Chris Conner
Highlands Bar and Grill
Birmingham, Alabama
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Interviewer: Eric Velasco
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Project: Highlands Bar and Grill at Work

Eric Velasco: This is Eric Velasco for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm conducting an oral history interview about Highlands Bar & Grill with Chris Conner, Highlands' head bartender. Conner has worked at Highlands since 1992, overseeing the action on the more casual side of Highlands' bifurcated space. He created several of the restaurant's signature cocktails, including the Temperance Drinks list, which is a mocktail created for the legendary Highlands waiter, Goren "Red Dog" Avery, called Dog Juice.

Today is December 10, 2018. We're in the formal dining room at Highlands. Please introduce yourself, Mr. Conner, and, if you would, please also spell your name and give us your date of birth for the record.

[0:00:43.2]

Chris Conner: I'm Chris Conner. That's C-h-r-i-s C-o-n-n-e-r. My birth date is March 4th, 1969.

[0:00:53.5]

Eric Velasco: And describe your current job here at Highlands.

[0:00:56.3]

Chris Conner: I am the head bartender for the Highlands Bar & Grill.

[0:01:02.6]

Eric Velasco: And what does that entail?

[0:01:03.4]

Chris Conner: Development of drinks, primarily, though, to kind of make sure that the people who are working at the bar and the customers get the best service we can possibly give them. So we do love our cocktails, but we do focus on the service end.

[0:01:25.3]

Eric Velasco: And you're behind the bar?

[0:01:26.9]

Chris Conner: Yes.

[0:01:27.3]

Eric Velasco: How many days?

[0:01:28.1]

Chris Conner: Four days a week.

[0:01:29.6]

Eric Velasco: For the five days that Highlands is open?

[0:01:32.1]

Chris Conner: Correct. Sometimes five, but I try to make it four. [Laughter]

[0:01:37.3]

Eric Velasco: You've earned it after twenty-six years. [Laughter]

[0:01:38.5]

Chris Conner: Right.

[0:01:40.1]

Eric Velasco: So, describe the bar area of Highlands, the bar and the dining room. Describe how the front of the house appears around here.

[0:01:49.5]

Chris Conner: Well, you come into the bar area, it is divided, actually, right down the middle with the horseshoe-shaped bar that's in the center of the bar itself, the bar area. And that is because originally we only had the front side of the bar and there was another business behind us. It wasn't until a few years before I got here in [19]92 that they'd acquired the other business and took down the wall. So we decided to sort of not mirror necessarily, but create a second bar on the other side. So if you were to look at it, it's like a large horseshoe shape, twenty-two bar seats currently, and there are a few tables against the wall. There are three that are what we call the hightops in restaurant terminology, but they are just little bar tables where we don't take reservations. People are allowed to come in and sit there and have a drink. A lot of times it is used for food. I will say most of the people that come to see us now are interested in our food, believe me. The tables around the outside, there's twelve. It's about sixty seats in the bar, all told.

Now, on the other side of the other wall is the dining room, and originally this building was built in 1929. It was called Aztec Shop, something like that, but it's got a little bit of a Spanish feel, Spanish shops, and they were all separated into different businesses. When we came in, we got the dining room and the front side of the bar, and there was another business. But originally it was just three businesses all in here, and the landlord, his office was next to us where our new restaurant, or our newest restaurant, Chez Fonfon, is. So we have quite a block here. When you drive by here on any night, but especially on the weekends, you'll see lines of cars trying to get in. We're lucky. We stay busy and it's great.

Now, the kitchen, if you've been through it, you will probably think, "Wow! How do they turn that much food out of that little kitchen?" And I believe half the kitchen area is probably dishwashing space alone. These guys are all on top of each other, so they have to be good friends. Same with behind the bar. A number of people have worked behind the bar. At our bar we have an oyster bar, so that's oysters on the half shell, shrimp, crab claws, ceviche, and that takes up the back half of the back bar, as we call it. [Interviewer's note: If you stand at the street-side door that opens to the bar and look back toward the kitchen area, the "back" bar is to the right.] So you're going to have people who are working to get food out from there and then you try to make your way around without getting into each other's way too much, but you still have to serve food and drinks above the oyster bar, so it makes it—like I said, you've got to be friendly. If you're not friendly, there's always a chance—most of us, "Lupe", our oyster shucker, has been back there with us for fourteen years, fifteen. [Interviewer's note: Guadalupe Castillo was hired at Highlands in 1999.] Another bartender's been there for seventeen

years, and then myself, twenty-six years, and the youngest on our current staff is six years, and he's still the newbie to us.

[0:05:33.1]

Eric Velasco: What are their names?

[0:05:34.4]

Chris Conner: So, Jonathan Sealy has been here for seventeen or eighteen years, and Michael Costa has been there for six.

[0:05:46.6]

Eric Velasco: Can you spell their names?

[0:05:48.1]

Chris Conner: Costa, I'm not sure it has an *h*, but it's C-o-s-t-a, Michael, M-i-c-h-a-e-l. And then Jonathan is J-o-n-a-t-h-a-n, Sealy, S-e-a-l-y.

[0:06:06.5]

Eric Velasco: Great. Thank you. Especially with the "Jonathan," there's so many different variations.

[0:06:10.8]

Chris Conner: Right.

[0:06:13.3]

Eric Velasco: So that's the general crew that's working behind the bar?

[0:06:18.8]

Chris Conner: Yes.

[0:06:19.7]

Eric Velasco: So people have been around for a long time here.

[0:06:21.2]

Chris Conner: Mm-hmm.

[0:06:21.9]

Eric Velasco: Has that been fairly common for your time here?

[0:06:25.7]

Chris Conner: It is. It seems there will always be one that's kind of a rotational spot, like we have people that come in, stay for a few years, but they either use us as a catapult to a different job, to a different position, or they just decide to move into daytime work. I would say that primarily people that leave us don't necessarily leave us for other restaurants; they leave us for other lifestyle, which is not to work at night. They have families or they're starting families. A lot of the younger people do that. Those of us who

have patient-enough spouses and families, we tend to stick around. So all the bartenders here are married; we all have children. So it's a little different than going to a bar, you know, where the shooter belt makes the round at, like, 9:00 o'clock. We're more about stability and kind of that feeling of stability when you come in, knowing the people you work with, knowing what to expect.

[0:07:30.7]

Eric Velasco: Well, it ties into the sense of professionalism that seems to pervade every station in this restaurant.

[0:07:37.1]

Chris Conner: I will say we jokingly call it "the Highlands way," but we're supposed to be the vessels for that way. And nobody's perfect. There's always going to be a screw-up here or there, a hiccup, and every night— One of the first chefs I worked with here, he went on to win a Beard Award, but this was back before we had reservations in the bar, so the bar was just you came in, these tables were yours to sit at and drink until you've had enough alcohol that you thought eating would be a good idea. And I used to always tell the chef, I said, "I'm going to call you every bad name in the book, but when we get off tonight, I'll take you and buy you a beer. Let's just forget that it happened."

And that's the thing. You know that it's not trenches, it's not war, but it's busy, it's frenetic, it's crazy, and being able to manage all that as seamlessly as possible, because you don't want the patrons to see you absolutely frazzled. You need to let them

know that you have this under control, even if at times it feels like you're losing control of it.

[0:08:53.8]

Eric Velasco: What else is the "Highlands way?"

[0:08:56.6]

Chris Conner: "Highlands way" is primarily we have a—it's about the community. It's about reaching out to other people, the community at large, yes, the community of ours, the people that we work with. So you're looking out for your fellow man, your coworker. You want to be as friendly as you possibly can. Even when you're having a bad day, just go ahead and forget that for a minute, so you kind of table that. You put it over there and you come in, because there's a good chance the person that's coming in here to see you is having bad day, too, and they don't need you to compound their woes. So it's about service, I would say. The food, we want people to enjoy—I mean, the food is fantastic, it's phenomenal, it's unrivaled. But we want the experience, the food to just be a part of it. So you want the service to be wonderful. You want the attitudes of the staff when they come in to be nice, to be friendly. So there's a certain amount of—people say the dining room is a little more formal, it's a little tighter quarters, but we try to maintain that it's still us. We're people. We know a lot of our customers. We're fortunate.

This year has been a little bit different. We've seen a lot of new faces. But I will say that historically speaking, especially being behind the bar, a large part of my clients, the people that come in to see us at the bar are out-of-towners, people who got off a plane

and they said, "Where do I go to get some good food in this town?" So, I mean, we owe a lot of our business to the cabbies and the concierges of the world, the people that say, "Oh, you've got to try Highlands if you're in town." So we've always had new faces. It's just a matter of the level of new faces. The amount of effort these new faces are putting in to be able to come to have the Highlands experience, you get their reservation a month out. [Reservations at Highland only open a month in advance. Since winning the James Beard Award in May 2018 as the nation's Outstanding Restaurant, reservations have been difficult to obtain, even months later. Even though Highlands Bar and Grill is closed on Monday, the day this interview was conducted, the phone can be regularly heard in the background from callers wanting to book tables.]

I had a couple—the day after we won it, a family drove from Minnesota on Friday so they could get to the bar at 4:00 o'clock on Saturday so they would have seats, ate at the bar, went home and drove back to Minnesota on Sunday. So that's a sort of—you can't let those people down. I mean, that's a kind of diehard enthusiasm for something. You just want to say, "Wow!"

[0:11:46.4]

Eric Velasco: We're going to get into this more later, but just for the listeners, what is the "it" you were referring to that you won?

[0:11:52.0]

Chris Conner: The James Beard Award. [Laughter] Yes, for the Most Outstanding Restaurant. Wow. Ten years.

[0:12:00.9]

Eric Velasco: Ten years as a finalist, right?

[0:12:02.3]

Chris Conner: Correct. I think it was more shocking that we won it. Every one of us just—boom!

[0:12:08.8]

Eric Velasco: Let's jump into that. You were there that night.

[0:12:11.2]

Chris Conner: Yes. We'd been nominated for ten years, and I think a lot of us had begun to believe that it's just quite possible that given the competition, the market sizes of the people that were out there convinced us that we would probably never win it, but to be nominated ten years in a row, it's not easy. I can name several restaurants with world-class chefs and restaurant groups that got nominated and that were removed and didn't make it back. So to be there ten years means that we were just continuing to not just maintain our game, but to up our game a little bit. So we took that as a huge source of pride. I mean, this was fantastic just to be there.

The night of the event, we started and we barely get seated because the second award of the evening is the pastry chef. Dolester [Miles] was nominated. [Interviewer's note: Dolester Miles, the longtime pastry chef and one of Highlands' original employees,

was nominated for Outstanding Pastry Chef.] This was her third time. We kind of felt like the same situation for her, that it's just possible, but that she might have a better chance because it's not necessarily—the people can concentrate on getting the pastries from there, whereas getting people to come to visit us, to have dinner with us, it's a whole different situation.

And as soon as we were sitting, we just barely got seated, they announced the pastry chef, and it was Dolester. [Laughter] She was seated directly in front of me in the row, and her daughter [LaToya Phillips] came this year, which was a unique twist. She had not been before. So we immediately called her our lucky charm. But she's sitting by her mom and Dol just started crying. [Laughter] The rest of the crew's jumping up and screaming, you know. It was, "Woo!" And I just remember—maybe my most vivid memory of this is when Frank [Stitt] leaned over and said, "Dolester, you need to go say something to these people." [Laughter] And so at that point, we're all so happy, you know, you don't mind that you're sitting in a small seat in a tuxedo. You're just happy. We got one. We were just like, "Yes! We got a win. That's fantastic."

So we go through the rest of the evening, and then it comes time, and we've been here before, you know. We've seen this routine. The gentleman that was presenting it was Rick Bayless, who is owner of Frontera and Topolobampo, and we had had dinner with him a couple of years before, and apparently—I mean, he's a super nice guy. He got his wife to come down and hang out with us. He's really nice, very knowledgeable, just a very cerebral kind of guy. He was doing the announcing because "Topolo" had won the year before. When he started to say it, he goes, "This makes me very happy." As he was saying that, you look at it in real time, like I've seen the video, the name is coming up as

he's saying that before he says our name, and so we hit the roof. I mean, I still—you can see the chill bumps. It still is something. It was just like, "Wow! We just did it!"

