very funny about that. She'll rag you, she'll dog you out. Anything: presentation. plates, wipes. Everything. Look at the bottom of the plate; make sure there's no . . . on the rim. 'Cause you pick up a plate, you got a rim, you got a stain, that plate's dirty from the beginning. Should never have went out of the kitchen. Check everything. The guy that brings the plates over, the dishwashers, wipe the bottom of the plates. Could be something on the bottom. Very important. We don't like finding hair, can't stand glass, thimble, tack, stapler, all this stuff should not be in food. You find it all the time. People—the hell you all doing? What you lookin' at? Wash the lettuces. Wash 'em, figure out, separate 'em, look through it.

[02:23:07.00]

Eric V.: 'Cause everything's touched at some point.

[02:23:08.17]

Goren A.: Thank you.

[02:23:09.21]

Eric V.: Even the individual things of crab meat.

[02:23:12.02]

Goren A.: You find a fingernail, come on, that shit is insulting. It hurts everybody. One little plate can kill the whole night. Everybody's heads down. "How the hell a fingernail—put some gloves on!" Be careful what you do. It's food. Wear gloves in preparation. Check your food. Check everything. Check the containers you're putting the food in. Don't just go grab a bain-marie and don't look in the bottom of it and put some sauce in there. Look at the damn bottom of the bain-marie. Could be some particles in there. Look, focus. It's important. It'll save you a lot of trouble.

[02:23:48.28]

Eric V.: Now, Pardis, we've heard a lot about; we've talked a lot about how she's very exacting, very detail-oriented.

[02:23:56.18]

Goren A.: Very.

[02:23:57.00]

Eric V.: But she's Mama in another sort of way, in that nurturing sense of Mama.

[02:24:02.11]

Goren A.: Yeah.

[02:24:03.14]

Eric V.: Talk about that other side of her, from an employee's perspective.

[02:24:04.16]

Goren A.: You know what? She . . . I can go to her, Mama, we was talkin' yesterday. Me and Pardis was talkin' the other day. She was sayin' she liked to go to these musicals at the civic center – shows, and she loved the shows. Live music shows, stage performances and stuff like that. She was sayin' she gets free passes and did I want to go? She'd get some passes for me. She'd say, "You never do anything!" [Laughter] I said, "Well, Mama, I just, I'm okay." She said, "Well, you need to enjoy your life. You need to enjoy your life. You've been takin' care of your mama, your girlfriend, your daughters. You've been givin' 'em all your—" And she is, that's why we call her Mama. She is somebody to talk to. She'll love to meet with you for any problems you're having. "I don't want to work here; I want to work at another restaurant. I want to go work at Bottega, I don't like being here. I mean, I'm having some issues, they don't like me, employees treat me like shit, buh buh buh." So she'll figure out, okay, well, where you need to be? What's the solution? She's gonna make it work. If you're gonna be a part of this Highlands family, she'll make it work. Just so wonderful to talk to, dedicated to each individual person. She'll meet with you; she'll talk about the situation. Then, if you need something—like people have issues when they first get a job. You can't pay your bills, you need money, advancements. Everybody advancement, advancement. Sometime you get a little short on cash, you go to her and Papa. They'll help you out, best way they can. Wonderful people. I mean, just don't take advantage of anybody. "Mama, I know I'm just starting off. Before I get my first check, can I get a few dollars?" Just a paid out. She's good about doing that, helping you, even your family—you got some issues at home, your family, your home, well,

whatever you need to have done, she's there for you. She call me all the time. "What do I need to do for your mama? Your mama need anything? [Interviewer's note: Mr. Avery's mother, who is in her 90s, has been ill, and until recently Mr. Avery has been her prime caretaker.] What can I do for you? What do you need?" I'm okay, I'm okay. That love that she gives, and that's everybody. I don't care how long you been here, you can just start, you just started last week, and you been here thirty years, doesn't matter. "You're a part of the Highlands family, and we are delighted to have you here. What can I do to help you?"

[02:26:29.12]

Eric V.: Family is a recurring theme here, not just in people who have been related, but like your brother and Guadalupe's wife and son.

[02:26:38.02]

Goren A.: Uriel. Right, everybody.

[02:26:36.01]

Eric V.: And his daughter at one point.

[02:26:40.06]

Goren A.: Everybody, the whole family. His whole family was here.

[02:26:42.00]

Eric V.: Dolester and Verba were cousins?

[02:26:43.27]

Goren A.: Cousins, Verba. Yeah.

[02:26:42.24]

Eric V.: Dol's sister worked here for a while.

[02:26:46.10]

Goren A.: Diane George worked here for a while. So all these people, man. My brother, like I said, worked a little bit. My daughters never worked here; they thought they could, but this is not for them, and I know that. [Laughter] They needed some jobs back then, but this is just not for them. I know my kids. They cannot take the . . . this is not for them. They're not people person as far as dealing with this kind of . . . as far as, one of my daughters does hair, my other daughter does detailing and makeovers as far as cleaning. But as far as dealing with people? Nah. They can't do this kind of work. I know they can't. My granddaughter wanted to, but . . . she's not ready for this. Too lazy for this kind of work. You've got to be really motivated. So, I never got them to come down and apply for the job because of that. [Laughter]

[02:27:46.05]

Eric V.: How many grandchildren do you have?

