



**Drew Robinson**  
**Homewood, Alabama**

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

[Note: This interview took place on Oct. 29, 2018, in Drew Robinson's home. Occasionally the sound of someone cleaning the house is heard in the background. The occasional rattling noise is the byproduct of the interviewer getting accustomed to the mic holder.

Apologies.]

[*START INTERVIEW*]

[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 Drew Robinson. Mr. Robinson worked at Highlands from 2000 into 2003 and then went on and is chef de cuisine at the Jim 'N Nick's Bar-B-Q franchise. He is now a consultant with Third Car Consulting. Please introduce yourself, Mr. Robinson, and if you would, please also spell your name, give us your date of birth for the record.

[00:00:34.29]

**Drew R.:** Hi, I'm Drew Robinson, D-r-e-w R-o-b-i-n-s-o-n, birthdate is May 19th, 1973.

[00:00:45.20]

**Eric V.:** Great. So, tell us about Highlands Bar & Grill. If you were describing Highlands to a stranger, tell us, what would you tell them about that, and what significance, what impact has Highlands had on Birmingham?

[00:01:01.18]

**Drew R.:** You know, if I were describing Highlands to a stranger, it would be that it is sort of a—you know, I think every city has its own sort of iconic spot that is, you know, just sort of the place to go when you're in that town. And Highlands has kind of always been that, to me, about Birmingham. It's just . . . you know, the kind of place that, if I'm travelling around the country, like a Gramercy Tavern or something like that, that's what I see Highlands as, in Birmingham. Which, the special thing about that to me, is there's lots of cities around the country that have had long, established food reputations and, at the point in time that Frank opened Highlands, Birmingham's food reputation was not that. I mean, there were—fine dining in Birmingham at that point was . . . sort of old school, just meat and potatoes and very, you know, very sort of—to me—kind of . . . overcooked fish and beef and green beans. And Frank was the first person to sort of say, "We can do something with our region here in Birmingham and Alabama and the Southeast, and turn it into something really special." I think that sort of statement, in being the first one to really forge that path here, is what makes Highlands kind of an iconic spot. So...

[00:03:13.29]

**Eric V.:** How did you first hear of Highlands?

[00:03:15.19]

**Drew R.:** [Laughter] So, you know, I first heard of Highlands when I was a teenager growing up. I hung out with the punk rock kids in the Five Points South neighborhood of Birmingham, which is where Highlands is. So, I grew up there, hanging out and getting into trouble that we won't go into in this conversation. But, just watching folks go in and

out of Highlands. I didn't really know what it was, outside of the place where all the fancy folks went to eat dinner. But over time, as I sort of grew up and started getting serious about a career in food, I just learned through working around town and just being in the business, what Highlands was. You know? I would say, outside of being the sort of high-end restaurant in town for many, many years, I didn't really know what Highlands was beyond that until I started working there. I mean, I knew when I went to . . . give Frank a resume, I knew that I wanted to work there because I wanted to have the experience of being inside of, you know, this very popular, iconic spot in my hometown. But it was really being there in the kitchen on a day-in, day-out basis that helped me understand what the place really is and has been.

[00:05:19.14]

**Eric V.:** What were some of the places around town you were working in kitchens in early on?

[00:05:24.23]

**Drew R.:** Early on, I had an illustrious career in restaurants that no longer are open. [Laughter] I worked for Arman's at Park Lane a long time ago, and I worked for the Hot & Hot Fish Club for Chris Hastings for probably about a year, and that was sort of a—that, in and of itself, helped me along my journey in getting to Highlands. [Interviewer's note: Arman DeLorenz briefly was the chef-owner of Arman's at Park Lane in the suburban city Mountain Brook, which opened in 1994. He also opened several restaurants in the Birmingham area 2001-2005. Hot & Hot Fish Club, which Chris Hastings opened in 1995, remains in business.]

[00:06:02.29]

**Eric V.:** They both are pretty serious restaurants.

[00:06:06.17]

**Drew R.:** Yeah. Arman's was the first restaurant that—I had worked in other restaurants before.

Arman's was this restaurant that I went to when I decided that, okay, "I'm going to be, try and forge a career in this industry." That was . . . that was a nice stop for me and met some good friends and such. Then, the Hot & Hot was—yeah definitely, that was the restaurant that probably taught me how to really be serious about being a young, aspiring cook. It was kind of on a different level than anything I had experienced before.

[00:06:59.28]

**Eric V.:** When were you at Hot & Hot?

[00:07:00.22]

**Drew R.:** Wow. I guess, probably, it was in the late [19]90s. I left the Hot & Hot to go finish my culinary education at New England Culinary Institute in Vermont, and I left there and lived a couple of seasons on the north coast of California. And when I left California, came home in 2000, and that's when I approached Frank about working for him. That was . . . that was, at that point in time, the sort of pinnacle of things that I had done, was being at Highlands. It really helped layer in another piece of my foundation that has helped me go on to do things that I've done since.

[00:08:06.12]

**Eric V.:** Let's back up for a second, for people who are not familiar, would you please tell people what Hot & Hot Fish Club is? And there's a Highlands connection as well to that.

[00:08:15.21]

**Drew R.:** Yes. So, the Hot & Hot Fish Club is—it's another really sort of great Southern restaurant here in Birmingham that Chris Hastings opened. Chris has, in his own right, won a James Beard Award. [Interviewer's note: Best Chef South; 2012.] He did a lot in the culinary world working in California, but also being one of Frank's chefs—I'm not exactly sure what years he was at Highlands, but he was one of Frank's chefs at Highlands Bar & Grill. [Interviewer's note: Hastings started at Highlands around 1985 and was chef de cuisine before helping open Frank Stitt's second restaurant, Bottega, in 1988. He left in 1989.] So, there's definitely that connection there. For a long time, in Birmingham, the two sort of places that people considered as the places to go when you wanted a high-end meal were either—for a long time, it was just Highlands, and then Hot & Hot opened, and then it was kind of Highlands and Hot & Hot. I know from working in both of them that it's like you kind of see folks making their rounds through, and that was a long time ago. Birmingham's grown a lot since then, so.

[00:09:35.23]

**Eric V.:** But if you were considering a career in a kitchen as a culinary professional, those were the places you wanted to work.

[00:09:43.05]

**Drew R.:** They were. For me, being from Birmingham, I wanted to work in both of them and sort of, you know, absorb as much as I could to help learn techniques and that sort of thing, but also to—and in the mind of a young cook, you kind of have, even if it's relatively abstract, you know some sort of a vision of, "Here's what I think about the way that I would like to cook, the kind of . . . what my style is, so to speak." I think that's kind of a ever-evolving sort of thing, but . . . in having, in my mind, when I was first sort of setting out to be serious about learning how to cook, those restaurants each had something about them that sort of felt consistent with where I wanted to see myself evolve towards.

[00:11:01.12]

**Eric V.:** In what way? Expand on that, please.

[00:11:03.11]

**Drew R.:** Well, they were—I mean, they were both . . . nice restaurants, fine dining restaurants, so that, and that was from the technique and then the professional end. I mean, that was something that I wanted to get under my belt. Beyond that, I . . . I knew more about the Hot & Hot earlier than I did about Highlands just because I had some friends who worked there. And they were talking about, like, here we've got this chef bringing in these tomatoes or this person bringing in this fish or lamb or whatever it might be. You know, they were sort of talking about just the . . . sort of intense focus around that, around the

best ingredients they could bring in, and really sort of grounds-up preparation. I had never—and I guess by grounds-up preparation, I mean, they would bring in whole animals to fabricate. You know, utilizing every piece of the—whether it's the animal or the vegetable or whatever, I mean, just not taking anything for granted. You know, I hadn't really been around that sort of intensity, and I wanted to. So, that was where I first really got that appreciation for that. Then, and like I say, I moved away before I got to Highlands, but when I was coming back home from California—and really, the reason I came back home from California is because I sort of had this, I had been away in Vermont and California for long enough to know that when you grow up somewhere, you spend a lot of time thinking about how much brighter the lights are in other places. The grass is greener on the other side, so to speak. I got enough exposure to other places that I realized that there was something really special in the South, and there was something special about my home here in Birmingham. So, when I made the decision that I wanted to come back, I had been at the Hot & Hot and had had a great experience, but wanted something different. So, that's when I sent . . . I sent Frank a resume, before I left. To be perfectly honest, I had just read—he had just opened Chez Fonfon and I had read an article about that somewhere, I don't even remember at this point in time. [Interviewer's note: Chez Fonfon, Stitt's bistro located next door to Highlands, opened in 2000.] But I was pretty interested in bistro food, and I thought maybe he would need a sous chef there, and that would be great. So, I'll send him my resume and see what happens. He contacted me back and let me know, when I got to Birmingham, to let him know and he would set up time for me to come work in the kitchen for a couple of days and see how things went.