And then what comes next, the next five minutes of life is very hazy. [Laughter] There was walking down this slippery slope to the stage in these terrible slick-bottom shoes, and I felt like I was going to have a catastrophe going up the steps. People are all slapping—you get to meet a lot of these people while you're there, so you pass people that you've befriended, that you know had incidental, like, just contact with some of the receptions that they have. So you meet these people, you get to talk to them, you get to realize that we're all very much alike, and one thing you'll see is that they're all very service oriented. I mean, you're talking about people who are dressed in tuxedos and still feel the need to actually take an empty glass from you, you know? So that's kind of—it's your way of thinking.

And it's just one of those five, eight, ten steps, however many it was, and I remember getting up on the stage and they were directing us where to go. The lights are very bright, and all you see is something that looks like some kind of Impressionist rendering of an audience out behind the lights, you know, just kind of faces but just kind of mulled together. And we were all so stunned. I mean, there were several members of our group that were crying. Some of us couldn't even talk. Just somehow, Frank, who had said that he didn't want to jinx it, so he didn't write an acceptance speech, mustered up and he went up and he did a great speech. And you're just like, "Wow! You know, that's something." I would have just been like [demonstrates]. [Laughter] Just kind of out of my brain.

[0:17:28.2]

Eric Velasco: Who all was there from Highlands?

[0:17:29.9]

Chris Conner: Well, we had me, of course Frank and Pardis [Stitt], and then our managers, Ryan Ford and Matt Gilpin, and then our head waiters are Goren Avery, who is sort of legendary, and then Patrick Noling, and our sommelier in charge of our wine program overall, whose name is Gray Maddox, and Dolester. So it was a good-size crowd, actually, and Dol's daughter as well, but she stayed back in the seats to watch the purses. [Laughter]

[0:18:06.5]

Eric Velasco: Did you all go up on stage—

[0:18:09.1]

Chris Conner: Mm-hmm.

[0:18:09.1]

Eric Velasco: —for the Outstanding Restaurant?

[0:18:11.0]

Chris Conner: Yes, everyone went. Like I said, looking at that crowd from the stage, we're just standing back there, and it was something. And then they take you back, and everything else is still just crazy, a blur.

[0:18:29.8]

Eric Velasco: Now, that must have been pretty cool as an employee, as a worker, to be sharing that moment.

[0:18:36.5]

Chris Conner: Oh, yeah. Yeah, it's something else. I mean, you really wished you could bring everybody. You wish everybody could be there, but the way that things are now, it was great because my kids actually watched it on TV and they were telling me—I forget the numbers of how many people watched it. It was kind of amazing, considering it wasn't cable TV, but everybody now can kind of be involved in it. Yeah, it was one of those things you can't duplicate.

I will say, like, when Dolester won the award, the theme of this year was the electronic media, Twitter, Facebook, all the feeds, everybody going up, and they were running them behind for, like, the past winners or the people that have won that night or what's going on and things that were said. But two awards later, they already had a feed from the *Tuscaloosa News* or some Tuscaloosa newspaper, that says, "Alabama Welcomes Another National Champion. Congratulations, Dolester!"

[0:19:47.3]

Eric Velasco: Aw!

[0:19:47.7]

Chris Conner: And we were just like, "Wow!" See, you know, I know it doesn't sound like much, but this is a big national championship. We work hard. We practice. We go through the routines. And it really is, it's about making it seem seamless, and that's kind of "the Highlands way," which is make sure you be graceful, be service-minded, be polite, and be professional. And that's kind of a big thing.

[0:20:26.3]

Eric Velasco: Over the ten years, how many of the award ceremonies had you gone to?

[0:20:31.6]

Chris Conner: Just the ones in Chicago, the last three years. Primarily—and this is—I'll tell the story. My anniversary was on that weekend, and it's hard to, when you're working four to five days a week, to take that weekend where you get to see your wife for your anniversary and say, "I'll be back and I'll see you in another week." So I always had turned down offers to go to New York. But I'm a huge Chicago Cubs fan. [Laughter] So this year, Pardis brought out the big guns and had Frank ask me personally and say, "We'll even let you go to a Cubs game." And so I did, and I got to take Dolester and the staff here, Frank and Pardis, to their very first Cubs games.

[0:21:18.6]

Eric Velasco: Who did they play?

[0:21:21.2]

Chris Conner: The first year, we played—oh, actually I took Red Dog, even, his first game. First year, we played Milwaukee, and Dog was upset that we had a reception to go to and had to get up, because it was a beautiful day that day. Then the next year, we played Atlanta, which seemed kind of odd for us to travel all the way to Chicago to see the Braves play. And it was Chicago weather, you know, May. It was roughly 35 degrees with a wind chill of 21, so we all decided to cut out somewhere kind of early that day.

[0:21:54.3]

Eric Velasco: You were wishing for a recession. [Laughter]

[0:21:55.4]

Chris Conner: Yes, we were looking for a recession that day, warm place to sit. And then, unfortunately, both games, when we left, we were tied. Actually, we had a chance to break the tie when we were leaving that day, they started to hit a ball that got knocked down in the outfield, was going to be a two-run home run, and we were like, "We gotta go. We gotta go." But now it's kind of like you put that into sort of lore of the craziness of the whole Chicago trips. It's very packed. It's forty-eight hours, essentially, turnaround. You get there early Sunday morning, start with brunch, then receptions, baseball game, and then come back, get cleaned up, go to dinner, meet others.

And then the next day is just all about there are all these little venues, little events you can go. Billy Reid, who's a big fan of the SFA, who's the designer, he has a thing called the Southern Mafia, that he has a big reception over there, and it's always a lot of fun. So we usually make a few of those stops and just kind of walk around the city and check it out. It's going to be different this year, not knowing that it's there, you know. We're not going to Chicago? What are we going to do now? I guess I'll see my wife on my anniversary. [Laughter]

[0:23:15.6]

Eric Velasco: But Chef Stitt will have to be there, because he's presenting, right?

[0:23:17.5]

Chris Conner: Yes. Right. Correct. I'm relatively sure that's how it works. It was Topolobampo, and then the year before, Grant Achatz had won for Alinea 2K, and he was the presenter giving to "Topolo." So I'm pretty sure that's the way it works.

[0:23:36.4]

Eric Velasco: It will be a triumphant return.

[0:23:37.8]

Chris Conner: Yes, absolutely.

[0:23:41.1]

Eric Velasco: So tell me a little about—we talked a little bit about the more casual aspect of the bar, but to clarify, it's the same waiters—

[0:23:51.7]

Chris Conner: Right.

[0:23:53.0]

Eric Velasco: —the same food—

[0:23:54.4]

Chris Conner: Correct.

[0:23:55.5]

Eric Velasco: —same level of service, certainly, you know, the same level of service behind the bar.

[0:24:01.5]

Chris Conner: Well, maybe the casual that I was talking about is the feel of the guest on that side. A lot of people ask for the bar side because, I mean, much to Pardis' chagrin, there is a TV. You can watch sports over there. You know, you have people that you'll hear a mad cheer coming from the other room when somebody's doing something. But the bar itself, we are primarily—we do a lot of dinners, so it's just people that come in, wait, didn't maybe want to bring their sport coat out that night, which in the dining room,

jackets are preferred for gentlemen, and you'll see a little bit more nicer attire, whereas I've got people that show up in the bar in flip-flops, you know, and baseball hats, and that's kind of—there's no difference in attitude. There's just a difference in how much you prepared for your evening, you know, and so a lot of it is the people that eat at the bar are regulars, what I call the illuminati, but the people that are involved in local politics, government, lawyers.

When I first started working here there was no reservations in the bar. And a big part of it was we were open at lunch, so we would have like crab cake Thursday. I just remember people would be lined up all the way down the sidewalk for us to open that door at 11:00 o'clock, and you'd just open the door and you're immediately—so you would have some holdovers that maybe made the late lunch because they didn't want to deal with the craziness, and so they would come in at 2:00 o'clock to eat because that was when we stopped. We took a break between 2:00 and 5:00 for our kitchen to reset, get a different shift in there. So you'd have holdovers, people that kind of maintained their tables.

The stock market closes Eastern Time, and so people would get out and they knew they could get down here, meet their buddies, and hold a table for pretty much the day or the evening, and then they would get food.

[0:26:04.2]

Eric Velasco: Would the bar be open during that 2:00-to-5:00 period?

[0:26:07.5]

Chris Conner: Mm-hmm. The bar stayed open. So you'd come in, you'd get your drinks, you'd kind of hang around, wait for the kitchen to open again. But a lot of it, especially the stockbrokers were the early crowd, and quite a few medical professionals and lawyers. Anybody that ever talks about Highlands bar will tell you it's a lawyer, politician bar, so you're going to see a lot of, like I said, the Illuminati, the people that run the town.

This is where—I don't know what all deals have been brokered here. I have no idea. It's kind of crazy for me to think. But there's a lot of stuff that goes on here that maybe gets its foundation right here. It's an idea, somebody spitballs it to them, and they know they're going to find this person sitting at the bar at 6:00 o'clock. They might go down, "Hey, I had an idea for you," you know. So a lot of things have actually happened, and I know a lot of the people that are responsible for it.

I think one of the great moments, I was walking with my kids in a Veterans Day Parade when they were Boy Scouts, and as we were filing past the mayor's stand, the mayor started shouting my name. [Laughter] I was like, "What do you say, Mayor?" I mean, it's that kind of crowd. The crazy thing is, it's not just that kind of crowd, it's also people who are diehard Cubs fans. We have a big Cubs following. When the World Series was on, nothing but Cubs fans in the bar.

And there's a level of familiarity and, hopefully, a level where people come in, they feel that level of comfort already. It's not necessarily our job to disarm them, but to make them feel at ease, because for a lot of people, something like this, myself included, if I came into the dining room and I'm wearing a suit and it's all very—so much pageantry. But in the bar, it's a good way to start this. You come there, "Well, you know,

I'm not sure. The menu looks a little daunting." Well, we can help you with that. We'll translate the parts that don't make sense. We'll try to describe it the best we can, but we bring a lot of food by to let people at the bar see, just because a lot of these people don't have experience with that dish, and you just want to show it, say, "Okay, I can give you the best detail in the world, but nothing like seeing the dish to let you understand what's actually involved."

[0:28:55.8]

Eric Velasco: And you guys could break down a menu item like nobody's business.

[0:29:00.4]

Chris Conner: Right.

[0:29:00.7]

Eric Velasco: You could practically walk me through cook again.

[0:29:03.5]

Chris Conner: Right. [Laughter] Well, I mean, every day we have a waiter/server meeting, and we come over and we listen to the changes that are going on. We listen to maybe the fine-tuning that they did to a dish from the day before. Recently, for example, we are doing a cauliflower soup. On the first couple of days, they were doing a preparation. Then they decided that it would be better to just basically olive oil, salt and pepper, and roast the cauliflower in the oven before they broke it down and made the

soup out of it. Made all the difference. Fantastic soup. It was great before. Now it's better. So that's the kind of thing, the constant fine-tuning, the fine-tuning of everything, I guess.

[0:29:47.5]

Eric Velasco: And you're apprised of this in each of these evening meetings.

[0:29:48.6]

Chris Conner: Each of these meetings, little changes that are made. The fish, the proteins will change. Like the fish, whatever came in that looks the best. So you may have the same or very similar setup to what you had the day before, like the sides for the dishes that are under it, but the protein will change. So you might have a Farro Verde with a crabmeat relish, but instead of the swordfish, today we're putting this beautiful tuna on it. And because of that, you might want to change a little bit what's in the relish. You don't want to necessarily have it be heavy, because you've got two different kind of fish. That's—they're great at it. I mean, every time you come out, you just look at the food, you think, "Wow!" And that makes it easy.