[02:27:46.05]

Goren A.: I got three granddaughters and three daughters, man. They all just . . . too not into this work.

[02:27:55.14]

Eric V.: Because this is a very specialized job.

[02:27:57.07]

Goren A.: My granddaughters are into athletics and stuff like that, you know? Volleyball and baseball, and doing sports and track and field. But my daughters, also, their just—fingernails. They just cannot get rid of their nails, they gotta have pretty nails, they gotta have long nails, their hair gotta be a certain way. Here, you gotta have your hair cut a certain way. Can't be too long. Can't be running down your—you gotta ball it up. You gotta turn it into—so, they're just not cut out for this. You gotta have a certain look about you. Not too much makeup, not too much rouge; all this stuff means a lot. People don't wanna see all that. Just, it gets in your food. It gets in . . . in other words, you gotta be kinda plain. You know? In this business. That's why you see waitresses come up to other waitresses, "All this makeup and lipstick . . . I'm not goin' to a strip club, I'm goin' to a restaurant, so." [Laughter] That's why you see a lot of women that's kinda plain in restaurants, not too much. Pretty but not over made. That's very important, 'cause sometime makeup can get in your hand or sometime in some of your food. And you're sweating. You're rippin' and runnin'. You got stuff runnin' down your face, you got your makeup runnin'. [Laughter] All that black rouge, that stuff run, man. You got too much on. You don't need that much. It's very important. The handbook tell you all of that, how

much hygiene, your fingernails, need to be clean. You touchin' stuff. People lookin' at your hands. Just gotta be . . . your shirt, your sleeves. Can't have dingy sleeves on. Rolled up. There's a ring around your sleeve. It's a lot of stuff. People just notice a lot of stuff, man.

[02:29:48.22]

Eric V.: The manual even reminds you to brush your teeth before service, right? [Interviewer's note: I asked Pardis about that. Her answer: "Daughter of a dentist, what can I say?"]

[02:29:50.18]

Goren A.: [Laughter] Yeah. And smoking, oh, worst thing in the world. You ever been to a restaurant, a server come up to you and smell like smoke? Where you been? Wash your hands, wash your uniform.

[02:30:05.00]

Eric V.: And is this why I've been waiting?

[02:30:05.00]

Goren A.: Yeah! [Laughter] You walk up to me, I'm walking up to you, and you're sitting there, you're my first guest. The cigarette aroma then come all in your face, OK? That's not cool, man. So, the thing is, I don't smoke. Lot of waiters do. They go out back, they smoke, they come inside, they wash their hands. It's still in your uniform. Take some lemon, lemon juice, put it in your hands, rub it up and down your uniform. [Interviewer's

note: He's demonstrating, rubbing his hands together as he speaks.] Your vest. It'll kill it, every time.

[02:30:40.28]

Eric V.: Who came up with that one?

[02:30:40.28]

Goren A.: [Laughter] Old school.

[02:30:43.22]

Eric V.: That is awesome.

[02:30:46.01]

Goren A.: Lemon juice. Somethin' about it, it just gets that smoke. Yeah. Lotta lemon juice.

[02:30:51.12]

Eric V.: How long you been knowin' about that one?

[02:30:52.01]

Goren A.: Oh, long time, baby. Long time, baby. Just rub it up, all the way down, here. Just a little bit. Right there. So, you already got your breath mint in. It's the cigarette smoke that's in your clothes that you're trying to get rid of, lemon juice. Every time. [Laughter]

[02:31:09.25]

Eric V.: That is amazing.

[02:31:09.25]

Goren A.: Every time. It'll get it every time. So.

[02:31:14.12]

Eric V.: So, what was it like, being the subject of a documentary film? [Interviewer's note: In 2014 Mr. Avery was the subject of a Southern Foodways Alliance documentary, "Red Dog" which premiered when the SFA honored him with the Ruth Fertel Keeper of the Flame award in recognition of his professionalism and longevity in a field where frequent turnover is the norm.]

[02:31:20.21]

Goren A.: Hoo, boy.

[02:31:22.26]

Eric V.: First of all, what was your reaction when they approached you about it?

[02:31:24.15]

Goren A.: I was just, I was nervous. I was blown away. Had a meeting with John T [Laughter]
And Joe York.

[02:31:35.01]

Eric V.: Yeah, he's the filmmaker.

[02:31:35.01]

Goren A.: Right here. Right here.

[02:31:37.12]

Eric V.: This table where we're sitting right now.

[02:31:38.14]

Goren A.: Told me what they wanted to do. I said, "No. Come on, man. I don't need with that."