[00:15:00.03]

**Eric V.:** So, when was this? It was the year 2000, but when in that year?

[00:15:05.24]

**Drew R.:** You know . . . over the past twenty years, my memory's gotten a little foggy on the exact date, but it was somewhere around May, I believe. Yeah, April or May, I believe. So, I came in and did just that. I actually worked in Highlands most of the time, but also, I think, maybe spent part of a shift at Chez Fonfon and at the end of the two days, Frank offered me a position as the expediter at Highlands, which . . . that position is primarily coordinating the plates between the kitchen and the servers, and . . . I told him that I really appreciated it, and I don't even remember what the hourly rate was, but I knew that I just couldn't afford it. So, I thanked him and said, "If it's okay with you, I'd still like to finish out the evening here just to be a part of the kitchen, and we'll leave it there."  
[Laughter] Then, in the middle of the shift, the grill cook, who . . . that's a whole different story that I won't go into, but the grill cook got a little upset about a few things happening, and just said, "The hell with it." And left. And Frank pulled me aside and he was like, "Do you know how to work a wood-burning grill?" I was like, "Yeah." So, he was like, "Why don't you go give it a shot and see how that works?" And so, by the end of the night, we . . . his needs had changed a little bit to be more congruent with what I could kind of get with at the time, so, it all worked out. I worked the grill for, I think it was two or three months, maybe a little bit longer, and then the chef de cuisine there at the time moved on to other things. Frank offered me the position, which was great. So, I jumped at it.

[00:17:47.05]

**Eric V.:** Okay. That night, how long after you had had that conversation with Chef Stitt did the grill cook quit?

[00:17:55.07]

**Drew R.:** I mean, it's a long time ago, so I'm sure I'm getting this wrong, but it wasn't very long at all. I mean it was, you know, probably within the hour, to be honest with you. So, it was . . . really just sort of a twist of fate, how things all worked out there.

[00:18:20.23]

**Eric V.:** Yeah, I was wondering if your “Spidey sense” was tingling, or if it was just like you said, it was a good twist of fate there.

[00:18:25.25]

**Drew R.:** No, nothing was tingling. I mean, I didn't have a job. I didn't have anything else to do that night. Didn't really—because I had just moved across country and didn't have a job, I didn't have any money to go out to do anything. I'd rather hang out in the kitchen and learn a little bit more and take that on my way. So, it just all worked out well for me.

[00:18:54.05]

**Eric V.:** Did you have any experience cooking over a live fire at that point?

[00:18:57.04]

**Drew R.:** Oh, yeah. Definitely. Definitely, no. I wasn't . . . yeah, I had definitely had that experience. So, yeah, it just panned out well, basically.

[00:19:12.05]

**Eric V.:** Who was the chef de cuisine who you replaced? Down the road.

[00:19:17.17]

**Drew R.:** Yeah, a guy . . . so, when I first started at Highlands, it was a fella named Chris Vizzina, who I'm actually still—I just talked to him this morning. [Interviewer's note: After leaving Highlands, Chef Vizzina become a culinary educator and now is a food-service consultant based in Birmingham.] We're still friends at this point in time. He left to pursue other things, and there was an interim . . . well, I don't really, interim's probably the wrong word. Frank promoted another fellow named Ed Reese who had been with him for I don't know how long, years. I mean, he had worked in all of Frank's restaurants and had been there for quite some time. [Interviewer's note: Reese cooked at Bottega for roughly 18 months before moving to Highlands.] But Ed, I don't think Ed really hung around for, a month might have been a—he just had other things in his life that he was more focused on at that point in time, than trying to take on that responsibility. So, those are the guys.

[00:20:23.02]

**Eric V.:** Who else was working in the kitchen when you were there?

[00:20:27.12]

**Drew R.:** Yeah, let's see. So, in my role, I worked on the—typically, I would be on the sauté station every night, doin' the braises and sauces and those sorts of things. I worked ... Most of that time, there was a fella named Brian Hedeman who worked our entremets position, which was sort of responsible for all the plate sets—

[00:21:07.21]

**Eric V.:** H-e-d-e-m-a-n?

[00:21:09.20]

**Drew R.:** I believe so, yeah.

[00:21:11.24]

**Eric V.:** Okay.

[00:21:11.24]

**Drew R.:** A fella named Collin, who I don't even remember Collin's last name at this point in time, who worked the grill station most of that time. Although, well, I say that, but a fella named John Washington who I think—if I, I may get this wrong, but I think he was really one of the, maybe the first cook that worked the line at Highlands with Frank when they opened. John just sort of came in and out of the picture over the years, and so, he worked there for a good bit of time while I was there. James Briscione worked the hot garde-

manger station, and he took over as the chef de cuisine when I left. [Interviewer's note: Briscione, who also started at Bottega before moving to Highlands, went on to a career as a restaurant sous chef, culinary educator, television chef and personality and cookbook author. He once was named to People Magazine's list of "Sexiest Chefs Alive."] Jason Ray worked quite a bit on the cold garde manger, who was . . . his mother was married to Pat Conroy, so there was a pretty close, you know, familial Highlands connection there. [Interviewer's note: The author Pat Conroy was a longtime patron of Highlands before his death in 2016. He wrote the forward to Stitt's first cookbook published in 2004, "Southern Table," based on recipes at Highlands.] I worked with Verba Ford, who had been with Frank since the beginning. She was the kitchen manager there and she and I sort of tag-teamed the managerial components of the kitchen. Yeah, it was a great team that we had in the kitchen. There was a gentleman there who would come in during the day and do some prep work for us, wash vegetables, peel salads, slice garlic, put the orders away, and then wash dishes and sort of take care of the shop at night. His name was Guadalupe. [Interviewer's note: Guadalupe Castillo, who started at Highlands in 1999.] Guadalupe, I know, still works for Frank, and he works behind the raw bar at this point in time. He sort of oversees all of the raw fish and works that position in the evenings. You know, he's been a pretty integral part of Frank's team for many, many years now. There's a lot of people at Highlands like that who have been with Frank for a long time, which is part of creating, again, to go back to the space that is Highlands when you walk in and you just feel . . . you know, warm and welcome, like it's a place you want to be. I mean, you know Frank, Frank and his wife Pardis, they get a lot of credit for that like they should, but they can't do it without people. Really, it's, to me, walking in to

Highlands, if I'm gonna sit down at the bar or sit in the dining room or whatever, even sixteen or seventeen years since I worked there, still see people that I know and that I worked with. It's certainly immediately takes me to that place of sort of being in a very comfortable, welcome table, and I know—I mean, I would assume it's just gotta do the same thing for even people who haven't worked there, just people who live in Birmingham or travel to Birmingham frequently that have been eating there for years. I know when I talk to people, whether it's sitting at the bar and eating, getting some shrimp cocktail or raw oysters that Guadalupe's plating or talkin' to Chris Conner behind the bar or sitting in Goren Avery—or Red Dog, as we affectionately call him—sitting in Dog's section in the dining room, it's . . . people, that's one of the things that later in life, which I worked for Nick Pihakis, he always drilled in to us in the restaurants, "People make places." I just can't help but think of that, that people make places, and it's those people that are a part of the entire Highlands team that make that experience possible.