I mean, you know, I've often said I went from a sales job after college to this, and I said because this is the best sales job I know. You sit there and they come to you for your product. You don't have to go beat down their door. They want to buy your product from you, and it makes it easy when you just consistently turn out great product, not just in the food, but great service, great drinks. The wine list here is legendary. It's almost too

copious. There's 330 bottles on there. Don't get Pardis started on that. But it's a lot of work, a lot of attention to detail in every aspect of what we do here.

[0:31:19.0]

Eric Velasco: And who does a lot of the ordering for the wine?

[0:31:22.6]

Chris Conner: That's going to be Gray. He's the sommelier. He works at Bottega, but he's sort of the liaison between the people that would like to constantly be in Frank's ear and what Gray thinks is worth taking a look at. Because there's a lot of product out there, I mean in everything, from the proteins that are coming in the kitchen to the vegetables. [Interviewer's note: Bottega, which has separate kitchens and servers for a café side and fine-dining side, is Stitt's outlet for Italian-inspired cooking. Chez Fonfon is Stitt's French Bistro.] I mean, you see us pick through the vegetables and the fruits that come in here. I think these guys, these poor purveyors. [Laughter] They're sort of polishing the fruit before they bring it in. It's that kind of—we want the best. We really do, and Frank's chefs' theory or philosophy is that, you know, this is such a beautiful product, let's just make sure we give it the proper presentation.

[0:32:20.5]

Eric Velasco: Over the years, he's built quite a network of farmers and purveyors and growers and producers. It's coming in the door just about every day of the week. What winds up behind your bar?

[0:32:36.7]

Chris Conner: Well, primarily we do mostly fruit. We don't have a lot of veg that we do behind the bar, but we do have, like, some beautiful Cara Cara oranges, and that's also getting it at the right time, getting it from—so we don't have a whole lot of local. We have some satsumas from Cullman, the peaches that come in, of course, those are already [**unclear**] in Cullman, but there are some decent things that we get from some of the local purveyors. The problem is, for the amount of quantity that we do back there, it's going to be hard for them to kind of keep up.

We actually have our own farm now, Paradise Farms, and we've had that for about eight, ten years, and it's begun to produce a lot of what we have here. [Frank and Pardis Stitt bought Paradise Farm about 11 years ago. Not only do they grow produce on the Shelby County farm, Chef Stitt also keeps horses there.]

But the fruit and—I'm trying to think if we have anything from any vegetable—I've got a pecan that I get, that we use for a pecan orgeat, which is our house—it's more of a take on an old Mai Tai, because an orgeat is traditionally an almond liqueur. This is a Southern take. We make a pecan milk, essentially. Then we sweeten that and we add the rosewater and a little bit of bourbon to kind of brace it, but this drink has become hugely popular, to the degree that you have to start this process—it's a three-day process to make this.

[0:34:04.6]

Eric Velasco: Walk me through it.

[0:34:07.4]

Chris Conner: Well, you start with—we're getting these pecans from a local farmer, and we take those, we divide it into two large pots and we soak these pecans. You soak those for a full twenty-four hours. Then you pull the pecans off the liquid, set the liquid aside, take those pecans that have been soaking and you do a rough puree on them, and you put them in a cheesecloth satchel. You divide the water up. You reintroduce it into that water, which is becoming more and more essentially a pecan milk. And you let that set for a day.

Then you take it, pull it out, and you sort of wring out the satchel so you get all the nice—it's amazing, the color change that goes on. It starts as the brown pecan then it goes to almost the whites, like an off-white. And once we pull it down, the third day we cook it and reduce it, and the color goes back to this deep brown. Once you get it reduced to the level of the pecan flavor we're looking for, we really want it to have a nice pecan essence to it, then you add in some sugar, which some people would say it's not a simple syrup, it's really an orgeat, because it's not as sweet as all that. Simple syrup is typically fifty-fifty water and sugar. This is nowhere near that. Just because traditionally the orgeat has the rosewater in it, we put that in there. So a little bit of bourbon to brace it.

You set it set for about two hours after you cook it, so you can see why you have to do it like overlapping, because we're only open five days, so you have to start that batch. Like sometimes I'll just be driving along and I'll think, "Oh, man, I've got to go start pecans." [Laughter] So I live close enough, it's not that bad. I just run in here, grab some pecans, and start 'em soaking.

But it's part of the attention to details that we do on our drinks too. A lot of our cocktails are, we have some—the Orange Thing, I'm sure—there were teeshirts made up for it. It was a very popular drink that was created kind of by accident by one of our old bartenders, William. Unfortunately, he passed away a couple of years ago. But as he told me, the story was—and he used to work lunches with me here—was like, "I started to make a drink for somebody, forgot what it was, and I started to screw it up so bad, and some friends of his," he goes, "that I decided to make this, and they said it was the best drink they've ever had." [Laughter] And they said, "Do another one." He goes, "Oh, no." [Laughter]

So it was tweaked, and we kind of got it down to a simple—the essence of what it is, which is really just the fresh-squeezed orange juice. The orange juice is what makes it. We do it in front of you, and it's right up at the bar with the old manual press, and when you do that, it causes the essence, the oil of the oranges, to kind of get out there, and people can smell it. People say that especially the grapefruits, people twenty feet away will be like, "Oh, my gosh, that smells so great. Can I have a—?" And then, you know, it's up to us to come up with a drink that they want to have with fresh squeezed grapefruit, fresh squeezed orange, satsumas. We even tried doing our own fresh squeezed tomato juice for a little bit. Turns out we weren't very good at that. [Laughter]

[0:37:50.0]

Eric Velasco: What else is in the Orange Thing?

[0:37:51.9]

Chris Conner: It's vodka and orange liqueur, and that was kind of reduce it down, but it is—as I told my—when I first started dating my wife, she came in here to see me, and she had the Orange Thing, and half hour later, she was really honest with me. [Laughter] She goes, "Wow, that thing is—." It's two shots. It's two shots of vodka. The orange juice just kind of helps cover that up. So I say often—I call it the Truth Serum. So it's vodka, the fresh squeezed juice of one orange, and a little bit of orange liqueur, which, honestly, is intended to kind of balance it out. Because of what we do and how we search out our produce and our fruits, sometimes you're not going to get the same orange you had last week. You're going to get an entirely different orange profile.

[0:38:50.8]

Eric Velasco: As it goes through the season and you have the different varieties—

[0:38:52.4]

Chris Conner: Exactly.

[0:38:53.7]

Eric Velasco: —being harvested.

[0:38:54.9]

Chris Conner: You leave the orange liqueur in there. It ties it together. It really does. I used to think it seemed redundant, and I realize it made it more consistent.

[0:39:03.4]

Eric Velasco: What's your wife's name?

[0:39:04.8]

Chris Conner: Dawn.

[0:39:05.7]

Eric Velasco: Conner?

[0:39:06.6]

Chris Conner: Yes.

[0:39:08.2]

Eric Velasco: What does she do?

[0:39:09.4]

Chris Conner: She is one of the co-heads of the Birmingham Regional Planning Commission.

[0:39:14.9]

Eric Velasco: And what do they do?

[0:39:15.0]

Chris Conner: They take care of Medicaid waiver. There's several other—it's sort of an umbrella, but her primary is to take care of Medicaid waiver, which is to make sure the older people get taken care of. And she does a great job.

[0:39:32.6]

Eric Velasco: And what the Truth Serum pull out of her mouth that night?

[0:39:35.7]

Chris Conner: Oh. [Laughter] Luckily, we were young enough into the relationship that nothing much, just maybe—nothing I'm thinking made enough of an impact that it changed me, because I just said, "Well, if I'm going to marry this girl—." It was an amazing thing meeting her and seeing what a big heart she has, and that's kind of—you know, in service-oriented people, she was working in a restaurant. She was in school when we met, and I happened to be friends with somebody that worked with her, and that's how we accidentally met. I was going to go have lunch with a guy that she worked with, and we ended up meeting up with them for brunch, and I spent the whole day hanging out with her. Then went the very next day, had a date that day. Working in the restaurant industry, you find dates where you can, you know. They're not a traditional Friday, Saturday movie sort of thing. So a lot of lunches and a lot of trying to make it work.

It was shortly after that she took over Meals on Wheels, actually. That was her first job out of college. So that was, to me, it was great, because you see what we do here is present food in a very elegant, wonderful way, and you see the looks on people's faces.

Then the parallel is you go and you drive Meals on Wheels and you deliver a meal to somebody, and the look on their face is just, you know, appreciation.

You begin to realize that everything—what I do is I provide. I have alcohol behind the bar, which is a luxury. It really is a luxury. It's not required to live. Food, however, is, and when you can combine the two and make it an experience that's worth remembering, that it's an experience that people talk about, that people would suggest to their friends, or cab drivers would suggest to people getting off a plane, then you know you're doing the right thing. You're doing what you're kind of supposed to be doing.

[0:41:56.3]

Eric Velasco: And both levels are about nurturing.

[0:41:59.2]

Chris Conner: Yes, exactly, and maybe the nurture is possibly the—you have nature, you have nurture, and here we're about the nurturing part of it, and that's from the seed. I mean, if you hear them talk about working the farm, working the soil, if you talk to our farmers, our local farmers that come in, and the love that they put into growing this product, and if you look at one of our menus, it's riddled with little tip of the hat to the local farmers. We list their farm on there. We want people to know about this. We want to know how much these people are really working to get us the best possible product, and that's one of those things I think is really kind of special and unique.

And the culture of people from Birmingham, maybe, and—Birmingham is a very food city, you know, and people, I think a lot of it is an offshoot of this restaurant, a lot of

past employees who've gone and started their own great restaurants, fantastic restaurants, and you see that they take "the Highlands way" with them and put it into their own system. Then it was eventually going to be that this would be a great restaurant town, and that's how it's worked out. Look at all these places. So I'm happy for us. I mean, I really am.

[0:43:29.7]

Eric Velasco: What role did Highlands play in the development of a cocktail culture here in Birmingham? Which has developed later than the restaurant, but still.

[0:43:40.3]

Chris Conner: Right. Well, the cocktail culture, I think we started trying to—we wanted to do essentially what we do with food: fine-tune. A lot of what we do is fine-tune classic American cocktails or classic cocktails in general, and you take them and you tweak it and you find—like, if you get just a standard Manhattan, okay, somebody asks you for a Manhattan, you can do a Manhattan with an inexpensive bourbon, an inexpensive sweet vermouth, and a couple of dashes of bitters, and it's definitely, by definition, a Manhattan, but it's not the best drink you can have. So it's finding a pairing of the right amaro or the right sweet vermouth with the right bourbon or rye.

We're doing a gin drink tonight that's just a modification of a classic—for a private event tonight. These people are big cocktail fans, so they like to sit down with us, come up with the one cocktail that they want to have presented that night. So tonight they've decided on a Gin-Gin Mule, which is just a take. It's gin with mint simple syrup

and the ginger beer, and that's just a take on the classic Moscow Mule, but it's just a matter of tweaking it, kind of making it our own, and making it taste—I think a lot of what we do is balance. It's the same thing, if I'm looking at beers to have on draft or even the wines, I mean, you want balance there. You don't want something that's so far to the left or the right that it—pardon the politics—but that it leaves somebody out. You want something that has balance that gives you still the essence of the liquor, the base of the drink, and then the rest of it you build around it, but you want to make sure that it tastes good, that it's something really nice. If, when they get the product and they want to tweak it to the left or the right, we can do that. We have the technology to change that drink slightly to meet their palate, and that's what we do here.

[0:46:05.7]

Eric Velasco: So how did that come about? Did they say, "We want this kind of concept and you come up with a recipe," or what?