John T says, "No, it's gonna be okay. You got people comin' in, film crews." [Laughter]

"You're gonna be hooked up to a mic." I'm sayin', "Oh, my God." "You're gonna be

walkin' around in the dining room, talkin' to your guests like you do every night. I'm

gonna have people come in early just for the film so they can be here early, 5 o'clock,

daytime." Right here. I'll never forget it. This all took place right here. I was mic'ed up,

baby.

[02:32:10.17]

Eric V.: So, he brought in the guests, too, to—

[02:32:15.09]

Goren A.: Yeah! Pardis had— gave people an opportunity to come early to be in my film. She paid 'em, not paid 'em, but gave 'em dinner on the house. The mayor, Michael Choy, attorney, the Middlebrooks that comes in, regular guests. The guy in the wheelchair, it's two guys that's married, got married in California. They passed the law here that two men can get married. Had another couple here, a four-top, good friend, Mr. Thompson came in. She called him, said, "Y'all come in early for Red Dog's film." All my friends. Everybody here was my friends to make the film worthwhile. Joe sayin', Told me what to do. "How you gon' do it?" John T said, "It's gonna be okay, man. You're gonna have so much fun Goren—" Tryin' to get my confidence built up, 'cause he knew that I was tough to do some of that. I just wanna be loved and left alone. I don't need all that. So he said, "No. You do need it." [Laughter] "Damn it. Stop bein' so hard-headed." Said, "I don't need to be makin'—" I said, "Okay." Joe said, "Let me tell you. It's gonna be mic'ed up, buh buh buh. I'm gonna ask you some questions." And so he asked me a lot of questions, like you're doin' here, to get the history and the story. And when he came to reality, when I had to really do it in the front of the guests, oh, I freaked out. So—

[02:33:49.15]

Eric V.: Something you've been doing every day.

[02:33:49.15]

Goren A.: Yeah! Every day. Get mic'ed up, I'm goin' behind the scenes, I'm mic'ed up, all this is being recorded, everything I'm sayin' to my guests, everything is recorded. Everything is being—and Joe got a lot of stuff. He got a lot of stuff. Exciting. And then the next several

weeks, I . . . went down after the film was made, and I went down to Oxford, Mississippi to receive my award, and then they played the damn movie as I was receiving my award for the Keeper of the Flame award. The movie playing in the background as I walk onstage to pick up the plaque. My family and Pardis and Frank, and it was just an amazing time. So many people there giving me love and honor, to receive this award. Then I got a lot of CDs that I gave to my friends and sent my brother some.

[02:34:54.10]

Eric V.: CDs of the documentary.

[02:34:54.10]

Goren A.: Yeah. Everybody saw the movie. It became YouTube, and damn . . . [Laughter]

Some say they saw it on YouTube, they saw it on the web. It was just on people's telephones, and I never saw the movie until I got to Mississippi to see it. Actually didn't see it because I had my back turned to it. I finally watched it at my house on the big screen, just to kind of look at, "This is what I'm actually saying and doing." It was just, it was a great moment.

[02:35:25.04]

Eric V.: What were your thoughts as you were watching yourself?

[02:35:29.16]

Goren A.: [Laughter] You know what's funny you said that, 'cause I was gonna say, "This is really what I be sayin'? Do I be sayin' this shit for real?" [Laughter] I said, "Do I really talk like this at tables, or this is what . . . I'm sayin' every night? This is the energy I'm givin' every night to make this thing work." My girlfriend said, "You really are silly. You are so crazy." But I said, "This is why. Huh. Interesting. I guess I can deal with this waiter myself." [Laughter] Talkin' bout myself, 'cause you're lookin' at yourself doin' what you're doin', and you laughin' at yourself, sayin', "I cannot believe this is the kind of energy I give every night. Every night." When it's over, it's like, phew. Go to the back door, get in my car, I sit down for a second and I hold my head back. Phew, thank God. Another night. For giving me another opportunity to what I do. I love you, Lord. I just pray in the car before I take off. Please let me make it home safe. I get home, relax. My girlfriend don't talk to me about my day. She don't talk to me about who I waited on, you have any issues with people? Because she knows that I'm tired.

[02:36:38.01]

Eric V.: It's decompression time.

[02:36:38.27]

Goren A.: My mouth—next day she may ask me, "How was your night?" "It was good, it was pretty good." But then the same night, she never does. Joe sent me a lot of copies, Southern Foodways was so amazing. When I went there, I stayed there about three or four days to eat at John Currence's restaurants, restaurants, and the Catfish Cabin thing. And he has a restaurant. We ate so much food, we had a feast, man. Every other day was

a feast of food that other people was bringin'. It was a lot of people there for that moment, just to see the Southern Foodways Alliance, the Keeper of the Flame. It was all about me for that particular night. It was amazing.

[02:37:27.09]

Eric V.: What was the award for? Was . . .