[Interviewer's note: Chris Conner is a longtime bartender at Highlands. Goren Avery, whose nickname "Red Dog" was coined by Frank Stitt, has been at Highlands from the beginning. Nick Pihakis is a Birmingham restaurateur. After leaving Highlands, Robinson was executive chef and vice president for culinary operations for more than fifteen years at Pihakis' Jim 'N Nick's Community Bar-B-Q restaurant chain.]

[00:26:33.15]

**Eric V.:** Yeah. Considering the amount of time that's passed since Highlands opened, and later Bottega and Fonfon, given the number of restaurants that have opened in the interim here

in Birmingham, many of whom are from alums of those kitchens, what does that say about Highlands that they are able to retain people for thirty-six years?

[00:26:55.16]

**Drew R.:** You know, I think it says a lot. I think it says that . . . I think that it says, to me, people want to work somewhere where they feel appreciated, first and foremost. So, I mean, that's—if you can go to work and you feel appreciated, and take home the things that you need to take home, then that's probably the fundamental need people have out of a place of employment. Then, beyond that, the relationships you make with the people you work with. I mean, like I said, I still have relationships with the people that I worked with at Highlands, and so they feel like they're . . . they're a part of something that matters, and means something, and makes a difference in people's lives. I think that's, in the restaurant business, you've got to keep that in context. Making a difference in somebody's life isn't like performing open-heart surgery or saving somebody's life, but I think the thing that I've always . . . that has always given me the satisfaction most about restaurants, in addition to the obvious of providing great food and service to people, is when that experience becomes transformational enough so that people can leave . . . they can sort of transcend the world for a meal. And that's an important thing. It's a nice thing to be able to take yourself out of the world, so to speak, and just be in a place enjoying others' company and a meal. You know, and forgetting about life for a little while, I think is something that matters to people, no matter who you are.

[00:29:31.10]

**Eric V.:** An incredibly beautiful, gracious atmosphere in the dining room, it's considerably less glamorous back in the kitchen. Give us a little set-up of the kitchen in there. It's not a big space, for one.

[00:29:49.29]

**Drew R.:** No. I mean, the kitchen is . . . yeah, I mean the kitchen is tight quarters. I mean, that's not a unique thing to Highlands. Most people—[Laughter]—spend their real estate on the dining room, where they can get guests in to dine. So, kitchens typically are small quarters where you, you know, you better enjoy the people that you work with, because you're gonna get to know 'em pretty closely. You're back there and movin' around quickly with hot pans, bumpin' in to each other, and you know, it wasn't any—that was sort of our day-to-day. But it was fun. You know, when you're a cook, I think you like that. I mean, I think that there's a . . . you know, there's a reason people become cooks, in my opinion, professionally beyond just food. I mean, I think that they—I think, to be a really good cook, you've gotta be really passionate about food. That's just sort of a, if you don't enjoy chopping vegetables and cutting up animals and all the things that go with that, then you're not going to be a very good cook. But beyond the sort of nuts and bolts of the job description, cooks, by and large, they want to be back in the kitchen. They don't want to be out talkin' to people. They're a more reclusive sort of type of person, and it's . . . I don't know. I mean, the kitchens that I grew up working in, cooks were, like, pirates almost. I think that, even with the recent passing of Anthony Bourdain, he sort of put that sort of quality of the kitchen on display, but in a way that sort of also humanized it. So, and I think that's, yeah, we're tight quarters; I mean, I'm sitting here making this braise or

whatever, and probably eight or ten feet away from me is the guy washing dishes, and four feet away from me is the guy frying some oysters for an appetizer or whatever. The person who worked the station most directly next to me was, you know, I mean, I had to be careful if I was turnin' around with a hot pan, otherwise I'd clock him. You know? But you're there just because it's kind of like where you want to be. There's a component of it that is comforting and it runs you ragged, but it's also, certain people gravitate towards it. Those who do, I think, feel almost safe in that environment, really.

[00:33:47.28]

**Eric V.:** Walk us through a typical day in the kitchen. Day starts very early, ends very late.

[00:33:58.22]

**Drew R.:** Yeah. I mean, my day at Highlands usually . . . I would usually get there, I think, around 11 o'clock. Our typical day at Highlands was usually, we change the menu on a daily basis—not necessarily every single item on the menu, but a lot of things changed, and it would just change with the products. I mean, that's kind of what you do when you're in a restaurant that is bringing in fresh fish or fresh pork or fresh lamb on a daily basis. Whatever this farmer happens to bring in. Then, you just find ways to evolve the menu and incorporate what's fresh on the menu on a daily basis. So, I would go in around 11[a.m.], and usually, that would be kind of a time for Frank and I to talk conversationally about those things. Frank, a lot of the times, he would—if there were something that were in his mind that he had been sort of working on conceptually that he wanted to see on the menu, he might be ordering things, had things in mind before I

walked in, which was often the case. So, the first hour of the day, first bit of time, usually consisted of buttoning the menu up for dinner service. Then I would sort of, from there, I would write prep lists for each of the stations, so they would know what to do. The guys—the kitchen—started filtering in around 1 in the afternoon, up until maybe about 3 o'clock, depending on what their position happened to be. Dinner service was at 5:30. So, my day would be spent, once I got everybody else's lists together, they would get there and I would sort of brief them on things and give a little direction. Then I'd be setting up the sauté station for dinner, which would, again, I've said, be braised items and sauces and usually I would make the soup for the evening. There would be some sort of—I would also have some sort of, usually, quick pick-up item on the menu, like sautéed fish or something like that, that we would try and spread the responsibility so that no one station got crushed. But yeah, we would push forward until 5 o'clock and get everything done. The butcher came in at about 1 o'clock and portioned all of the fish and meats, and the entremets station, that person came in to prep all the vegetables, and so on and so forth. The pastry chefs usually got there in the morning. They would be there before me. That was sort of designed around, once all the savory cooks got there, we would be taking up the stove space and the oven space for things we needed to get ready for dinner. There wouldn't be a whole lot of opportunity for pastry space. A lot of that is, if they needed space to slow bake a custard, and we're bangin' in and out of the ovens, it would disrupt the whole cycle. So they would start first, and then somebody would come in late to manage the plating of pastries throughout the dinner shift. But as things wound on through the day, then we would make our way through service. We would get the kitchen shut down, and that was usually my, the end of the evening for me, once everybody got

out of the kitchen. I would look at, I would make sure that a) everything was done properly, the fish was all iced down and taken care of, and everything was straightened up as it needed to be, and then look over what had been ordered for the next day. If we had . . . Verba a lot of times would place an order before she left. I would sort of look at things after dinner service was over, just see if we maybe used more of something than we anticipated and try and see if I could get that in on a truck the next day. I would make notes on the menu—not necessarily things that, not menu changes per se, but I would make notes on the menu as far as how many portions of beef we had left over or whatever it might be. Or if I knew that we had tomatoes coming in the next day or whatever. I would make some notes and hash that out, as well as the list of products coming in for the next day; leave that for Frank. He would usually look at it first thing in the morning and then, like I say, I'd roll in at about 11 the next morning. Whatever he had planned for the day with the notes that had been left from me, we would resume conversation around 11 o'clock and start it all over again.

[00:40:46.08]

**Eric V.:** How would your suppliers get product to you? For example, I was talking to John Rolen for a story recently, they communicate by text. Zack's communicating by text now with the farmers and all that. [Laughter] [Interviewer's note: At the time of this interview, John Rolen is chef de cuisine at Bottega. Zack Redes is chef de cuisine at Highlands.]