[0:46:11.7]

Chris Conner: Well, I'll be honest. Everybody does. The whole staff is—and we have even members of the other restaurants, some of the younger kids are from the cocktail culture, the mixology, and they've worked at other bars here in town doing that, developing cocktails, so everybody gets their input. It's not just me. My primary, as far as the liquor goes, is to make sure we have it, make sure we're in the right direction when things need to be ordered, but is to try to find the best quality to give them a little bit of a canvas. I mean, to be honest, I haven't had liquor, besides tasting the drink, since 2009. I

decided it was—I had two kids that were very young, and I knew that liquor sure made me feel bad the next day, and so I just did it as a temporary New Year's resolution and it stuck. But I will take the liquors, like I'll have a liquor tasting with somebody, and you rinse and you spit, just like you would wine. If I get a good-quality product and we all get together and we brainstorm and say, "What would be good with this? How would we like to use this?" It's an involved thing. Everybody kind of gets their say.

And I think that also makes you feel pretty good. I mean, if you're there and they ask your opinion, you know, new kid in the block, even, you're just like, "You've done this. You've seen this. What do you think would be good with this gin? Do we need to just leave it like it is or because it's so floral, do we need to add something to it to kind of accentuate the floral nature of it?" And you get knowledge, and that's kind of a big thing. We do that to have—like, we talk about new gins. We talk about new rums. We don't really add a whole lot of vodkas, but bourbons, scotches, anything that's new, and you kind of want to give—the staff needs to know as much about that as they do about the food so they'd be better prepared to tell the customer what they're looking for, like stylistically in gins or stylistically in rums, agricole versus industrial. So that sets us apart, I think, set us apart.

Now, there's a growing culture behind that. There's a lot of—it's not growing anymore; I think it's fully blossomed. But that originally set us apart, was our attention to the product, the styles, the being able to advise somebody the direction that maybe they wanted to go. If somebody just says—because our martinis were sort of legendary because of our style. We muddle our martinis here, which is neither shaken nor stirred, but muddled. So it presents a slushy appearance. Now, if somebody's having that kind of

martini, a Bombay White Label is great. It's fantastic. But if they're wanting something not muddled, you know, a martini with just a drop of vermouth, something that they were looking for something sweeter, well, they need to be looking for a Plymouth-style gin or a Genever. There's all these—the rums, agricoles versus industrials.

And that kind of knowledge is what's—not just the bar staff. The bar staff takes it and runs with it, they're super creative, but with the wait staff as well. They get to go out there, and we sell, I mean, a ton of mixed, crazy drinks every night. And we have to be able to—and that way we're a little bit more—we don't go to the extent that where you go to some of these mixology bars where it takes them five to six minutes to build you a drink. I have two hundred drinks I have to make in the next ten minutes, so we have to find a happy medium. We have to be able to build some of it off to the side and connect the two, so it can't be one of these super overly—because we already have enough of that that comes in from outside, like your French 75s, something like that. It's a later—

[0:50:27.8]

Eric Velasco: To compare with the kitchen, you need *mise en place*.

[0:50:32.5]

Chris Conner: Yes, exactly.

[0:50:33.1]

Eric Velasco: So you can put something out to order.

[0:50:35.4]

Chris Conner: Exactly. I mean, us doing the pecan orgeat takes three days. People don't see that. But as far as making the drink, it doesn't take that long to make the drink. So that's kind of what we want to do. We want to put the work into the prep and make the process of getting it to the table as expeditious as possible. We don't want people waiting. I mean, any new employee that comes in, I'm like, "You listen for the printers and that's because those people have already been seated for five minutes, so you make nice with the people that are here, get their drink order, and start making these drinks, because those need to go out. These people, they deserve to have their drinks in a very timely manner as well." So that's part of it.

I have a new guy that we're bringing in who's not new at all. He's been with Bottega for, like, fifteen years, and it's a delight to have him because he's got this great attitude and he's willing to just kind of take any direction, and he didn't bring in baggage from the past jobs he'd had. He knows what we do. And he's been working a few nights here a week, and he's like, "But one thing that I'm just going to have to get better at is speed."

And that's kind of it. I mean, as bartenders, we are servers who have three other things to do. We have to not just take care of the glassware, but we have to go get the wines for the table, we have to make the drinks for the table, and we have to make sure that we have all the *mise en place*, the stuff that goes in. Then we happen to serve fifty dinners a night, so you're armed with—you've got to have speed. You've got to be quick to do it, but you've also got to not look like you're just trying to fly through it. You've got to remain at least somewhat calm, because if you're not, then that's when things can

go wrong, is when you lose that sense of, like, where you need to be, what you need to have done. People say multitask. I'm not sure that multitask really exists, but I think prioritization does. So you put that in the level of, "All right, this is what needs to be done now. Let's get this out."

And once people kind of learn, you're amazed at how many people don't really—people that have come in, that have worked with us, don't really have that sort of mindset, and then when they leave there—I have one guy that worked for me fifteen years ago, and he was working on his MBA. He went on to be the head of one of the larger firms in Alabama's entire [state public employee] retirement planning system, and he has 120 employees. He always says to me, "Don't think I would have survived doing what I do if I hadn't had you as a boss at one time. You taught me how to look at things and to treat the people that work for you like you want to be treated, and how to take criticism well, but also be able to accept praise." Sometimes those aren't—I mean, they're not—you would think it would be easy to take praise, but a lot of people, like me, I squirm a little. It's like, well, you know, I'd rather—tell me what I'm doing wrong than what I'm doing right.

[0:54:00.6]

Eric Velasco: To be recognized as the professional you are and to be able to influence another professional in a completely different field, how does that make you feel?

[0:54:11.3]

Chris Conner: It's great. I mean, I've actually had several different people, who one of them—and I still maintain friendships with these guys, you know. It's fun. Sometimes they'll just call to razz me, like, "How ya doin', old man?" Stuff like that. When I think about it now, like I look back at all the people that I've actually worked with, people have gone on to work for the governor. One went on to work for a presidential campaign. One is head of an industry in Germany. These people, like I said, most of the people that leave us don't leave because they don't want to be here; it's because they had opportunities elsewhere. A couple of the jobs were facilitated by the connections they made here working at this bar, meeting some of the higher end, like the lawyers and the political figures. So, I mean, how could that not be anything but great? I mean, really, for me to be like, "Wow! Way to go! Way to be."

Sometimes they get all kind of gushy and you're just like, "Don't. You know, I don't have anything to do with this. You're just the person that you were when you got here. You just needed to maybe kind of figure things out." Well, literally, like how to—one of the guys that worked for the presidential campaign, we were talking and we said, "All right, on your way down the stairs, if you've got to go upstairs to get the wine, there's three things that you pass that you can probably bring back to the bar with you. It's going to be a lot."

And he's like, "Well, I know." He goes, "Well, I'm just too lazy."

I said, "No, you're efficient." [Laughter] So the argument of laziness versus efficiency is, you know, that's age-old, but we kind of—you have to be efficient in your movements and pretty much in life too. If you're not, then you're expending way too much energy.

[0:56:12.1]

Eric Velasco: Working smarter is a lot better than working harder.

[0:56:14.4]

Chris Conner: Yes, exactly, and that's the thing. I mean, I didn't know what I was doing when I got in here. Had a guy that was sort of my mentor, and he was anything but that. He was just this huge personality, a guy from England but he was Irish. He spent his whole life in England, a massive personality. People just loved to come down and hang out and listen to him. But I always got the sense that he hired me so that I would do all the stuff that needed to get done. [Laughter] Which is fine. I was like, yeah, you've got to have that. You've got to have personality, you've got to have the sort of linear thinking at times, the resolution of a task, but you also have to remember that—I have kids, and I tell them, you know, work is work. If it was fun, they would call it a hobby. But you have to understand that in this world, if you're getting paid to do something, you need to do it, and you need to do it as efficiently and as effectively as possible. You want to make sure that you present yourself in a way that your employers feel like they've done well in hiring you. Your whole life doesn't have to be necessarily spent trying to please them. But while you're there for that time, you do the best job you can. If it comes to a point where you don't feel like you're able to do the best job you can, then maybe it's time to change jobs, and that's a lot of folks that change job, and that's wonderful.

I'm just lucky enough I found a place where I get paid to talk about sports and food and just hang out, and that's a great opportunity. That's a cool job. I mean, if you

tell anybody—like I have an old friend comes in, goes, "Man, twenty-five years ago when you took this job, I thought you were crazy. Now I wish I had your job." [Laughter]

I was like, "Yeah."

[0:58:34.8]

Eric Velasco: Before we backtrack a little bit, who was your mentor?

[0:58:37.0]

Chris Conner: His name was Mick Reavey, which, honestly, you know, Mick was his name, Irish guy, but he was a soccer player that came to the U.S. as one of the founding members of the UAB soccer team. So every Scottish, Irish, English soccer player that has ever been in this town is amongst our clientele. I mean, literally we have a big—every year we have what they call an Alumni Weekend, where these guys descend on us en masses, and it's great. I mean, it's unique, because how many people have like soccer culture in this town? And it's growing. It's getting more and more popular. But back then, twenty-six years ago, hell, it was the first year that UAB even had a program, so that was kind of a big deal.

He came in and he did it for two years, and then he dropped out and came to bartend at Highlands, and that's when I met him. I was going down the street to get a sandwich, and I was working for—doing sales for a hydraulic company, and I got transferred up here, and I was willing to take it because I didn't have kids. I didn't have a wife and kids when I was living in Florida, so I was like, "I can go because my sister lives in Birmingham. I'll go crash on her house, do this."

I got up here, and she lived right up the hill. I was walking down to this little sandwich shop that was on the corner for years, called Goren's, had a great Reuben, and I would go in there and grab that. I happened to see somebody I know on the sidewalk talking to Mick, and we just started talking, shooting the breeze, and he's like, "You need a job?"

I was like, "Well, I could take a job sort of temporarily, because I've got to start work in the other company."

He goes, "Well, this is just a couple nights a week."

And I was like, "All right. Great." I'd worked in restaurants. In all honesty, I started working at a pizza place when I was fifteen years old, and I just loved it. There's nothing better than the smell of a pizza place in winter, like the oven. It's just fantastic. So I was, "Yeah, a restaurant job sounds great," you know, and it's February, it's cold. I'm like, "All right, I'll go do this." And I go, "Well, when do you want me to come by?"

And he goes, "Can you start tonight?" [Laughter]

I was like, "I don't even have clothes. I've just been here for three days." I didn't have anything but a couple pair of blue jeans. I had to go back to the beach to get my clothes and everything.

So I went to the local store and bought a pair of black pants and a white dress shirt. He said he'd give me a tie, and he did, and I started that next night, kept working for the other company briefly, but I would only work a couple of nights a week here. Then at the six-month mark, I had the opportunity they gave me. He said "Well, do you want to bartend?" Which is all I wanted to do. I was just being what they called a WA, waiter assistant, at that point.

I was like, "Yeah, that'd be great!" Because, now Reavey is big. Reavey is legendary, people are piling through the door to see this guy. He's like a hero. I want to be that guy.

So they said, "You can do the daytime bartending shifts with Wayne," of the legendary "Wayne's Orange Stain," "or we still have the couple of shifts a night, but if you do this, then in a few months we would have you working at night." [Interviewer's note: Wayne is Wayne Russell. "Wayne's Orange Stain" is an in-house nickname for Wayne's Orange Thing, a legendary Highlands original cocktail.]

So I made the decision right then and there. I was like, "All right, I've got to lose the daytime job." Sales is tough. That's when I realized this is sales, but it's sales that are easy for me because they're coming to get it.

So that's how—it was a big party then. It was like everybody had a great time, tons and tons of people in that bar all the time. But it was mostly drinks then, didn't have as much to do with the food.

[1:02:41.8]

Eric Velasco: I hear it would get so packed that the waiters would have to go out the front door and in through the—

[1:02:46.5]

Chris Conner: Yeah, to get to it.

[1:02:47.5]

Eric Velasco: Into the other door to get to the bar, just to be able to serve food.