[02:37:29.20]

Goren A.: It was called Keeper of the Flame award. It means that I am . . . the oldest waiter in the South, that's still accurate, that's still doin' it in this city, at sixty-seven, sixty-eight years old. You don't see that anymore. Oldest surviving of the old school servers in Birmingham, and that's what the award was all about. John T said that, ever since he been coming, said, "Man, you been amazing every time I see you. And you're just so damn good. you just on your job. Every time I see you. You always seem to be enjoying what you do. You don't see that much in an older waiter. Most of the time, they kinda burn out. Your feet is movin' fast; your knees ain't shot out. Your energy is good. Your personality as well. I want this documentary to be made of you. I want people to know, this is a life that you can make a good living. And you are making a good living out of it. Evidently, shit, you been here thirty-seven years for something. You're doin' something you like, you know? If you didn't like it, you wouldn't be here."

[02:38:34.09]

Eric V.: You'd have taken some of those offers.

[02:38:35.03]

Goren A.: Yeah. It has been, it has been good to me. And I seem to be working a little bit harder because of the business, because of the turnovers. Shit, twelve years ago, fifteen years ago, four tables is all I needed for my night. Four tables. From 6 to 10:30. Boom, one turn. Easy! Breezy. Now, turn that table over. Four of 'em. You got eight tables instead of four. Then sometime you have to have ten. But the money is basically . . . it's better then, okay, 'cause they spent more money. They sat longer. [Laughter] Now, less money, faster turn, so . . . the average is . . .

[02:39:21.06]

Eric V.: Does it average out?

[02:39:22.07]

Goren A.: Yeah. Average out. A little bit more harder. Little bit more movement. The money, it's gonna be alright. If you enjoy what you do and you do it good, and you constantly do it good, you're gonna make some money. When you start not caring about what you're doing, just, "Oh, shit. Let 'em order. Whatever they want to order." If you don't take over, that's when you know it's time. I done lost my . . . I lost my rhythm, my love, my compassion for the job. "Let them order whatever they want." Oh shit, you know? That's not the attitude to have. You have people order, "We want four fillets. Tenderloin." Come on, man! [Laughter] I can do that. A lot of waiters can't. That's not their thing. They're not gonna say a word because they don't know the guests. That's when you get to know

them. "Guys, that's kind of boring." [Laughter] They look at me, like, "You right." "Why don't you all get two fillets and get two other things? What are you afraid of? What is it about a dish that you don't want to try? Why are you having four fillets? Is there something on the menu you don't want, or you don't like, you don't think is interesting, or you're not sure what to do?"

[02:40:37.00]

Eric V.: "And if you take a chance, do you think we're gonna make you eat it if you don't like it?"

[02:40:40.08]

Goren A.: "If you don't like it, I'm gonna take it away, I'm not gonna charge you a dime. I would really rather for you all not to get four fillets. I really would. You're gonna get me in trouble, first of all. I'm gonna use that word. And it's not exciting. So, why would you do that? Four grits, four steaks. Come on. What is wrong with you guys? Somethin' is wrong." So what happens, people are not sure about something. They . . . rabbit? It's gonna be too strong. Duck? It's not fresh duck, it's gonna be . . . I mean . . . how you know? Try it. I tell you what. My chef, I'll bring you one slice of rabbit just to put in the middle of the table. One slice. Y'all check it out. Next time, it's on the house. So, just make 'em change it up. I can do that. I don't even know you, but I can—"Come on, guys!" In a funny way, in a laughing way. "Come, on guys!" You know. "Nah y'all can't do it like that!" You may not get them, but at least it's on they minds, like huh. He got a

point. Why would you order four fillets? "So, y'all are not sure about our food? What you wanna to do?"

[02:42:02.10]

Eric V.: Or they don't have the confidence.

[02:42:02.10]

Goren A.: They don't have the confidence. "What you wanna do? What can I do to make you change this order? Let me tell you about this dish, again," or, "You didn't ask about this dish the first time. Ask questions. It's okay to ask the waiter. 'Waiter, what does this mean? What does this mean? What does tapenade mean? What does *duxelles* mean?'" That's why people don't ask questions, 'cause they don't understand all those words. "What does 'Bayou La Batre'—what does 'stone-ground,' what does 'beef carpaccio' mean? Why they little asterisk there?" "Cause it's raw." "What does it mean? What does 'ceviche' mean?" [Interviewer's note: Mr. Avery frequently refers to Bayou La Batre. It's a small town on the Alabama coast well-known for quality seafood, especially shrimp.] You be surprised people order that, don't know what the hell is. I'll be takin' an order of ceviche, don't know what it is. "We'll take a beef carpaccio." Don't have a clue what it is. When they see it, "Oh, shit, it's raw." So, in other words, stop bein' like that. Ask questions. So you done messed up a plate of beef carpaccio, I'll just take it away, take it off the menu, take it off the check, and they're bein' very appreciative of that, 'cause they know that they made a mistake. It's okay. What do you want? Try it!

[02:43:12.25]

Eric V.: You've been in this business—

[02:43:14.22]

Goren A.: Try it.