[00:41:03.19]

**Drew R.:** [Laughter] We had a—

[00:41:03.19]

**Eric V.:** That was before then.

[00:41:04.24]

**Drew R.:** Yeah. We had a telephone that had a cord on it that was long enough to where we could answer it and get to any part of the kitchen while we were still on the telephone. Literally had this forty-foot cord on it that was—I think we added an extra, like, some people listening to this won't even know what a telephone cord is, you know, at this point in time, which is surreal. But we didn't have text messages. We didn't have iPhones, we didn't even have cell phones. The cell phones that were available back then were, like, the size of suitcases. Yeah, we just had an old-school phone in the kitchen, and the things that, late at night that I might be able to call in and out on would be leaving somebody a voicemail and hoping that that registered. But people who were working—

[00:42:06.25]

**Eric V.:** And for those who are old enough, on their answering machine. [Laughter]

[00:42:12.14]

**Drew R.:** Right, yeah. Yeah, yeah. You know, some farmer or maybe the local produce house or whatever, walk into their whatever framework of an office they would have and push a button on their answering machine. It would spit out my message and, hopefully, that all

got relayed in time to get something on a truck to get to us. But yeah, you know, yeah, that's how we communicated back then.

[00:42:47.09]

**Eric V.:** Who'd call whom? Would the farmers let you know what they had, were gettin' ready to pick? Or Greg Abrams, what boats are coming in? Let us know how you would do those communications.

[00:42:58.21]

**Drew R.:** Yeah, I think a lot of that would be . . . a lot of that would be driven by Frank. I mean, he might be calling farmers and things during the day, fishermen or whatever, while I was workin' on getting the kitchen set up for service. So, there would be those conversations. Then there would be those conversations when they would come into the restaurant that I would have with them, probably in conjunction with Frank, and Verba at the time, too. It would be somebody showing up to the back door, whether it was baby lettuces or eggplants or whatever it might be, to deliver. Then we would have a conversation about, here's how things look for the rest of the week or next week or things that I have coming in. So, and back then, it was—the network of farmers around town was still growing. There's a lot more resources available now than there were then. But yeah, those conversations were oftentimes had in the walk-in cooler or by the stove or in the parking lot or whatever.

[00:44:44.17]

**Eric V.:** That's one of the things I wanted to get into. Chef Stitt talks a lot about how, early on, he had to build a network from scratch. Couldn't even find organic grits anywhere except for over at the health store or health food store.

[00:45:00.04]

**Drew R.:** [Laughter] Right.

[00:45:00.15]

**Eric V.:** How established was it by 2000 and the time you were there in the early 2000s?

[00:45:07.04]

**Drew R.:** Well, I'm sure it was a lot more established. I don't really have a perspective on what it was like back in 1985, but I'm sure it was pretty bleak at that point in time. [Laughter] It's funny because the local health food store, that was one of my very first cooking jobs when I was in high school, ironically enough, right down on the opposite end of Five Points from Frank. Harinam, who's a Sikh, owned the Golden Temple, still does. [Interviewer's note: Harinam Khalsa opened Golden Temple Health Foods and Café in 1973. It is blocks from Highlands in the Five Points South community.] It's funny that those two guys are still down there, taking care of Five Points. But there wasn't—one of the farms that we have here right now, as a farm in Birmingham, is a farm called Jones Valley Teaching Farm. Their primary focus is not selling food to restaurants as much as it is an educational thing about where food comes from for schoolchildren. But back when I was at Highlands, Jones Valley Teaching Farm that is now this multi-acre farm in

downtown Birmingham really had just been founded by a guy named Edwin Marty. It was Jones Valley Urban Farm, was the name at that point in time. It was on this little plot of land that I still drive by occasionally, behind a housing project in Southside. It's like if I were to take somebody by there at this point in time and say, "We were getting food from here," they probably wouldn't believe me. [Interviewer's note: Marty and Allison Page started Jones Valley Urban Farm in 2001 on a vacant residential lot in Birmingham's Southside community. It moved downtown, at Seventh Avenue North at 25<sup>th</sup> Street, in 2006. In 2012, under new leadership, it rebranded as Jones Valley Teaching Farm and adopted its current educational mission.]

[00:47:24.04]

**Eric V.:** 'Cause that was an old homestead, wasn't it, where the original Jones Valley was?

[00:47:27.02]

**Drew R.:** Yeah, maybe it—

[00:47:28.21]

**Eric V.:** Up on a little hill or something? Looked like a little residential thing.

[00:47:28.23]

**Drew R.:** Yeah, up on a little hill. Yeah, exactly.

[00:47:32.20]

**Eric V.:** I'm trying to draw a picture for people, because it is not like a little bit out of town, it is smack dab in the middle of town.

[00:47:39.13]

**Drew R.:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:47:39.13]

**Eric V.:** Even the current spot's right under the highway. [Interviewer's notes: It is in the shadows of elevated exit ramps from U.S. 280/31 onto Interstate 20/59 in downtown Birmingham.]

[00:47:41.03]

**Drew R.:** Right, yeah. You know, but so, I just say that to say that there was that. Frank had a former employee by the name of Michael Dean who had ventured off to start growing some lettuces and baby vegetables and, in the summertime, had grape tomatoes. I lost touch with Michael a long time ago but, to my knowledge, he's still farming and selling products to Frank. [Dean's Terra Preta Farm supplies each of Stitt's restaurant.] So, that was part of the network back then. Yes, there was Greg Abrams on the coast, bringing grouper and pompano and flounder from the Gulf up to Birmingham that I would argue was probably fresher. ... By the time it was getting to us and we were breaking it down and putting it on a plate, it was probably fresher than seafood people were buying if they were on the actual coast itself. So, yeah, there were—and there were other little farmers. At that point in time, it was just sort of that. It was like there'd be a guy who's like, "Hey,

I'm growing some herbs." We had a little herb garden outside of Highlands. Or maybe somebody who had grown some squash or whatever. It just was really still finding its way into our whole food community here in Birmingham. We would hear stories about, "Oh, well, in San Francisco or Napa Valley," and it's like, yeah, well, that culture had sort of existed since the [19]70s. But I would say one of the great things that Frank really did is that he, not just searching those people out—and people would sort of naturally, again, back then, I mean, Highlands and the Hot & Hot were gonna be your avenues to sell stuff if you had it and you were here locally. But that being said, those people who wanted to sort of make their way in, whether it was with chickens or eggs or produce or herbs or whatever, it's like, we saw a lot of stuff at that point in time. It was like, yeah, it was lettuce, but it was dirty and beat up and full of bugs. It was like, "Well, we don't want this, man," you know? "You guys have to put a little more effort into what you're doin' than this."

[00:50:51.26]

**Eric V.:** You were having to turn back a good bit at the time.

[00:50:55.15]

**Drew R.:** Yeah. So, it was helping the farmers understand what that expectation was, and Frank really did a lot to encourage people, too. If they wanted to venture into agriculture, he would say, "You've got to bring something of the quality that I expect, but if you do, I'll buy it, regardless." And we did. It was like . . . watermelons, potatoes, tomatoes whatever. We'd have some sitting there, and a farmer would show up. Frank had told

them, "If you do this and you do good quality, I'll buy it." It was like, "Okay, well, now we've got a whole lot of tomatoes," or whatever it happened to be. But Frank wanted to see that network grow, and that was his way of being committed to it, was telling people, if they did their part, he would do his.

[00:52:11.21]

**Eric V.:** At the same time, in fact, your employment at Highlands coincided with the beginning of the pop-up farmers market movement here in Birmingham and the greater Birmingham area. Pepper Place started the same year you started there. [Pepper Place Saturday Market premiered in 2000. In 2018, there were more than two-dozen one-day markets operating in Jefferson and adjoining Shelby counties, with at least one open each day of the week except Sundays. This is in addition to the year-round farmers market on Finley Avenue.]