[1:02:49.8]

Chris Conner: You'd see people walking down the sidewalk with a tray of drinks. [Laughter] It was like, okay. I remember back in those days, the Alabama football games were here in Birmingham as well. They split time. And then the Iron Bowl every year was just absolutely crazy, you know. [The Alabama Crimson Tide college football team played many of its "home" games at Legion Field in Birmingham from the 1920s until the late 1990s. The Iron Bowl matchup between Alabama and Auburn football teams, the Iron Bowl, was held annually at Legion Field from 1948-1987, and periodically until 1998.] When it went on, people would just come piling in here. I think a lot of the popularity of it was that there was only us, a place called Louie Louie, and a couple of restaurant bars around, but for whatever reason, ours became just like a—we were a bar culture and a food culture at that time. But the bar was definitely—it was more of what was going on. It was the energy, it was the just craziness, and then you'd close the doors and this would be all nice and quiet over here. [Interviewer's note: on the dining room side.]

So there was at that point, yeah, definitely a difference between the bar and the restaurant. It began to sort of meld together, I would say, as we got a little busier, but I would say the thing that actually kind of took us to the point where we're like—the city said you had to have a smoking and a nonsmoking section, and there'd be people in here and we'd take an ashtray to the table. [Interviewer's note: That was in 2005. Birmingham City Council banned all indoor smoking in public places in 2012.] Back then, people

would smoke at the table. Well, so we decided to make the bar side, the tables, the smoking section of the restaurant. So that really expanded how many covers we were doing a night. And it also kind of opened up like—then we changed to having a bar menu, which featured like steak sandwiches or burgers, fish sandwiches, things like—and that was kind of short-lived because it turns out that the kitchen was not prepared to do that many steak sandwiches a night.

[1:04:37.6]

Eric Velasco: Around when was this?

[1:04:38.8]

Chris Conner: Oh, late [19]90s since we were closing for lunches, and we opened up very briefly for lunches again in probably 2001, somewhere around there, and we realized what we're doing is we need to be focused on the nighttime, that we need to have one shift in there, because, like I said, if you've seen the kitchen, you know having two shifts overlap in there, like a daytime cooking shift and a nighttime, no, it's not happening.

[1:05:12.1]

Eric Velasco: And originally, it was half the size of what it is now.

[1:05:14.8]

Chris Conner: Right, and had to expand out the back. And then even when I got here, where the big walk-in cooler is at the very back, that wasn't there. So the stove and the convection oven, all that at the top was not there. That was where the walk-in cooler was. [Interviewer's note: The "top" part of the expanded kitchen is elevated, with stairs leading down to the original kitchen, where most orders are cooked.]

So you had what you had downstairs, and that was it, and upstairs was prep or—I mean, there's a little closet that I've been here long enough that I still call the old dessert room, because that's where they plated up the dessert. [Laughter] And that's what we went with, you know. You had this little room and the waiters would plate up some, and you had the pastry person in the back, pastry chef in the back, maybe doing stuff. They would kind of get it out to you. But you do the best you can with what you have, and that's what we did. Luckily, we were able to find space. I mean, it feels like a NASA project back there, you know. It's just like, okay, we've got to have this, we've got to have that, and when we took out that walk-in cooler, were able to put in a steam kettle or like a stockpot, and that really opened the way that we started doing—like that we're able to make massive amounts of stock. Then you can make that an integral part of your cooking.

As well, I mean, we were able to—the first time the bar could actually have like an eye on the stove. You could go up there if you needed to make simple syrups, if you need to make things like that. Originally, even—oh, god, till about [19]99—and it's in the book—Miss Verba's Pimento Cheese, we served that as a bar snack, but who had to make it? Me. [Laughter] So I'd be out there and I'd be like grilling up these croutons and making this pimento cheese. Then all I was succeeding in doing was really making the

rest of the chefs mad, like, "You're messing up every—get out of my space." [Interviewer's note: "The book" is Frank Stitt's first cookbook "*Southern Table*," which is based on Highlands recipes. It was published in 2004. "Verba" is Verba Ford (now Dupass), who like her cousin Dolester Miles, was an original employee at Highlands.]

So it's very tight quarters, but like I said, I think it works. I mean, it really does. It works for them. They've figured out their system, and I guess because of mother of necessity, you know, necessity is the mother of—these guys have developed a system that may be the most efficient way to run the system or to do what they do. They just didn't know it was accidentally going to happen. Just like behind the bar, you've got to look at this, look at this, and look at this. Well, leading to success is not necessary, and you've got to trim that. You've got to trim from your motions to, like—it's just an evolutionary process, it really is.

[1:08:04.1]

Eric Velasco: It sounds like first-year law school. It's a weeding-out process, too.

[1:08:06.3]

Chris Conner: Right, yeah, and you have to—I mean, and every new thing that you roll out, every drink that you try, some are going to fall flat, some are maybe, as the chef likes to call them, maybe a "little sophisticated" for some, and we have to be willing to understand that, okay, we're going back to the drawing board with this or we want to hear remarks, we want to hear people say this is what that drink should taste like versus what that drink tastes like.

And maybe to a purist, you're into making these drinks, you feel like, "Wow, let's just add simple syrup." That's everybody's answer to everything, right? But you also have to remember it's their drink. They're the one that's drinking it, so don't—I mean you hear the knock on bars where people turn up their noses, all snobby, at you. You can't do that. You really can't do that in anything. You can't just look at somebody like, "Pfft. What do you know?" And if you go to places and you have that happen to you, then you understand why we don't do that here.

[1:09:14.9]

Eric Velasco: Because that's another part of "the Highlands way." You're the fanciest, most revered restaurant in town, but you don't act like it.

[1:09:21.1]

Chris Conner: Let's hope. I mean, that's what we strive for, I think, and that's to—like I said, people come into a restaurant bar like this and they maybe think, "I'm a little over my head," but they don't understand they're not. Nobody is. We hope this turns out to be the greatest experience you've ever had. And when somebody sends you an email or if you get a letter from Wisconsin for somebody that felt like they had such a great time that they sent a thank-you note, that, to me, is like, wow! What we're doing, it really does affect people. It does. And for years I thought that was maybe a little bit overblown, but the further I've gone, the more I realize people are affected by experiences in life, and maybe the thing that you want to do is have the positive effect, not the negative one. I

will say the negative, they're far more likely to write something. But the positive people, I mean, it's a very great job. It really is.

[1:10:34.8]

Eric Velasco: Let me back up a bit. You were talking about training on different liquors, all those kinds of things. When would this take place? Would this be as part of the 4:30 staff meeting?

[1:10:47.5]

Chris Conner: No, we do separate trainings. Like our wine tastings, typically—well, you kind of have to work around the schedule that people are going to be doing the tastings with you, but we're fortunate that we get a lot of wine makers in town that come here because they're having wine dinners here, or we do the Pinot Camp here. So a lot of people come to this town to be part of the wine culture here, and if they're in town, we typically, you know, that's when it really is great being us, because we get first bill. We're like, "Okay, [unintelligible] is in town. He's going to come by here and taste us on these wines." And that's a wonderful thing, is to be able to get that kind of attention.

So we schedule that separately. Typically, we just tell the waiters to be here a half hour earlier so they can get the setup done, and the servers, everybody kind of gets in a little early. Then you'll have his undivided attention instead of him looking at a bunch of guys who are like, "I still have to get my station set up," you know.

So that's the same with the liquor, same with–the beers, beer, except for the local beer makers, you don't run into that. You don't typically have to have that. You can get

enough information that if we're putting one on, we'll say this is the style of beer, this is what it's like. And our beer literally has changed. We started going to draft beer, which all my life I've always said that's only the real indication of how a beer is, not the stuff in the bottle. I mean, I understand it's good. I still love bottled beer. But the draft beer, it's a little more genuine to me.

So we do local and semi-local for our taps, and we can get guys to come in that are so happy to get on our draft because we sell four times as much draft beer as we do anything in the bottle, and people are excited about getting in here and getting their names right there. If you look at our bar, the front "L" of the bar, there's four big tap handles that are directly in your way [Laughter] when you're trying to serve food, but it's also front and center so people get to see it. So we sell a lot of beer based on that alone. They're just like looking at the tap handles, and people, especially people that are just starting out or small micro brews, people want to get on that. They want to have that tap.

[1:13:20.7]

Eric Velasco: I remember Jason Malone and Michael Sellers of Good People talking about how validating it was to them that Frank Stitt was one of their first accounts. [Good People Brewing opened in 2008, Birmingham's first modern brewery.]

[1:13:30.5]

Chris Conner: Yeah.

[1:13:31.4]

Eric Velasco: And that just seems like "Okay, we may make it in this business."

[1:13:36.1]

Chris Conner: Right. [Laughter] Well, we still have that first tap handle, and he's asked me if he can have that back, but no. [Laughter] Alabama license plates.

[1:13:45.0]

Eric Velasco: And Sellers made that in his workshop. [The original tap handles for Good People Brewing Co., which opened in 2008 about a block from Highlands, were hand-ladled wood with replica state license plates and the brewery's yellow pickup truck logo.]

[1:13:47.7]

Chris Conner: Yep. [Laughter] Which is great. We're going to hold on to it, sorry.

[1:13:53.6]

Eric Velasco: But Highlands has had that effect in other areas of alcohol, too. What impact has Highlands had, for example, on the wines that you can buy independently of the restaurant, in stores and things like that here?

[1:14:11.7]

Chris Conner: Oh, yeah. No, absolutely. I mean, this could take hours in and of itself, but wines that we put on by the glass here, I mean, anybody that knows Chef knows that he is a huge wine guy. I mean, he is as passionate about it as just about any wine grower

I've ever met, and he believes that our wine list—I don't want to put words in his—should be fluid, it should work with what we're doing. It doesn't matter where it's necessarily from, as long as the product itself is fantastic.

So, regionally speaking, we do want things that pair up with our food. We don't ever want something that's going to overshadow things. But for that reason, we brought a lot of wines now that I will say people say they're household names almost, our styles, like Sancerre. When we first brought Sancerre on board down here, people thought we were crazy. But, I mean, when I first got here, nobody had heard of Sancerres. I mean, nobody was doing the Spanish wines. Then we started getting some Gran, Crianza, some Spanish wines in.

Things that we put on our wines by the glass list will translate and you will see them. They will go to—they spread. I mean, we are big proponents of Austrian-style wines, the Grüners, the Pinot Blancs, even the dry Rieslings. To me, those are just fantastic wines, especially the Rieslings. They can age well. And people think Riesling, it's like Chablis in the seventies. They have this terrible connotation that it's going to be some sweet syrupy, you know, something that their German grandfather would send. It's not like that. They're extremely complex wines and they're also very food-friendly.

And putting this on means it's a matter of literally time. I swear to you that when I go somewhere else in the town, I'm like, "I remember when we had that on by the glass," or when we had that on. And that is because people do watch us for the changes, because I do feel like maybe there's a lot of fantastic food in this town and there are some good wine lists, but our wine list is amazing. It's beyond compare.

[1:16:44.1]

Eric Velasco: How much did you know about wine before you started here?

[1:16:46.0]

Chris Conner: Absolutely zero. I knew what d'Oro was, which was a really inexpensive version of Riunite that I could buy and put it on ice [Laughter], but nothing. I mean, I just came in completely fresh-faced, you know. I didn't know anything about wine. I knew what Milwaukee's Best beer was. But I also knew that, you know—and this place, I mean, it has evolved a lot in the beer and the liquor selection, but the wine was always one of those things. Like, I remember the first time I tasted a Bandol, a really good Bandol, and I thought, "Wow!" Okay, so that's different. I get it. I understand where this love of wine comes from. Sort of it's a living, breathing thing, it really is, and it evolves with its age and, you know, people build it. It's a science. It's a science and a passion all at the same time. I mean, I don't know how you have the patience and the fortitude, because a lot of these guys, people think that they're making just—some big wine makers, sure, they're making money hand over fist, but so are a lot of big chain restaurants.