[02:43:14.22]

Eric V.: Since your early twenties.

[02:43:16.01]

Goren A.: Man, forty-seven years.

[02:43:19.06]

Eric V.: When did you think, when did you know that you were gonna make a career out of it?

[02:43:22.06]

Goren A.: When I left—you know, when I knew, when Frank and I met at the Hyatt. And I got it there, I was in a rhythm. I was workin' Sunday brunch at the Hyatt and workin' dinner when I was a head waiter at the Hyatt, after all the old guys had moved on and passed on. I took over as bein' kind of a head waiter and captain. I knew right then, the money I was makin'. It was like, "God." I was married, I was young, bought a house, got married, had two cars, just makin' bank. Makin' bank! Puttin' money away, savin' money. Goin' to work every day, makin' some good money.

[02:44:03.26]

Eric V.: And again, this is the early [19]70s, so it's hard for a black man in Birmingham . . .

[02:44:07.29]

Goren A.: Yeah! Oh.

[02:44:09.20]

Eric V.: To make a decent living.

[02:44:12.19]

Goren A.: And [19]60, ooh, Lord. [19]68, [19]69, [19]70, I was a little waiter, I was a busboy workin' downtown. Just change, they were leavin' change. Four quarters on the table for the waiter assistant. So the waiters are not takin' the waiter assistant back then. You bussin' tables and they leave some change in there, just 'cause you bussin' the tables or whatever, that's yours. But the waiters may give you a dollar or two, just to say, "Thank you for helpin' out." But you made more an hour. So I knew at the Hyatt that when I, my last year at the Hyatt, when Frank open up this restaurant . . . [Laughter] I had left the Hyatt and went to the Relay House because the Hyatt had fallen. Had just went down the drain, you know. Food started gettin' really sorry and they had some unprofessional waiters. I moved to the Relay House, where I got a offer, more money, but tip pooling, what I didn't like about it. Couldn't stand it! I'm workin' hard, but I'm gettin' the same amount you gettin'. You out there smokin' cigarettes and goofin' off.

[02:45:17.19]

Eric V.: And then not remembering the lemon trick. [Laughter]

[02:45:18.21]

Goren A.: Thank you! Man, pissin' me off. I'm doin' all the work, makin' the same amount of money you makin'. I didn't like the Relay House, but I stayed there until Frank—I got a call. Somebody said, "Frank Stitt want to see you." I said, "Frank Stitt? I said, is he in town?" I said, "Yeah!" I came over here, man, Frank was in here. Frank was . . . "Dog! Good to see you, Dog." Buh buh buh. "Man, I need . . . I'm openin' up a restaurant in October. I need some help." "What you want me to do?" He said, "I want you to bring two guys with you. In a couple weeks, I should be ready." The place still gutted out. He showed me a piece of paper with different things, and he said, "Well, bring two guys." Dol was here, Verba. Wayne, Clarence. All of us, we had a meeting. Just talk about, "This is what I'm trying to do. This is what I want to do for Birmingham. I want you to be a cashier." I told Frank I wanted to be a bartender. He said, "No, you'd drink too damn much back there." [Laughter]

[02:46:21.22]

Eric V.: One for me, one from you.

[02:46:21.24]

Goren A.: Ah! He said, "I want you to be on the floor, 'cause you know people." I had an old guy, A.B., he dead now. George, he dead. Brought them two with me. Two guys. Nice guys. I learned from them.

[02:46:35.28]

Eric V.: That's George 'Shaky' Peterson?

[02:46:37.00]

Goren A.: Yeah!

[02:46:37.00]

Eric V.: And A.B. Barganier?

[02:46:39.11]

Goren A.: Yeah, I learned from them.

[02:46:37.23]

Eric V.: They were kind of your mentors, right?

[02:46:38.18]

Goren A.: Yeah! Them boys bad. Them boys, they's like four years older. They taught me the ropes, man. [Laughter] If it weren't for them, I wouldn't be doin' this today. I don't know what it is . . . A.B. was so smooth. Even when he made a mistake, you never knew it.

He'll put down this grouper in front of you and say, "Oh, man. Here's your grouper." The guest may say, "A.B., I didn't order no grouper. I ordered the snapper." He's like, "Aw, hell. The grouper's better. Just keep it." [Laughter] He was so smooth. Right here! He got away with it, 'cause it was A.B. And guests knew him. So, just, he got older and started makin' mistakes. [Laughter] He passed on. So George was also—only thing George did that I didn't like, that he told Frank about, he was tryin' to tell Frank about the menu, things that didn't seem to match or things that didn't seem to his . . . to his mind, didn't seem to . . . work out. So, Frank didn't like that. He . . . "You're not here to, you are not the chef. You're still the waiter." But George was managing the restaurant, the Hyatt, so he thought he can says things like that. But it was just a bad mistake.

[02:47:54.21]

Eric V.: Especially since Chef Stitt's doin' something completely new . . .

[02:47:56.27]

Goren A.: Thank you. Thank you.