[00:52:27.07]

**Drew R.:** Right.

[00:52:28.26]

**Eric V.:** How did the Highlands market help create a market there?

[00:52:35.11]

**Drew R.:** You know, back then, Pepper Place was such a different animal, so to speak. It was very small. It was just a few farmers pulling their trucks up. Now, it's grown to—it's funny, you go to the farmer's market on Saturdays now, 'cause in a lot of ways, it's

become a very social event. And that's great. I mean, I see positives and negatives in it. One of the negatives I see is, some people come to the farmer's market and they get coffee and a donut or whatever and walk around and are very impressed with everything they see, but they don't necessarily leave with a lot of stuff. It's like, I take my family down there every Saturday, and we've got a little wagon that we pull behind us. We buy all of our produce there for the week, for the most part. You know, so I've seen other people starting to do that over the years to allow Pepper Place to become what it's become, which is great. And I think that it is a very . . . it's kind of a, it's all just sort of spokes on a wheel. If there's going to be this farmer's market, then people have to buy that. They have to come and support it and support the farmers, but it also helps people in their mind, like when they know, "Oh, okay, Highlands is buying this produce, too." Or, "This farmer delivered to the Hot & Hot Fish Club." Now, at this point in time in Birmingham's history, we've got this great meat and three restaurant called Johnny's. So many of the farms that are at Pepper Place are on the chalkboard there every day, so that it's like, when people are decidin' whether they want to get turnip greens or field peas, they also know which guy that they see on Saturday morning at Pepper Place that's coming from. So, I think the early involvement from a person like Frank, it lends credibility that can be used to sort of draw in the consumer. You know?

[00:55:18.14]

**Eric V.:** I think, in some ways, would you agree that it also helped create a growing market for heritage farmers as well as young farmers, because you can't just get by on restaurants?

[00:55:32.10]

**Drew R.:** Yeah, no. I mean, restaurants are . . . I mean, they're a part of it, but at the end of the day, farmers exist on volume. I think it's probably a, maybe an assumption of consumers that, if they buy something—if a farmer sells a pig, that's a great thing. Well, a farmer has to sell a hundred pigs for it to be a great thing. So, I think that's—

[00:56:21.04]

**Eric V.:** It's more than just the chops and the ribs and the shoulders.

[00:56:24.09]

**Drew R.:** Exactly. So, that's a big . . . I think that's a big part of it, as well, to keep in mind.

Yeah, restaurants are important, but it is the whole picture of getting consumers involved at the farmer's market. Then, even other outlets. If a farmer—the farmer's market that is not talked about here is the Finley Avenue Farmers Market, which is where we used to go at Highlands on a daily basis, which is the big farmer's market. It's the commercial farmer's market.

[00:57:08.27]

**Eric V.:** That's the 7-day, 365 farmer's market.

[00:57:13.12]

**Drew R.:** Yeah. They're crankin' out lots of food down there. So, it's all just pieces of the puzzle to make it work.

[00:57:25.02]

**Eric V.:** What was Chef Stitt's role? What was he doing on a daily basis? He's not working the line at this point in Highlands.

[00:57:37.12]

**Drew R.:** Frank's role was, no, Frank is not working the line at this point in time. I think some people think that Frank's working the line. [Laughter] Hey, that's great. Whatever makes your meal the way you want it to be. But Frank was . . . he was the vision, the heart and soul of the restaurant. Granted, he does that in conjunction with Pardis, but in the kitchen, it was very much—it's his menu. I was the chef de cuisine, but I was not doing anything but executing his vision on a day-to-day basis. I think that, beyond what that might appear to be on a plate, Frank had a very complete view of that. I learned more about wine working at Highlands than I learned at any other restaurant that I have ever been a part of. That was an equal component to what Frank wanted to put on display for diners, as the food. They were one and the same. It wasn't just a complementary piece; it was part of. So—

[00:59:33.24]

**Eric V.:** In a lot of ways, Highlands and Frank Stitt have had the same effect on wine in this city that he's had on food in this city.

[00:59:39.22]

**Drew R.:** Yeah, I think that's fair to say. There are some wine companies in town that . . . that have been in business since Frank has, and that's how . . . I think they kind of grew up together. I know that Frank's got great relationships, and that was a big part of building his business, was building those relationships with wine distributors, but also wine makers and grape growers. He's got relationships with people all over the world at this point in time that are wine makers that some of those wines are available now in Birmingham because he lobbied his friends in the distribution business to bring them here. No different than telling a farmer, "Okay, if you grow this much okra, I'll buy it from you." You get the wine here, and I'm gonna put it out, front and center in my restaurants. It's funny, because I could—one of the wine makers that Frank had a great relationship with that I got to know was a guy named Jim Clendenen, who owns the Au Bon Climat wines that are from Santa Barbara and have long been on Frank's menu.

[01:01:33.01]

**Eric V.:** As a house wine, right?

[01:01:33.26]

**Drew R.:** In some cases, yes. But his full range of wines. It's funny, because I can remember a time when, if that's something that I wanted to have, then that meant getting it via Highlands. But after enough time of it being on the menu and promoting it, it's like, you can find that in a retail store in Birmingham at this point in time. Yeah . . . I mean, no different than the food or the raw produce or proteins or whatever. It all just works together.

[01:02:22.20]

**Eric V.:** Now, Birmingham has a long, established reputation that's starting to fade in the annals of history. One of the things about Highlands Bar & Grill from the very beginning was its diversity and inclusiveness. Talk to me a little bit about the diversity within your kitchen. You mentioned Guadalupe earlier. For people who aren't aware, Verba Ford is black.

[01:02:51.28]

**Drew R.:** I mean, so . . . I think that there was, yeah, there was diversity at Highlands. I think that Verba was a longtime, she'd been with Frank since the very early days. Dolester Miles, his longtime pastry chef who just won a James Beard Award in her own right, she's been with him since day one, I believe. If it wasn't day one, it was at least week one. Goren Avery, again, who we all call Red Dog, he has been taking care of the dining room since the beginning. John Washington, who I mentioned earlier in the conversation, he's an African-American fella. His brother, Duke Washington, was a long-tenured chef at Bottega restaurants and Highlands, as well. He worked in both places. So, there was a lot of diversity in the kitchens. I think it's probably important to realize that . . . black folks have been cooking white folks' food for a long time, you know? We don't need to necessarily try and skirt around that issue. I think that it was a natural sort of thing that a lot of African-American folks ended up working in the Highlands kitchen, because that's the place that African-Americans have historically been able to get a job. Not to discredit any influence that Frank had on that; I think Frank's contribution to that is that Frank just has an open mind and is not a prejudicial person, so he made room in his restaurant for

African-Americans. As time went on, and the Latin community in Birmingham became more prominent, then Latin-American employees came on board as well. But I think that's part of the restaurant culture in general, is that service jobs, by and large, have gone to minorities.

[01:05:47.14]

**Eric V.:** Although, I think we see an unusual level of African-Americans being in positions of authority, as well as just having the jobs.

[01:06:02.00]

**Drew R.:** Yeah. I think that that is definitely true. Frank, I mean, Verba and Dolester both in their own rights have positions of authority. Frank has had other African American service managers in the dining room. So, yeah, absolutely. That just goes to the fact that Frank . . . is an open-minded person. He doesn't have any prejudice in that regard. I mean, if somebody wants to be a part of creating a warm, hospitable experience or a great dining experience, it certainly doesn't matter to Frank what color your skin is or what gender you are or anything else.

[01:07:10.10]

**Eric V.:** Sexual orientation as well.

[01:07:11.10]

**Drew R.:** Exactly.

[01:07:15.24]

**Eric V.:** You were, I believe, chef de cuisine at the time that Chef Stitt was working on the *Southern Table* cookbook.