The people that are doing it when they don't know what their crop's going to be that year, what their yield's going to be, how bad the weather can mess them up, they're doing it, you know, a lot of cases in the beginning just barely surviving. They're just getting it going. But they feel so compelled to do it that that's maybe the kind of thing that everybody should take a lesson from, you know. If you really feel that sort of passion for things, as Frank calls it, beauty, I mean, like he says if you see beauty in things—

maybe I see humor in things. I look at things and I want to see the humor in everything, no matter how bad. You know, the ship is going down, there's got to be something funny on there. There's got to be something funny, because if not, then what's the point in doing all this? You've got to laugh. You've got to enjoy. You want to, you know—and this—I mean, everything, I guess it's all just sort of a metaphor for life, but you've got to fail in order to accomplish anything.

You have to understand how to laugh in the face of some really bad situations, and you just want to kind of translate that to what you do back here. That way, "back here," I mean, I'm not behind the bar. [Laughter] My whole life is back here. But in that way, it's kind of like that. You just want to—you know, you kind of want to—and people look at you sometimes and they know, especially since the Beard Award, that it's so crazy busy, and I feel for the people that don't get to—that I don't get to talk to as much as I used to, and that's, you know—it'll die down eventually, but in the meantime, I really like that whole talking, that interaction, that kind of getting together with people and finding everybody that you meet here you get to develop a little bit of a relationship with, and you do it by finding the common ground, the things you can both speak on, whether it's sports, whether it's food, whether it's wine or whether it's kids. I mean, every human on the planet has something in common with the guy next to him, and if you just find that, you're okay. [Interviewer's note: Someone briefly fires up a vacuum in the background. Even though the restaurant is closed, people are cleaning, stocking and working in the upstairs office.]

[1:20:19.4]

Eric Velasco: Had you done much bartending before you started here?

[1:20:21.4]

Chris Conner: Never. I'd never done *any*.

[1:20:23.4]

Eric Velasco: Wow.

[1:20:23.4]

Chris Conner: I started as a busboy here. [Laughter] I'm just like, "Wow!" And literally when they gave me the opportunity, like I said, seeing Mick, Mick was maybe larger-than-life personality and that kind of thing, you're just like, "Wow, that guy is cool." And we'd become like best buddies in the three, four months I was working here, and he was wanting to get me in there, but it came down to, with anything, you need to make baby steps.

So we had a daytime bar at that point, we were doing lunches, and I was able to start off making a handful of drinks, but mostly iced teas and Chardonnays, and that was a lot of what your daytime service was, but it gave you a feel for the bar, the lay of the land, how things were set up, and then you can start—you'll get like your intro-level drinks, like your Dewar's and sodas or your vodka OJ's, and then for a while you'll get a more complicated one. You'll learn to use your drink recipes. You'll find you'll go in there, look it up. Now it's so nice because you've got it on your phone. Before, I've got

this whole line of books up there, and you're just like, "Oh, man, where would that be?" So I let my *Playboy Bartending Guide*, it's dog-eared, it's so worn out.

But I built up and I worked my way into being able to do the night shifts, and it was—I mean, it was really kind of extraordinary. It was an amazing thing because Mick and I, we meshed so well together that it was like some weird—you know, it was like a movie, but it wasn't "Cocktail." [Laughter] But it was just like, okay, we've got this great—we'd laugh, we'd have a great time. People liked to see us joking around, people liked to see us, and so it was literally just lots of—throngs of people just kind of hanging out.

You know, with the bar biz, you're going to have slower nights, so that's when you would have people come in and have food up there. But eventually, as I was saying earlier, when you had to have the—then smoking was banned altogether, that was the only time that I worked in this restaurant that I remember a real slow period, and that was because it was only banned in restaurants within the city of Birmingham, so you could go half a mile to Homewood and smoke. You could go to any bar. You could go two blocks away and smoke in a bar, but you couldn't smoke here because we had food.

And so it took about eighteen months, I think, before the rest of the municipalities kind of caught up with it and they banned it as well. Those eighteen months, we just had very little bar business at all. Even people that didn't smoke were like, "I don't smoke unless I drink." Well, you're probably here because you're having a drink. And even, as I always say, I mean, maybe only 20 percent of the population smokes, but when you're going out to meet some people to have drinks, at least one of those people is a smoker, back then, maybe not so much now, but back then, at least one would be a smoker and

they wanted to go somewhere where they could smoke. So it was kind of an explosion, and it came back around. It took about two years, and once everybody was into the smoking ban, then we were right back up rolling, busy bar.

[1:24:00.6]

Eric Velasco: Was it more bar then? You've talked about the evolution in the bar.

[1:24:05.0]

Chris Conner: Yeah. No, it was definitely—well, during that two years, what we did was we decided to "Okay, let's go ahead and focus on not doing steak sandwiches, but, rather, the full menu at the bar. Let's focus on having a lot of diners there, people that didn't get a reservation, people that didn't really know where they were going to eat that day." That's me all the time. I mean, I know I don't think a month in advance. So this is the opportunity that we seized to kind of make this into a bigger dining thing. It's very New York in its style. Literally when you get here on Saturday, there'll be people waiting to get in the door, and within thirty minutes, the first twenty-two people will be down at the bar. Before you ever seat a table in the dining room, you've got to go tell the kitchen, "Got twenty-two coming at you, guys." [Laughter]

So that's where we are now. It's primarily food, not a whole lot of cocktail crowd, not a whole lot of drinkers, and I think that—I don't know. I mean, I don't know what to say, but I think it's wonderful and at the same time it's a little bit sad, but it's a wonderful thing, because a lot of what got me into the business was that sort of craziness, and now there's still—there's camaraderie and there's fun and there's—but it's not, you know—

like I remember one night a guy had a girl on his shoulders to try to get the attention, and she was like ten people back. She's, like, shouting drink orders, and I'm just like, "Wow. Why am I doing this? This is insane." But it was also exhilarating. I was younger then. I had legs then. So now the evolution of it is that maybe I'm getting older, we're getting older, and we're ready to just kind of take-it-to-the-rocking-chair mentality, but it's so busy now, I mean, we're way busier than we've ever been as far as, like, overall production, but not drinkers. Back then, you know, it wasn't two-dollar Bud Lite Night or anything like that, but you sold a lot of alcohol, and it's a hard—

[1:26:22.4]

Eric Velasco: What was a crazy night or what were the crazy nights of the week?

[1:26:25.2]

Chris Conner: Well, and it still is to some degree, Tuesday is like the big bar night where you don't really have a whole lot of people eating, still. You still have a lot of the seats that are people just going there to have drinks, and that's just a tradition. There are reasons [Laughter] that we're not allowed to speak of, but it was, I think, primarily because, like I said, we were one of the few bars down here, and people didn't—we were closed Sunday and Monday, so on Tuesday night, they were anxious to get back to us. They were like, "This is where it is." So Tuesday night it also became like a place where a lot of people, yeah, went to talk about things. Tuesday night has always been sort of the—it's the one Happy Hour crowd night that we've ever really maintained. Tuesdays and Fridays. On Fridays—I always say Tuesday and Friday are exactly the same, except

on Tuesdays people went home at 9:00 o'clock, on Fridays they figure they don't have to get up tomorrow, so they would kind of stick around and they would be the long haul kind of people. But Tuesdays and Fridays are definitely the busier of the bar nights. Even now, I will say Friday now is a lot more dinners, do a lot of dinners.

Saturday has always been what I would call—except back in the day when there was football games in town, then it'd be crazy. It would just be insane. But now it's more special occasion people, I mean people that come out, and for a long time, the football Saturdays kind of killed us on Saturday, but over the last two or three years, it's become busier and busier and busier because people realize, "Oh, I can get in there and sit at the bar during football Saturdays."

I have these people that are professors down at UAB, and we kind of struck up a friendship several years ago because they're big baseball fans, but they can't stand football, and so I would definitely say I lean more towards baseball, and they would come in during football Saturdays so we could talk about—they're Cleveland Indian fans, so they were part of that World Series. [Interviewer's note: In the 2016 World Series, the Cleveland Indians played Conner's beloved Chicago Cubs. Chicago took the Series, 4-3, winning its first World Series since 1908.] But they were like, "This is fantastic! We can get up to the bar and we can actually talk to you, we can have dinner, and we don't have to worry about the madness of the—." And so that was like four years ago. Next year, it became a little more difficult. Last year, basically impossible. The other night they came in and I saw them like ten people deep on a Saturday night, and they were like, "Thank god we got a table!" [Laughter]

I was like, "Yeah." Everything's an evolution, it really is. It's not necessarily change for change's sake, but you have to kind of go with what's going on, and that's what we try to do, and keep the business up.

[1:29:18.6]

Eric Velasco: The old Tuesdays were not just "Let's Make a Deal" nights; they were also "Let's Meet Folks" night.

[1:29:24.4]

Chris Conner: Yeah.

[1:29:25.1]

Eric Velasco: Somewhat of a "m-e-a-t" or "m-e-e-t" market.

[1:29:28.0]

Chris Conner: Well, yeah. In fact, I would say Tuesdays and Fridays. I would say probably Tuesdays there was another aspect of the crowd that was—this might be off the record. [Laughter]

[1:29:47.6]

Eric Velasco: You might want to hold that story, then. There's no pausing this thing here.

[1:29:49.2]

Chris Conner: [laughs] I gotcha.

[1:29:52.9]

Eric Velasco: We can leave the names out.

[1:29:54.6]

Chris Conner: Gotcha.

[1:29:54.9]

Eric Velasco: The guilty.

[1:29:56.1]

Chris Conner: Well, let's just say that there is a certain thing that goes on in the state of Alabama that makes it second only to Las Vegas in the actual amount of money that is spent on it, and a lot of that occurs in Birmingham. And so as old gamblers say, what do you do? You lose a lot on Saturday, you lose more on Sunday, and then you double up on Monday. Well, Sunday and Monday, we were closed. So there was a lot of people, let's just say, that came in to make amends for their gambling debts that weekend. [Laughter]

[1:30:38.8]

Eric Velasco: They're either celebrating or commiserating.

[1:30:41.9]

Chris Conner: Exactly, exactly. So that was kind of a lot of what the Tuesday night was. It was always what we call a boys' club, an ol' boys' club, and there's still a bunch of them that still come in, crazy enough. I mean, a lot of them have died. There's been very little sort of supplanting or replacing these old-school Tuesday nighters, but they still—I mean, if you go in tomorrow night, you'll see fifteen of them. One's probably ninety. He's been doing it forever, owns local car businesses. And he probably shouldn't be out, to be honest with you. He's not as sharp as a tack anymore. But he still makes his little—this is his thing. This is his vigil. He comes here to—like, "I'm going to go to Highlands on Tuesday night, even if I don't remember how to drive there. I'll get there. Somebody's going to take care of it."

[1:31:30.5]

Eric Velasco: Because it's a club here.

[1:31:31.0]

Chris Conner: Yes, it is a huge boys' club, especially on Tuesday night, and I'll say Friday night would be the night that I would call more the "meet market" night. That was a night, like I said, people come out and then they didn't have to go home. But that's, I would say, universal in the bar business. Friday nights, tough night, especially if you're a place that doesn't close till 5:00 in the morning, and, luckily, we would have the good sense to pull the plug. Even for us, I mean, there were nights I'd walk out of here at 3:30, 4:00 o'clock in the morning on a Friday night, just whipped, you know, and you'd have

to get up and go do it again the next day. [Interviewer's note: Official closing time is 10 p.m.]

So for that reason, I grew to appreciate and respect Tuesday night, because literally come 9:00 o'clock, they knew their wives would be looking for them. [Laughter] "I can't just be at the office or I can't just be talking business for this long." So they would, you know, they would pack it up. But the great thing about it is all these guys, literally I know all their wives, and they've all been married forever and they're all just a bunch of—I mean, they're just a bunch of blowhards that talk a lot about a lot of nothing, and it's just their chance to—it's like front porch living for these guys. So that, to me, that's still cool. You know, every one of them—I mean, a few of them are widowed. One's widowed twice. Yeah. And you're just like, "Wow, man." In the time that I've known him, that's the sad part.