[02:47:59.16]

Eric V.: You know, he likes to tell a story about how people would get mad when he didn't have steak and baked potatoes.

[02:48:02.18]

Goren A.: Right. Right, right, right. I said, "Shut up, George. You need to shut it up. You're goin' out of your league." "This is just too much this . . ." "And he was just that kinda guy. I never had that issue with Frank, never. Now, I will tell Frank: "Frank, this is not enough food." Okay? "Need to bump it up, you gotta to listen to me." But he always say, "Goren people don't always want a lot of food." Nah. "This is very light, okay?" Now, we first opened, all we did was meat and a few little vegetables on the plate. No potatoes, no starch. So, he was doing the French thing, because that's what he learnt. And people was, like, complaining about they were not getting enough food here the first couple years. So I said, "Frank, I tell you what, why don't you put everything on one plate? Forget about the side plates, forget all that stuff." He started putting more vegetables on a plate to make the plate complete and putting a little height. In order words, mashed potatoes are called potato glue, okay? That's a word the chef used, to make stuff stands up. Makes it taller. A nice little bed of mashed potatoes, you put the fish on top. It stands up. Give it some height, and the vegetables around it make it look very complete. People loved that, 'cause this is the South. You ain't in France. But you're doin' French cuisine with a Southern flair, so give people some more vegetables. They did that. 'Cause people was leavin' here still hungry, sayin', "Shit." [Laughter] "Have to go by McDonald's." You know? [Laughter]

[02:49:30.24]

Eric V.: Yeah. We talked about a couple times, he values that kind of input. Because on some levels . . .

[02:49:39.10]

Goren A.: Yeah.

[02:49:39.10]

Eric V.: Because on some levels, you almost have to be brought back to earth to be reminded about the Southern, country Southern, part of what Highlands is all about.

[02:49:46.08]

Goren A.: Right, right. So, he . . . you know, he, he remarkable. Very smart. Frank is very smart. Went to Berkeley, degrees in whatever else he make. Everybody thought, his family thought he was gonna be a doctor.

[02:50:03.03]

Eric V.: Like his dad.

[02:50:03.25]

Goren A.: Frank say, "Shit. Sorry, Mom. I want to open up a restaurant." He didn't know how it was gonna be! He didn't know. Shit, he got those investors. Everybody that he got, I know all those investors. The day he paid them off, they didn't know. Never advertised. It was never mentioned on T.V. or radio, word to mouth. Everybody like—everybody name, billboards, all these damn people that own this city. Everybody. They told they friends. "There's a place been opened up I invested in." Just Frank . . . "It's gonna be called the Highlands Bar & Grill." The banner used to have 'Bar & Grill.' The church did

not want that. The church wanted it said 'Highlands,' not 'Bar & Grill,' 'cause they thought that we was gonna have people sitting out front, drinking outside.

[02:51:00.26]

Eric V.: For others, there's a Methodist—big Methodist church—right across the street —

[02:51:03.27]

Goren A.: Major player. Major players right here. Bad, they own the whole South.

[02:51:09.01]

Eric V.: It's the prime location in Five Points South.

[02:51:11.06]

Goren A.: Came over and said, "Frank . . . I appreciate if you don't put 'Bar & Grill' on that banner. Just 'Highlands' will be fine." That's what he did, had no problem with the church. They got a lot of pull, a lot of power. Chez Fonfon, no 'bar' and no 'grill.' Nothin' bout a drink. 'Chez Fonfon.' 'Highlands Restaurant.' That's it. Now, they got a little place out there you can sit out front and wait until your table, but nobody's out there smoking, drinking. No. 'Cause that's the city on the other side of the sidewalk, just a little spot to sit down, relax until your table—when they call you to come in, "Your table is ready." But yeah, he had a hard time with that at first.

[02:51:58.21]

Eric V.: How many different waiters and waitresses do you think you've worked with in your Highlands career?

[02:52:04.20]

Goren A.: Whew, Lord. I mean, God darn. Shoo. I seen a lot of kids, man, come and go. You know, we lost a lot of friends, closest friends that worked here. I can almost remember the first staff employees that—so many people have left. So many people have passed on. So many people has gotten older, like in my career . . . Art Yancey, big bartender, big guy. Huge. Health issues. John Turlock, doin' pretty good, got on . . . whiskey and alcohol and drugs. So many young kids that has went to other restaurants to work, decided they just could not deal with it. And then drugs hit this city real hard in [19]80. God, [19]80, [19]81, man. Cocaine hit this city hard. [Laughter] A lot of peoples getting into it, okay. Birmingham's not ready for that kind of . . . you know. It had been around for years, but it just, for some reason in the [19]80s, everybody in Birmingham been seemed to doing the same thing. Like, "Man, what the hell goin' . . . ?" [Laughter] Everybody partied very hard. And some of 'em partied too much. I was one of 'em. I enjoyed it, but it got to the point where it made me sick. Thank God, it made me sick enough to get away from it. All the juicing and drugging and . . . and we all partied, we all had a good time. But . . .