[01:07:24.12]

**Drew R.:** That's correct.

[01:07:26.27]

**Eric V.:** How did that effect things at Highlands? Was there any overlap between the two?

[01:07:35.03]

**Drew R.:** I had the good fortune to be an assistant to him with some of that. Not at writing or anything like that, but there were photoshoots for the book where he would need somebody to help him with plate-ups and prep and things like that. I was always, always happy to get to be a part of that. Recipe testing or whatever; he would call on me for certain things from time to time. So, being able to watch that all come together, I can't say I had a direct hand in it, per se. He wrote the book. But getting to play a supporting role in some elements of that was really pretty cool. It's not that—I had never had that experience before. Really, I haven't had that experience since. So, it's something I'm definitely grateful for. But it was beyond the ways that I was able to support it, getting to kind of talk to Frank about his creative thought process behind it and whatnot was insightful, as well. But it was kind of funny, too, because outside of maybe the times

when there was a photoshoot in the restaurant or something like that—which usually happened at off hours—I would say a lot of people there, a lot of people working there at the time, knew hypothetically that he was working on a book of some sort. But it . . . he did that in his own time. He was still in the restaurant every night for dinner service and still workin' on the menus with us and things like that. It wasn't like, "Oh, Frank's gone to work on a cookbook." It was like, it was sort of an innocuous thing to us.

[01:10:08.24]

**Eric V.:** That brings me back to something we were touching on earlier here. During evening service, where was Chef Stitt? Was he floatin' around, checking everything out? Did he spend a lot of time observing in the kitchen?

[01:10:23.12]

**Drew R.:** Yeah. He was everywhere. Whether it was in the kitchen or—he spent a great deal of time in the kitchen with us. Again, he wasn't . . . he wasn't working a station, and I should probably take the opportunity to say, I know even back then, people had in their mind, "Oh, well tell Frank that such and such that he cooked tonight—" It's like, people wanted to have it in their mind that Frank was cooking every single plate of food. The reality is that, if Frank had been working the sauté station every night, then they wouldn't really have had the opportunity to have the great experience that they had in the first place. His time was required to oversee things. Yeah, Frank spent most of his time in the kitchen. And Frank is the person that I spent most of my time with. His wife, Pardis, spends most of her time in the dining room, on the service side of the business. And do the two cross

paths? Of course. I mean, they're small businesspeople. Small businesspeople typically tend to do everything. But yeah, Frank would be in the kitchen often, looking at plates. Tasting food. Asking questions. Giving direction. I mean, I would know that if I didn't see him in the kitchen, he might be in the dining room talking to a guest. He might be next door at Chez Fonfon. He might have gone up the street to Bottega to do the same there. But— [Interviewer's note: Bottega, divided with separate kitchens into a formal dining room that is open nights and an all-day café, is about seven blocks from Highlands and Fonfon. Frank and Pardis Stitt regularly circulate among the restaurants.]

[01:12:29.03]

**Eric V.:** That's the other reality of cooking the line. When you've got four kitchens in three buildings blocks apart, it's a physical impossibility.

[01:12:36.23]

**Drew R.:** Right. I mean, so, yeah. That was kind of how I interacted with Frank during the shift, was coming in to see how things were going and taste and question and direct. I mean, I think—I feel like Frank and I developed quite a bit of trust in the time that I worked with him, and I think the trust there was him trusting the fact that, really, what I was doing at work every day was trying to execute his vision. I think he believed in my ability to do that. So, our interactions were usually—it wasn't like, "No, Drew, you've got to plate the fish this way." Our interactions were typically much more collaborative, just because of the trust factor.

[01:14:12.24]

**Eric V.:** I recently spent some time at Bottega, and one of the things that really surprised me was the extent to which they, to this day, go back to that 2009 cookbook, the Bottega cookbook, for dishes that they're gonna put on the next menu. Do you get a sense that the *Southern Table* has a similar sort of influence in Highlands' kitchen?

[01:14:37.17]

**Drew R.:** Um . . . you know, I don't . . . preface this by saying, I love eating at Bottega, and actually, I dine pretty frequently at the cafe. My knowledge of Bottega was always distant second to what I understood at Highlands. I mean, I didn't care. I didn't work at Bottega, so I wasn't concerned with what they were doing. Not concern, but I just—

[01:15:18.13]

**Eric V.:** Yeah, it wasn't your place.

[01:15:19.16]

**Drew R.:** It wasn't my focus, you know. But what they've done since I left, the cookbook was published shortly after I left. So, there was never a time that I worked there where the cookbook was a reality.

[01:15:42.27]

**Eric V.:** Right.

[01:15:43.08]

**Drew R.:** A printed reality. So, since then, I don't know how much—I don't know, conversationally, how much that really shapes the day-to-day menu. Since I've left, going back as a diner now, you know, the food has definitely evolved. The food has evolved since the time of the cookbook. So, I don't know that Frank—I don't know what he does. I don't know if he . . . I don't think he ever looks at any one of his books to necessarily recreate a recipe. There are some recipes in that book that, you know, Highlands grits. Well, Highlands grits have been on the menu since day one, and Highlands grits are never goin' away. I mean, they're just part of the fabric. They're part of life. But beyond that, I think that if I had to speculate about Frank's thought processes, I think that the spirit in which he wrote that first book is probably the same spirit that he writes recipes and uses to operate his businesses at this point in time. That spirit is very . . . is very tied to . . . Frank is a very cerebral guy. He's also a very emotional guy. He's very, there are . . . things that matter to him are time and place. We talked extensively when I worked for him about his time with Richard Olney. [Interviewer's note: In 1978, Stitt spent time with Olney, the renowned cookbook author and expert on food and wine, at Olney's home in Provence, cooking, drinking fine wine and helping as Olney worked on his cookbook series for Time-Life.] That is, to me, that time that he spent with Richard Olney is expressed daily in his wine list. It's expressed daily in the fact that the braised meats and gratin dishes are an integral part of Highlands cuisine. And, granted, Frank's not gonna put heavy braised dishes on the July menu, but he might have some sort of light interpretation of that with a rabbit or summer vegetable-type gratin versus a root vegetable gratin in the winter. But that time and space, I can just see evident in what he

does at Highlands on a very consistent basis. But, at the same time, the spirit is there, but the actual food and the dish itself continues to evolve.

[01:19:16.23]

**Eric V.:** How has it evolved in the last ten, fifteen years since you were in that kitchen?

[01:19:22.12]

**Drew R.:** My perspective is limited to being a diner at this point in time.

[01:19:38.12]

**Eric V.:** A fairly informed diner.

[01:19:38.28]

**Drew R.:** Yeah. You know, Frank . . . I know, after I left, he had a chef de cuisine named James Briscione, but for the large majority of time since I've been gone, I think Zack Redes has been his right-hand man in the Highlands kitchen. As a diner watching things evolve, it's . . . funny, the things that I notice, I guess. I have noticed the presence of a lot more of the local product that we talked about, because that has evolved so much in Birmingham. And just in this area in general. That has been able to be a lot more present in the menu. So, that's . . . and how that translates, I mean, to the actual finished dish, I think that . . . I don't know. It's funny, because I think that the food at Highlands is always pretty elegant, but it's also very . . . rooted in the fact that it is . . . kind of this . . . we used to kind of joke, behind the scenes at Highlands, Frank and Pardis we would sort of joke that we

were just kind of a fancy meat and three. I think . . . that is and it isn't true. It is much more than your typical meat and three, but at the same time, it is rooted in central Alabama and so, while there are definitely French inspirations and other inspirations, that sort of hominess of what we expect at dinner in central Alabama, which is some well-cooked greens and some cornbread and some meat . . . That is a joke, but I also think it's fair. So, I've seen it. I've seen things that, to me, are more . . . maybe elements and things that have become more refined over the years and more subtle, but not dramatically different. It's just sort of—it's like when you, if you . . . if you go to a, if you've got something that's working, you don't necessarily try to find something different. You just find ways to continue to improve upon it. That's the evolution that I see; not dramatic differences, but just as the depth of raw materials become more increasingly available, Frank dives deeper into that. As time goes on, and just cuisine itself becomes more modern, Frank finds ways to incorporate elements of that into refining his food without changing it.