So, you know, it's a crazy culture, but I won't say that it's near as crazy—I have worked in other bars since I started working here, like a pinch-hit. I've worked all of our bars, the Bottega, Bottega Café, and the Chez Fonfon. I've also worked at a couple other bars in town. When I see the level of insanity of what they have to deal with, you're just like, "Wow." It's a new respect for how well we've managed to kind of reel it in and keep it—but I think that's also the clientele. The clientele has a certain amount of respect. They may leave here and go act like insane people, but while they're here, they kind of respect the walls of the place. They understand it.

[1:33:51.8]

Eric Velasco: From your perspective, I guess that's how you're able to have married-with-children staff.

[1:33:56.6]

Chris Conner: Yeah, exactly.

[1:33:58.0]

Eric Velasco: Can't do that if you're working till 5:00 in the morning routinely.

[1:34:00.2]

Chris Conner: No. I mean, the guy that's only been here six years, Michael, he started a lot of these bars, like a couple places up the street, and he worked at the big what I would call *the* "meet market" was called Louie Louie, and he started there as a bar back when he was nineteen years old, and until he came to work for us, he was still getting off at 5:00 o'clock in the morning. He has a fourteen-year-old kid and, you know, he just was like, "I've got to make a change where I'm not leaving work to go take my kid to school." So this job allows you to do that. You can actually—and plus it frees up time for you to be able to hang with your kids, you know, not just during the summer, but if they need help at school.

Like if they're up for a parent volunteer signup sheet, guess what? My name's always on it and it's not necessarily because I did it [Laughter], but I have free time during the day. So I can go by and give a pumpkin-carving class to third graders or I can, you know, go to—you make life work for you, you know. You take your schedule. There

have been plenty of times, especially when I had two kids within twenty months and I was basically playing the stay-at-home-dad role during the morning, but after getting out of here late at night, and so there were plenty of times I thought, "Wow! It's time to just go back to daytime work to kind of get normal again."

You know, I've got to give a lot of the credit to my wife. She's like, "You know, is that something—are you going to be happy doing that? Are you going to be happy doing this? Are you going to be happy, or do we just need to figure out a way to make what's working right now a little better?" And so we did. She cut down to part-time work for the first four years of the kids—or until my oldest turned four years old. Then we felt like we could socialize them a little more, put them into like the MDO.

So you have to—if you're doing this, it's not for everybody. You can't do it if you're not committed to the idea of doing it, and you may, every night when you get off, you may question yourself, "Why do I do this, again?" You know, you're saying that, but literally you know you're coming back. You know you're going to do it. It's not because of inertia. It's because of, like, "What would I do if I was doing something else?"

[1:36:26.4]

Eric Velasco: And you're making a decent living, I would assume.

[1:36:28.4]

Chris Conner: Yeah.

[1:36:29.4]

Eric Velasco: A fun job.

[1:36:30.5]

Chris Conner: Yeah. You're sending your kids to school, you're making house payments, you're living—in every other aspect, you're living what would appear to be just that normal, you know, suburban life. But then you come here every night and it's just—things are different. Less so now. I'd say it's a little more—a little calmer in the ways of who we have in here versus like back when it was people sitting on their shoulders, like screaming at you. That's a whole different thing.

[1:37:05.9]

Eric Velasco: And as you mentioned, y'all are a lot older too.

[1:37:07.6]

Chris Conner: Yes, so we have evolved, and maybe the restaurant evolved because we did, because there are days when you have to stretch just to get out of bed. You think, "Well, okay."

[1:37:22.3]

Eric Velasco: Walk me through your typical day and your typical week.

[1:37:26.2]

Chris Conner: Well, a typical day is pretty easy. I take the kids to school, come home. Depending on whether I worked the night before, I'll take a nap briefly, like an hour and a half, then get up and start kind of preparing everything for what goes on.

I get here around 2:00, so getting in the door here at 2:00, I'm signing in orders, I am placing any order that has to be made, get that done before 4:00 o'clock. So you kind of—your first thing when I hit the door, I think, "All right, I've got to get the door open so the deliveries can get in." They come in, start signing those in.

Then you start at that point putting out the fires, like, "That's not the right thing." [Laughter] "You sent us the wrong bottle altogether. It's on our wines-by-the-glass list." So, just trying to—once you get those details hammered out, then you start setting up the bar.

The bar, it's mechanical now. We've got it down to a system like everybody—and it's great. That's another great thing about working with people as long as we have. It's like I know I go in, this is what I do. I'm going to get these down, get that down, get everything down, and basically the other bartenders show up at 2:30. We're open at 4:00. So everybody kind of—it's like watching a dance, you know. Like, we're doing these things so that we can stay out of each other's way, so we don't impede the other one's ability to get set up. We've got to have this kind of set up for that. One guy's over here cutting fruit, one guy's sorting out the fruit bowls, and then we have another guy that comes in to unload the wine, to unload the beer. It's just about—sort of about—I don't even know. More like a folk dance than a—but, you know, just kind of swing your partner 'round and 'round. You just get out of the way. And you know that it's coming.

Our favorite saying in the restaurant is, "Behind ya!" or, "Behind ya hot!" That way they know you're coming in hot.

And you just—like we have—I mean, people ask, "Why do you guys get there so early to set up for the bar?" Well, you have to remember ours is not like—you just don't just go grab juice and stick it in the well. You don't take last night's fruit and put it out. You don't—and plus we set up the oyster bar for Guadalupe because he doesn't need two more hours of work. That guy's here like eighty hours a week.

[1:40:00.6]

Eric Velasco: Because he's checking in food, fish, and all that early on.

[1:40:04.2]

Chris Conner: He's here early.

[1:40:03.6]

Eric Velasco: He's the early morning guy.

[1:40:04.9]

Chris Conner: Yes, he's the early morning guy, and he leaves at 10:00 o'clock at night. So we try to—he'll bring the oysters out and typically leaves me a list or puts them in a way that I know what oysters have changed, what oysters need to come off. Then we put out the sauces, make sauces for him, and kind of get all that ready, put that in his oyster well, and then he'll come out and bring—he does the shrimp and all that during the

morning as well. He cooks that off. Then he does, you know, literally what I consider just like yeoman's work, because he takes our crab claws, every one of the crab claws that we sell, and he hand-picks any little nit or shell piece that is on that crab claw. Now, where else are you going to find somebody that will do that? I mean, you just look and he goes through—I mean, we sell a ton of these things a night, and he goes through five pounds at a time and individually picks every crab claw. So if you tell me that he doesn't get that what he's doing is kind of important, yeah, that guy, he definitely gets it. I just want to—I don't want to be in his way. When he starts working, he's like some crazy—he's like a mad scientist-type thing, but if you look at his product, his oysters look fantastic, and his area is always so clean.

I mean, it's nice to have somebody that professional who, you know—but it's also fun to kind of cut up with him, because, like, we have one guy that works with us, and I can just say, "You don't like it, stab him," and he'll jab him in the side. [Laughter] So, you know, you've got to have levity back there or else we aren't all crazy, we'd all go insane. But that's kind of the thing. You've got to laugh. And sometimes when everybody's just buckled down and we're so in our own little zone, nobody's going to get to—the customers aren't going to have a good time if you aren't at least somewhat having a good time, so just laugh, you know. It could be whatever joke you want to make, let's just say. But whatever gets people to take their shoulders from way up here to down here for a second and just relax and just be like, "Okay, okay, that's right. Now I'm here. This is what I've got to do," and pay attention to the people.

You know, sometimes inadvertently the customers—I think a lot of the time the customers like to hear that sort of banter between us. In fact, I know, like on Tuesdays the

guy that works with me, he only works one night and that's Tuesday, and it's just because it's fun, it's crazy, and so we are always making cracks at each other, and that's a large part of the people that we built in on Tuesdays are people that are here to kind of laugh about it, they just like watch us kind of pick at each other and say things.

[1:43:02.7]

Eric Velasco: When they're ten deep, I guess it helps too.

[1:43:03.8]

Chris Conner: Yeah, and you're just like, you know—I always laughingly call him a retired Chippendale dancer. [Laughter] But, you know, it's that kind of thing. You've got to put everything—you frame it up right, and literally we actually talk about this. It's like sometimes like in the dining room there's going to be—you want familiarity, you want comfort level, but there's that sort of air of formality over here, whereas the same people will walk fifteen feet away—if you see Goren Avery in here talking to a table and he's Mr. Professional, makes little cracks, little jokes, then he walks fifteen feet away and he sees somebody sitting at the bar, whole different guy, you know. He's laughing, just cracking up.

So there is that sort of—we understand that there is formality in here, but we kind of interject or inject a little bit of levity, little bit of—but in the bar, we try to not be like—you understand that there is a time, like if somebody's up there that maybe doesn't want to be up there, it's Mr. so-and-so, Mrs. So-and-so, "How are you doing this evening?" Nothing but professional service from us. "I'm sorry if the people next to you

are obnoxious." [Laughter] And that happens too. I mean, that's what you're going to get with a bar. You're going to have crazy people that show up in flip-flops and baseball caps and people that are sitting there in a suit.

[1:44:30.0]

Eric Velasco: The guy with a suitcase because he just flew in from the airport.

[1:44:32.1]

Chris Conner: Right, yeah, exactly. So I'm putting stuff in the back. That happens more often than you would think, and all of it kind of blends together. And I literally actually gave an interview about this very thing. I love the blend that we have. I think that it's fantastic that we have the guy in the baseball cap. There are some that have gone over the top, I'll admit freely, but that's their right. They're individuals.

They get to—but then you have the—like, literally we had this doctor who would only eat at the bar for a long time, and he would call us up and block off like five or six seats, and he was just the king of formality. And he would sit there, he'd have all these seats, and he'd have his grandkids sitting at the bar. Yes. So I had to completely change gears. I mean, I would have to go from what I'm doing thirty feet away to coming over there, and they were all very proper, had to sit up like so, and he would—it's just crazy. But I found the common ground was that both of his kids play tennis. I played tennis growing up. So both of his grandkids—one of them was actually being scouted. He was going to the Bollettieri down in Boca, wherever it was. Not Boca. Ponte Vedra. [Interviewer's note: Nick Bollettieri founded his tennis academy in Bradenton, FL.] So I

was able to, because of that, because this guy was a tough nut to crack. I mean, that's kind of what you're looking for. You're looking for the angle that gets you in. And this guy was not that kind of guy. He still comes in, it's just that we can't save the seats for him at the bar anymore. You have to find the angle that will at least somewhat endear him enough to you, like you endear you enough to them, that they're willing to let you in a little bit. If they give you an opening, I guarantee you can make them a fan of yours by the end of the day. People love to be asked questions about themselves, don't they? So I suppose you would know that. [Laughter]

[1:46:50.8]

Eric Velasco: Well, I've never employed that technique in dating or professionally. [Laughter]

When did the oyster bar—has that been a part of the bar area the entire time you've been here?

[1:47:03.3]

Chris Conner: Oh, yeah, since I've been here. Well, since they opened the back side, which I'm not 100 percent sure on this. You'd have to check the dates, but it was before me, but I believe—so we opened in November of [19]82, and I believe they acquired the back half of the bar in [19]86 and had it all set up to go. I think the oyster bar, when it opened, that was a large part of why they opened it, was to be able to have an oyster bar. But when I started, it was one and only one kind of oyster, and that was Apalachicola. I mean, anybody that lives here knows the problems that have been going on with

Apalachicola and massive strides Auburn University is helping them make in restoring Gulf seafood. It's inspirational and it's really nice. Some of those oysters, the ones that are coming in look like something you would get from New Brunswick, the same sort of salty, size, minerality to them.

[1:48:02.2]

Eric Velasco: And the advancements in oyster farming in this state have just been huge.