[02:53:45.21]

Eric V.: And if it's going to hit anywhere in a city, it's gonna be within the restaurant culture.

[02:53:48.04]

Goren A.: All the restaurants in the city were like, God. Everybody, every time we got off, we met up, everybody got their little pack. Their little one-hitter. [Laughter]

[02:53:57.06]

Eric V.: Snorting up a little cocaine?

[02:53:59.10]

Goren A.: All night long! [Laughter] Getting home at 5 o'clock. Stupid, stupid stuff, spendin' too much money. So, all those waiters and waitresses that worked here, a lot of 'em moved on. A lot of 'em got really deep in drugs, a lot of 'em. A lot of 'em, really. A lot of gay guys worked here, died. From AIDS. AIDS was really popular, a big thing.

[Interviewer's note: I think he meant to say "a problem," not "popular."]

[02:54:24.25]

Eric V.: It really started to hit us in the early- to mid-[19]80s.

[02:54:25.22]

Goren A.: Shit. It killed a lot of guys, a lot of good guys. Young waiters, waitresses. They dead. Pardis, good friends of Pardis. She lost a lot of people. I remember a lot of people. A lot of guests has passed on. But the waitresses, some moved to New Orleans, some went to Atlanta, some went to wherever they went, and some has come back to visit. Some in New York, got a couple of friends of mine in New York got a couple of steakhouses. But

everybody left here that went out of this city to work at a restaurant used Frank as a reference. And they did damn good if they want to stay into it, because this place has been known. People has been here. People come here from all over. "Man, y'all . . . I been all over the world. I traveled everywhere. Y'all food is just as equivalent to whatever you get in Paris or France or Italy." You be like, "You gotta be kidding." "No. It's not pretty, it's not all frou-frou. It's just to the point. To the point, you taste everything, all the flavors come together. You guys got it goin' on without all that pretty stuff. You don't need all that pretty stuff. Your food speaks for itself. It don't have to be pretty; it's good. And consistently good." So, I miss a lot of my friends, a lot of the friends I worked with. I can't remember everybody's name, but I can see a lot of faces in my mind. I have nightmares about this business that I'm in almost every night. It's all I do, dream about restaurant.

[02:56:01.12]

Eric V.: Like stress dreams?

[02:56:02.05]

Goren A.: Yeah, almost too stressful. Like I'm the only waiter at a damn football stadium with seventy thousand people. I'm the only waiter trying to serve that many people. It's crazy. We all have those dreams, because this is all I do for a living. I don't dream about anything else at night but restaurants. Restaurants. Kitchens. [Laughter]

[02:56:25.17]

Eric V.: 'Cause it's what's on your mind.

[02:56:26.10]

Goren A.: Yeah. Food service, I'm on the floor, people callin' me all night. "Goren . . ." Ah! I can't get out of this dream. I wake up, get out of it, get back into it again. It's what I do. It's hard. It's hard. Like ain't no way in the world you gonna wait on that many people by yourself. And it's funny about the dream, you don't remember anybody else in the dream. It's funny about the dream. You don't remember anybody else in the dream, no other employees. Just you and a lot of new guests. No regular guests. All new people!

[Laughter] It's so funny. People you've never seen before. It's never anybody you know. Somebody you never seen before, askin' you a thousand questions. Askin' you, "Can you get my wine now?" I got the whole stadium! [Laughter] It's crazy, man. But, yeah, we lost a lot. Like I said, a lot of people have passed on. We lost Wayne Russell, the guy that made the orange thing, the popular drink—orange martini. He lost his life several years ago. Big couple of guys in the bar . . . just AIDS. Took them. Meth, crystal meth. David Craig, all these people. Sad. Some got married, had kids, other careers. Tried to open up restaurants, did not work. Some people went to Huntsville, Tennessee, local restaurants, didn't work out. Some move out of—Valleydale [Road] tried to open up stuff over there, didn't work out. Had one guy from Iraq, Iran, that had a scam goin'. Him and his brother opened up a restaurant and they had to close it up because the money was illegal. It's a bunch of stuff, a lot of stuff. You just never know a person. But I have continued to really . . . try to train. We got people comin' in every other week tryin' to do this work, and Pardis and Frank, they meet them, they talk to them, and they try to get in. 'Cause every

place is different. I think that this is the hardest place to learn and to work of any restaurant I ever worked, because we expect more. We need to be on our game. A lot of restaurants just put you on the floor and just don't train you, kinda like tell you to learn as you go. We have a book, a guideline, that we go by. So, everybody has to know what's goin' on. When you start workin' here, you work every department of the restaurant: kitchen, barback, bartender, waiter, waiter assistant. All locations.

[02:59:15.24]

Eric V.: Workin' your way up through the . . .