[01:24:11.07]

**Eric V.:** Do you think the openness to refining is part of why he's remained not only relevant but won the Outstanding Restaurant Award? [Interviewer's note: Highlands won the James Beard Foundation's award for the nation's Outstanding Restaurant in 2018, in its 10<sup>th</sup> consecutive year as a finalist.]

[01:24:22.00]

**Drew R.:** Yeah. I mean, I do. I think that that award—it's funny. Seventeen years after the fact, I was sixteen, seventeen, whatever it is, that award meant an awful lot to me. I think it meant an awful lot to Birmingham. It's just because of what my sort of experience had been at Highlands; what my memory of Highlands is. And being a part of something that you really feel like is special. So, to see them win that award, it means a lot. You know . . . Highlands is Frank's baby. It was his very first restaurant. But there are a lot of people over the years who have had a part in that and, under his direction and Pardis' direction, to continue to refine it to be what it is now and what it will ultimately evolve into in the future. Like the comment about how people make places, I think that winning the Outstanding Restaurant award, it's more than a meal. It is an entire experience of a restaurant and what that restaurant represents to win that, to achieve that award. I think Frank's leadership as a chef, I think Pardis' leadership in the dining room, I think everybody who has put in their efforts to make Highlands what it is, I think all the farmers who pull up to the back door, all of the wine maker friends that Frank has established over the years whose wines are part of the menu now. It's the sum of all those parts that make it that. In each one of those components, there is refinement always happening. I think that more restaurants go out of business than stay in business, and right now, we've got a lot of restaurants in business. I think we're probably about to see some purging of that. But just because we got more restaurants than we need, which may not be a popular comment, but I really feel like is the truth. [Laughter]

[01:27:38.04]

**Eric V.:** There seems to have been a talent drain, too.

[01:27:39.18]

**Drew R.:** Yeah, it's been a huge talent drain. But the restaurants that stay in business year in and year out and live a long life in the restaurant business—which, I've had the good fortune of working for other restaurants as well that have exceeded the thirty-year mark. In the restaurant world, that's a long time. So, to be able to achieve that, you've got to be willing to grow. Part of growth and refinement and all that stuff, it's two-fold. You do it because you know you've got to. You also do it because you don't want to do the same thing every day. That just gets old to everybody. [Laughter] Including the person who owns it.

[01:28:33.14]

**Eric V.:** Especially.

[01:28:36.26]

**Drew R.:** Yeah.

[01:28:38.13]

**Eric V.:** What have you taken from your experience at Highlands into your professional career, as you went on to Jim 'N Nick's and in general?

[01:28:50.23]

**Drew R.:** You know, I think the thing that I learned most—the thing that was most sort of transformative for me about working for Frank is that I don't—when I got into cooking, I

wanted to learn how to be a cook, you know? It was not my aspiration to . . . I think that there are a lot of well-intentioned people who wake up and decide that they want to be a chef. I think that a lot of those people don't even know what they're asking for. You know? Because what a chef is, is a guy—or woman, person—who not only knows how to execute a great dish, but knows how to bring that into context with a much larger picture of an experience and sense of place. They also know how to fix the stove when it goes down in the middle of the dinner shift. It's a never-ending process of owning a restaurant.

[01:30:42.24]

**Eric V.:** You see a whole fish and you're looking at portions.

[01:30:43.29]

**Drew R.:** Right. I mean, you know, but it's—being a chef involves so many things, and I think, with no disrespect to any other chef that I've ever worked for, but Frank, working with him, gave me the sort of most complete picture of that. How I carried that into the future endeavors with Jim 'N Nick's—it's a pretty funny story. I had long known that I didn't want to venture out on my own and open up a Highlands Bar and Grill-type restaurant. I even had conversations with Frank about the fact that I might like to do something more casual. I have loved barbecue deeply all of my life, and thought that might be an avenue for me. During my tenure at Highlands, I met Nick Pihakis, who was the founder of Jim 'N Nick's. We hit it off just because we were passionate about a lot of the same things. What I, at one point in time, thought was going to be me veering off to just open my casual little place ended up into transitioning to me going to work with Nick. What

happened with us was quite a bit like what happened with me and Frank. I think that we just developed a trust factor and mutual respect. Nick always had a vision for Jim ‘N Nick’s, but he always asked me what my thoughts were and was open to my opinion about things, particularly with our food at Jim ‘N Nick’s. We did things together at Jim ‘N Nick’s that were—the food could not have been more different in certain regards; in other regards, it was sort of a meat and three as well at Jim ‘N Nick’s. But it's funny, because when I decided I was going to go do that, I sat down with Frank and . . .

[Laughter] It's like he kind of turned pale white and his jaw, I had to pick it up off the floor for him. He was . . . [Laughter] He was very . . . he was very gracious about the whole thing, but he could not hide his utter sense of shock that his chef de cuisine was going to go work at a barbecue restaurant. But that being what it was, he wished me well, and Frank and I are still close. But that sort of trying to see things as a whole picture, a whole experience, a whole sense of place, is what I tried to carry with me into Jim ‘N Nick’s. Much different experience. But what we hoped to convey when I was there, and very much under Nick's vision and direction, was that: creating an experience for people. So, that way of viewing an experience as larger than just one meal is what—I know that sounds like a very abstract answer, but it's really the best answer I can give, because it is just . . . it's what Frank has always been about. What we're doing here is larger than just one meal, you know?

[01:35:24.22]

**Eric V.:** While you're at Jim ‘N Nick’s, they underwent tremendous growth. What, three dozen stores? Seven states. What did you do as chef de cuisine?

[01:35:36.10]

**Drew R.:** Well, my title over the years of all that has never—we didn't have a chef de cuisine position, so to speak. I think, depending on who was asking, I could have been the chef or I could have been responsible for purchasing or I could have been responsible for R&D. That question would get answered on kind of a need-to-know basis, so to speak. At Jim 'N Nick's, we sort of all wore the same hat. When I started working at Jim 'N Nick's, we had four or five restaurants. When I left, I think we had thirty-nine, and there are up over forty at this point in time. So, when I started working with Nick, he was running four restaurants, and much like Frank and Pardis, he was doing everything, you know? It was sort of like, "Okay, here you go; you're going to help me do everything, because that's what I need help with." [Laughter] We, very early on, changed the menu, and that was his. He wanted to do that, and he wanted to get my input on it. So, that was something we did early on from a culinary standpoint. But as things grew, shortly after changing the menu, then Nick and I went and opened a restaurant together, our fifth or sixth restaurant—I can't really remember at this point in time—but we did that, and it was a monumental undertaking. It was something that, I remember him sitting me down at the table nearest the kitchen after about a month of being open, and he was like, "Okay, so, we can do this better." I'm like, "There's got to be a way to do it better than what we just did." You know, I mean, we got through it. I mean, we were learning. But it was like, "Okay, let's get a plan for how we're going to grow and open more restaurants." I got to be a part of that planning process. I got to be a part of—there are a whole lot of things that go with taking a restaurant group from being a handful of restaurants in Birmingham,

Alabama, to being forty restaurants in seven states. It is a tremendous undertaking. I think, for me to sit here and say, "This is what I was an expert in, and this is what I did to contribute to that," would be a bunch of B.S., basically. I got in at a really good time. I had a really good relationship with the founder of the company. I took all of my past experiences and said, "This is what I can contribute." We rolled up our sleeves and we did it together. I'm just thankful for the opportunity for that, because every day was a learning experience in that process. Being the chef de cuisine of Highlands and being whatever I needed to be on any given day of growing Jim 'N Nick's was two completely—could not have been, it was so much different from anything I could have really imagined it to be on my own. But I can say that about Highlands, too. That's the great thing about the great tenures in my life, is that, by the time they all come to a close, they've turned out to be so much more than I ever would have thought they'd have been in the first place. The jobs that I look back on that basically worked out the way I thought they would, I don't look back on them very frequently. So.