[02:59:17.28]

Goren A.: Exactly. Every location, in case you are needed somewhere. In case you get hired for one thing, what if we need you to do this? You should be able to do that, too. Go in the kitchen, wash dishes. Waiter, waiter assistant, whatever. So you train for everything. That's what we do; everything. Not just one thing, everything.

[02:59:42.18]

Eric V.: And it's even such a multi-step process that there is an actual award at the end of this training process.

[02:59:51.26]

Goren A.: [Laughter] Right.

[02:59:51.26]

Eric V.: What is that award?

[02:59:54.04]

Goren A.: [Laughter] You know what.

[02:59:55.29]

Eric V.: Earning your vest.

[02:59:56.28]

Goren A.: Earning your vest and your tie and your apron, and a little piece of mind that you taken that test. Once you take that test, you may not completely pass the test—100%. Whatever you miss, they're gonna let you go over there again and take that test again. Stuff you miss. 'Cause we don't want you to leave. We need you, if you gonna do it. We got one young guy, he just has no—we don't understand him. He's nice as you can be, he don't talk to anybody, he don't smile. We can't get him to open up. He don't communicate at all, very, very, quiet. Very slow about what he does. I don't think he's gonna last, I just don't think it's for him, but right now we need him because he's a body that can do something. But I think if he opens up a little bit more, just his smile, just to kinda be—he's been here, what, four months, but he acts like he's just lost. It's not for him. So, until we can find somebody, we just tryin' to hold on. But he won't talk. He won't even . . . I never seen anybody so quiet in my life.

[03:01:08.09]

Eric V.: It's hard to do when you're servin' tables.

[03:01:11.23]

Goren A.: He's a waiter assistant, he won't talk to—the waiter assistants. Very, very—no communication, none whatsoever. We don't know what's goin' on with that. But you gotta open your mouth, find out. We need to know what you know, you don't know. Some guy just had to take the test over the other day. His name is Pearson. Nice young man. Passed the test, passed the second test. He's on the floor now. If he want to be a waiter, then he has to go through another training process, and he has to work at all the restaurants, every one of 'em.

[03:01:47.29]

Eric V.: Including in the kitchen.

[03:01:48.19]

Goren A.: Yeah, all of 'em. In the kitchen.

[03:01:50.05]

Eric V.: You're putting in the kitchen shifts.

[03:01:50.24]

Goren A.: Stuff you start off, in the kitchen, get the feel for that in case we need you for expediting. Then the only thing they don't do is dish wash. Most people, the machine does the damn work, you just gotta know how to put everything together. Yeah, this kid may want to be a waiter. He'll start off at Café next door. Before he become the prime waiter on the floor, you start off in the cafe, see are you ready? Are you ready to talk to people? Do you know what to say? Do you have the demeanor? Do you have the confidence? Had a guy the other day—he was at Chez, no, Bottega Cafe—he was . . . he didn't know that you could serve a salmon at a certain temp. He thought that it was just one way, the way the chefs sends it out, which is mid-rare. So, he did not realize that you could ask the guests, "How do you want your salmon cooked?" He did not ask the lady, it came too rare, she sent it back. So, he needed to realize that a salmon, fresh, sushi-grade salmon, is like having a tuna, medium to medium-rare to rare, you can do that. It's like having steak. So, he did not know that, so the lady sent the salmon back. She did not want anything else. It was like the end of the day, she had somewhere to go, so . . . I think she did not want anything. They took it off the check. Whatever happened, it was just not communicated right, so she left hungry and I think her son kinda mentioned it to Pardis and Pardis kinda told her, the maître d', not to put him on the floor until he's ready to be on the floor. Until he's really ready to explain to people what's goin' on with certain dishes. So, things like that, it's very important. Everybody got to be on the same page. You've got to know what's goin' on, because I don't like my salmon mid-rare, I like my salmon medium, which is moist, but not dried out.

[03:03:56.17]

Eric V.: That...

[03:03:56.17]

Goren A.: Oh, I love it. I can't stand it to be too translucent—it's too rare. Don't like sushi salmon. And some people like it like that, but you gotta know that. Gotta find out, find out how they want it.

[03:04:09.06]

Eric V.: It's a conversation in both directions.

[03:04:10.07]

Goren A.: Yeah. Some say, "I want it well-done." That's fine. But you gonna mess—you messin' up a good piece of fish, all right? Well-done, you don't want that. Now salmon it's gonna be dry. So, I suggest you get something like a white fish. [Laughter] Get you a tripletail fish. Get you a piece of grouper, because salmon is not good when it's that dry. It don't work. So, people don't know that. Just tell 'em. They don't know.

[03:04:39.07]

Eric V.: Mr. Avery, I appreciate it. I could talk to you forever and ever.

[03:04:43.28]

Goren A.: [Laughter]

[03:04:44.29]

Eric V.: And ever and ever, but I do need to cut it off—

[3:04:40]

Goren A.: [Laughter]

[3:04:49]

Eric V.: Maybe we can do a Part 2 some time.

[3:04:55]

Goren A.: I know that's right. Well I hope you got a little something.

[*End of interview*]