[01:40:14.15]

**Eric V.:** Now, the experience building restaurants from the ground up, opening multiple locations, franchising and all of that, have an obvious effect on your current restaurant consultancy business. What did your experience at Highlands, how did it affect what you're doing now? How does that inform what you do as a consultant?

[01:40:36.24]

**Drew R.:** So . . . in the food consulting that I do at this point in time, my business is very early on. I have left Jim ‘N Nick’s right at six months ago. That was really just a process of me saying, "I just want to go out and take the things that I've learned over the years and try and apply them myself, and do it myself." A lot of that was—sixteen years with Jim ‘N Nick’s, I had the opportunity to learn a lot of things. I think my early foundations in food, whether it was . . . the technique and cooking side of it, or whether it was the commitments to quality or understanding how to put a network of suppliers together, all of those things have a very direct impact on the work that I do with other people now, and the work that I do at this point in time is geared towards smaller business than Jim ‘N Nick’s is at this point in time, because that's—that's kind of where I like to work. But that very much informs me on a day-to-day basis in the way that I approach what I do. Down to, again, that sort of core thinking of, "This is . . . we've got the ability to approach what we do, that it's really larger than just the meal that we're creating." That . . . I mean, that's pretty inseparable part of who I am at this point in time, you know?

[01:43:13.11]

**Eric V.:** One of the things about Highlands, its existence really helped revive what had been a very strong independent restaurant scene in this city. Had kind of gone to the chains, as so many things did in the [19]70s and early [19]80s. Without Highlands, what do you think Birmingham's food and restaurant scene would be like now?

[01:43:33.02]

**Drew R.:** I mean, that's a tough question to answer. Hypothetically, would somebody have come along and done something, albeit different, but nonetheless inspired a spark in the restaurant community? Possibly. What that would look like at this point in time, I don't know. I can remember being a kid, and it was like, the chain restaurants popping up and stuff. At that point in time, it was kind of like, "Ooh, wow, this is cool." We didn't even know what it was, really. But I think the other thing to consider in that question is, what would be different about food as know it in the Southeast today, and even in America? Because, I think, when Frank opened Highlands, there just weren't a lot of people in other Southern cities doing what Frank was doing. The South was just relegated to . . . if it wasn't fast food or chain food to just the sort of Mom and Pops and meat and threes. The South was, in so many ways, an afterthought. Or, when thought of, was thought of for really negative things, some of which we earned, for sure. But Frank opening Highlands in Birmingham and Ben Barker opening Magnolia Grill in Durham and Elizabeth Terry opening her restaurant in Savannah or Emeril in New Orleans—New Orleans was a different bear, it's kind of a country unto itself, but what Norman Van Aiken in Key West . . . Frank was part of a group of people who took a chance on their region when doing that was a big risk. So, in taking that risk, they made it possible for other people to come in. It's like, at this particular moment in time, when people talk about major food destinations, Charleston is right up there on the list. It's like . . . Nashville is a blossoming food community in its own right, right now. There are other things happening in other Southern cities, but . . . what would not have happened without a sort of core group of people, of which Frank was a part, taking a risk that was significant. So, that paved the way for a lot of people. I know a lot of people in other cities would take issue with me

that maybe I'm not gettin' it all right, and I'm sure I'm not gettin' it all right, but nonetheless, there is a foundation of chefs of which Frank is a part. Louis Osteen would be a component of that, that they paved the way for people who I admire greatly and am friends with that are doing things in the food world right now that are probably beyond any of the wildest dreams that Frank or his contemporaries would have ever thought possible. But they're doing it because of the opportunity that was created at that point in time. How would Birmingham be different? How would the whole country be different? I have no idea.

[01:48:18.11]

**Eric V.:** It really helped change the image of the South and its food and foodways. We wouldn't have a Beard-winning soul food restaurant in Seattle without that generation of chefs.

[01:48:31.00]

**Drew R.:** Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I think that the Beard awards, much like anybody else, they evolve with time. I think Beard Awards are great. But they're also not really at the heart and soul of . . . what's really important. What's really important is the people who take a risk, and whether it's Frank taking a risk at Highlands and doing what he did, or it's my other mentor, Nick, taking a risk and doing what he did and trying to demonstrate that barbecue didn't have to just be a hole in the wall, Mom and Pop operation, that it could be something different. Whether it's Rodney Scott taking a risk of coming out from under his mother and father to open his whole-hog cookery in Charleston that he, in turn, wins a James Beard Award for. It's those people who take a risk because they believe that what

they're doing is greater than the sum of its parts, is what it's all about. [Interviewer's note: In 2018, Pihakis convinced Scott to open his second barbecue restaurant, in Birmingham.]

[01:50:00.29]

**Eric V.:** What am I missing here?

[01:50:04.04]

**Drew R.:** You know, I mean, I've got a three-year eye into the window of Highlands when I was there, so, to say that I have comprehensive knowledge of what Highlands Bar and Grill is would be inaccurate. But it's great. I got to see a lot of things in my tenure there that were really neat things. I was working for Frank when he won his first James Beard Award, and that was something to see, in and of itself. [Interviewer's note: Stitt was named Best Chef Southeast in 2001.] We went—overnight, it was like we went from regular business to business that we couldn't even comprehend. Overnight. I was working for Frank when 9/11 happened, and I remember waking up and seeing the news, sort of . . . the news was breaking right about the time I got out of bed on a normal day-to-day, anyway, and it was—for me . . . shock and disbelief like it was everybody else in the country. I remember going to work thinking, "What in the absolute hell? Who is going to come and eat dinner tonight?" The cooks were filtering in, and they're like, just the visceral place that everyone was coming from on that day. We're like, "Why in the hell are we here? Nobody's coming to eat dinner tonight. I mean, this is terrible." That very well could have been one of the busiest nights I've ever worked at Highlands. I think that was

indicative of the fact that . . . that's what people needed, you know? That's the kind of thing people need after a tragedy. A good friend of mine and a good friend of Frank's and a good friend of Nick's and a good friend of the Southern Foodways Alliance, John Edgerton, I remember him saying to me and a group of other people at Jim 'N Nick's one day, he was talking to us and just talking to us about the importance of food in general. He said, "Sometimes, the most important thing you can do for somebody is take 'em a bowl of potato salad." I think, whether it's potato salad or baked grits or some sort of very elaborate dish and whatever, that is a common place that people find comfort. I think that was exhibited on that day. There are plenty of other things that happened at Highlands that were nuts. It's the only time I've ever seen an ANSUL system go off in my life, and being the chef de cuisine, it's not a good idea to set the ANSUL system off, but I was the one who did it. For people who might read or listen to this that might not know what an ANSUL system is, if you have a fire in a commercial kitchen, there's a built-in extinguishing system that blasts chemicals all over the place to put it out. I was spit roasting ducks on a grill one day and I had turned my back on that to turn around and take care of something else that I was watching, and like, I could see the flame on the wall in front of me. Before the ANSUL system went off, I was just like, "Oh, hell." I knew what was going to happen, and it did, before I could even do anything about it. Because of the fact that we had two great pieces of fortune that evening—one was that we had a prep kitchen upstairs that had a small stove, and then that's where our entremets station did all of his prep work before dinner service started. So, all of the mise en place for the meal was still in the upstairs portion of the kitchen, and so we went upstairs. While part of the folks cleaned up downstairs and did all that, part of the folks were able

to serve dinner out of the prep kitchen. I don't know that the guests realized what a disaster it was, but it was one of the hardest nights I've ever worked, I can promise you that. But then, there's a lot of other stories I know about Highlands that you're not gonna get me to tell, but if you can pull 'em out of Frank, be my guest. So.

[01:55:43.05]

**Eric V.:** Well, that's a good note to end on right there. Thank you very much for taking the time with us today. We're going to pause for thirty seconds.

*[End of interview]*