[1:48:07.5]

Chris Conner: Yeah. Back to the point, like we want to know about our food, well, we brought in the guys from Auburn and the people that were doing this to do a class on what oysters were. So you may think you know about oysters, but what you don't know about oysters, I mean, it's amazing. I really had no idea that they all came—every oyster in the United States came from the same seed. I didn't know that. How long their changes are, how long they're grown, what way they're grown, float bags or beds, and their diet. Basically, the colder waters changes it. So it's amazing. The great thing about that is, okay, so if I get excited about hearing about it, because I really had no idea about that, I just thought that this oyster was this way because of this, I always assumed it was something to do with the water. Colder waters produce a smaller, sweeter oyster. Well, that's because of their diet. So that's the reason. But the way in which they harvest them and the fact that they're all from the same exact seed, to me when you see two oysters that are as different as they can possibly be and they're from the same seed that makes you realize that, okay, this is pretty complicated stuff. So Auburn's down there doing a

great job, and the people that are involved in it, not just Auburn, but the farmers themselves, the people that are helping out with all that.

But when they put that in, I think it kind of became a little bit of a game changer. I mean, it really brought people—it brought people up to the bar to see it. People would sit there and order oysters, and for a little bit, like—I mean, there are people that still come in, will ask like, "Can I order oysters if I'm not sitting at the oyster bar?"

I'm like, "Yeah, oysters at the table, yeah, absolutely. You can have them wherever." [Interviewer's note: The oyster selection, as well as "Lupe" Castillo's other seafood starters, is listed at the top of menus that every Highlands guest receives.] But I think for a while, that became sort of a niche-y thing to do, was to come up and to have the oysters. And we had this guy back then, he was huge, his name was Rod Clark, and he—I mean, even Lupe will tell you, this guy was just lightning fast. He can blaze through it. They weren't as pretty as what Lupe puts out there. Like, I mean, every one of Lupe's is like sending away a child, you know. He makes sure that it's leveled out, it's cut just so, and it's a beautiful oyster. Every oyster looks like it's going in a picture. Rod would be doing, you know, thirty dozen a night, but he'd be doing them pretty quick. You'd get them out there, looked good, we were very big on the presentation even then, but nothing like what Lupe does, and those are all Apalachicolas. So you'd see this guy over there just hashing these things out, and he had arms that were like tree trunks. I always said, man, thank God he's on my side, you know. [Laughters]

When he left, we went through—it was terrible. We were trying to find people that could do it and people that would do it, and let's be honest, it's not the most, like, glamorous job, and it's very hard. I went through a period where I had to shuck, and if

Lupe was off or something was up, I would still be the pinch-hit oyster shucker. Luckily, I had a tennis elbow injury, so I don't get to do that anymore. [Laughter] Have to put that on somebody else. But it's a hard job, and Lupe just kind of—for four or five years, actually, Lupe's cousin was doing it, and moved, and Lupe was already working here. I think Lupe had gotten him the job. He just kind of stepped into it, so then he went from working all day to working all day and all night. So got to give him hats off to that. I mean, he's just tireless.

[1:51:55.0]

Eric Velasco: And his family helps him out during the day too?

[1:51:56.9]

Chris Conner: Yeah, yeah. Until recently, Niellie [phonetic], his daughter, moved back to Mexico about six months ago to go to school there because she was having problems getting everything situated here, but, yeah, she worked here for years. His son, Uriel, worked there, and his wife, Bernadine [phonetic], they all worked. [Interviewer's note: They still work there.] So it's like—so he found a way to not be separated from his family was to bring his entire family to work with him. [Laughter] I always tell my kids I'm going to do that. I'm like, "Man, you guys need to get down there and start humping some barrels of ice," get them behind the bar. It's like, "No." [Laughter]

[1:52:40.3]

Eric Velasco: But it does reflect this is a workplace. There is very much a family atmosphere here.

[1:52:40.3]

Chris Conner: Oh, yeah. I mean, when I was the bar manager—I was actually the manager that took care of everything—I had two kids that were young, and that's when everything was—so I had to back off being a manager, and that's where Mr. Gilpin comes in. And my wife went to part-time work, but I would be here all the time and I would have one baby on one hip, and people laugh because I would be setting up, and when the oyster well was empty, I would stand the two-year-old in the oyster well so that I could keep an eye on him. [Laughter] And I would cut fruit there right beside him.

Then they got involved. I mean, we would be making the cocktail sauce. Like I remember the first evil prank that my older son ever pulled was we were down here making sauces one day and setting up the bar, and my youngest was probably three, and the older one's like five at this point, and so I was building the cocktail sauce and I'd just poured all the Tabasco on top of it and was getting ready to whisk it all together, when the younger one comes up. He goes, "What's that?"

And the older one says, "Ketchup."

And he goes in and he gets a big fingerful of the ketchup with the Tabasco on it. Within ten seconds, as I'm getting the whisk and turn around, he's screaming, scraping his tongue. It's like, "All right, that's it. It's funny, but you're in time-out." [Laughter]

But, yeah, people bring their kids in to set up. I mean, that's been kind of a longstanding thing. Whatever you need to do, we'll try to work with you so you can be a part of this. That's very definitely family oriented.

[1:54:32.1]

Eric Velasco: Because it seems to be very important to Frank and Pardis in creating that atmosphere in the workplace.

[1:54:37.9]

Chris Conner: Oh, absolutely, yeah. I mean, Matt, who is the beverage director, bar manager, he has two girls that are, I'll say, a handful, and he knows it, and they're absolutely crazy, but they're in here all the time. They'll be here starting next week because it's Christmas break, and you get to see poor Matt pull his hair out. [Laughter] I'm like, you know, when they're that age, I love that age, but now that I look back on it, I'm like, how did I survive that age? It's insane. And his kids are roughly the same; I think they're twenty-two months apart.

And the other person I would say we were bringing in to try it, from Bottega to be a bartender, he's got two kids.

[1:55:25.0]

Eric Velasco: What's his name?

[1:55:27.0]

Chris Conner: Chris Stovall. His wife works in the café, so they split time, where like if one of them's working that shift, the other one can't, so they will divide it up so that one will be off to have the kids. And his kids are much younger. They're like seven and five. But, you know, I mean, it's because we can kind of work around these things, you know. We're not here to put anybody's life in peril. We want you to work here, but we also know you've got family. And without family, the world doesn't continue and we don't have future customers. So you need to concentrate on that. We want you to concentrate on that. At the same time, sometimes you look at the people that have the young kids, and they're just absolutely, you know, dog-tired because they're parents of young kids, but you also know that now they're working this and working that. Sometimes you just got to say, "Man, you might need to take a day. You might need to take a minute. If you want to leave the kids with us, even." We do that kind of stuff.

Our big party that we do every year at the farm for our annual party, tons of kids. It's like romper room out there. I mean, you go out there, they have the horses, and Frank'll do pony rides around the pasture. [Laughter] So, you know, that's part of it. You have to be able to accommodate families in order to make this work, in general. Maybe you're working the speed bars, the shooter bars of the world, the meet market, you don't have to accommodate that. So that's why those people tend to be short-term. Here, if you're a person that likes the idea of being a restaurant employee but you didn't know how you'd work it with your family, just ask me. I mean, mine are going to be sixteen in two weeks and fourteen, and they're amazing kids, haven't been in any trouble yet, and it can be done. It can very definitely be done.

And I think with the evolution of how our economy's going, with the way things are, there's going to be very few things left that really can't be outsourced to computers and robots. You need to consider the fact that there will always be service industry. We can be replaced to some small degree, but how many people really want to go somewhere and sit with a bartender that is a Coke machine, that you just put in what you want and it spits it out? That's not why you go to a bar. It's not why you go to a restaurant. You go because you want the energy. You go because you want to feel like—I mean literally like there's nobody but you in a room full of a lot of people, the idea that people are paying attention to you and the food and the camaraderie you have.

And a lot of people come here for special occasions, and I know that's kind of what people—"Oh, it's a special occasion." I would say Saturdays you still get quite a bit of that. But the fact of the matter is, a lot of people come here every week, you know, they eat here all the time, and they still come here for special occasions, you know, like they're here Tuesday, but "Tonight's my birthday." So that's kind of—we want to be all those things. We want to be the place you come when you're having a good day, the place you come when you're having a bad day, the place you come, you know, just to kind of check out of your own reality for a minute and appreciate this.

[1:59:11.2]

Eric Velasco: And hear some really good stories, too, you know. You talked about the stories behind the oysters. And it seems like every time I come in here, I'm hearing a great story that makes what I'm enjoying all the more enjoyable.

[1:59:25.5]

Chris Conner: Right, you know, and you can't do that without—I mean, education, okay, is part of our education is key, it's an ongoing education, it's not just a stagnant thing. You have to realize that everybody here is going through the same thing you are. The chefs are just as excited as they can be to when they find out about something new, and so that's kind of—that's a thing. Without education, this place wouldn't exist, without an ongoing sort of search for it. It's not just—it has to, to some degree, be personal too. You have to want to look at these things. But sometimes it's not the easiest thing in the world to get somebody who just had a big week at work to go and research stuff on their own, so it's nice to have it provided for you, and that is a large part of what they do. They facilitate, like Frank and Pardis. They make sure we have access to all the tools that we need to help us succeed, and not just here, but in life. I mean literally. That's how you become a person. You go through and you learn. I've learned here, and I think it's done all right for me.

[2:00:50.3]

Eric Velasco: Frank and Pardis split time among four restaurants, and all four of which are open in the evening when you're open. What kind of interaction do you have with—we'll start with Chef Stitt first.

[2:01:04.4]

Chris Conner: Truth be known, we're his favorite. [Laughter] So I have a lot of interaction with Chef and Pardis as well, I mean, because they want to invite that. They

really want you to kind of be—not as soon as they hit the door, but I do see them. I'll always say—I mean, I say Lupe works a lot, but Chef is here a lot. His office is primarily here, so he spends—it's Monday. He's around here now. He puts in a lot of hours every week.

Same with Pardis. Pardis is—like, her job is everything, you know, so she literally is—she's everywhere. She is one moving portable office with just this—like, people trailing her, whether through voicemail or actually physically trailing her, trying to keep up. So I see her a lot.

I'm accessible to both of them. They know they can call, they can text me, they can email me. I would say that for most of the staff. They really want to. I mean, there are certain people, like the old guard, they may pop up on them. They expect us to kind of know the direction that things are going, and for that reason, I think I probably have more interaction with them than a lot of other people do, but I will say, he's there. He talks to every single person. He engages you on any topic. I mean, like I said, I took him to his first Cubs game at Wrigley Field, and now he'll talk baseball with me, and that's great. That tells you that, you know, he decided it was okay to be a baseball fan. So everybody's involved. He's way, way—he's very, very involved in all this. [When Frank Stitt walks through any of his restaurants, he greets every employee by name and asks how they're doing, from his top manager to the part-time dishwasher.]

You see it, you watch the TV shows, the reality shows, you see the things that are going on, and there are different levels, but I will say, like, the one universal thing, if you're watching these restaurants, is that in order for a restaurant to succeed, I believe that the owners have to be really involved. They have to be very, very hands-on, very

day-to-day, and their presence has to be felt. So for them, that's even tougher. I mean, they've got four to bounce back and forth to. Luckily, they're located within a half mile of each other, and they can make that trek fairly easily. Literally, like, the other night we had a problem with one of the meringue cakes had fallen and the meringue slipped off, and Pardis was up the street, but she was able to run down here, drop off a meringue cake, and go back up. So she didn't have somebody else do it. She did it, you know, and that's the understanding that all this is—we're all a big part of the team.

A couple weeks ago, we were so crazy in the bar, I'm in there and Frank's bringing me food, and I take the food from him. He's run the food out to me, now, and he takes the dirty plates that I had. [Laughter] He's like, "Let me get those. You get this."

I'm like, "Okay." You know, that's how involved—if you put love into it like he does, like they do, and you put the energy and the time, there was no question it was going to work. It was just we didn't know how well it would work.

[2:04:55.3]

Eric Velasco: What else does it take to maintain the highest level of excellence—you're almost four decades in business at this point—

[2:05:06.8]

Chris Conner: Right.

[2:05:07.3]

Eric Velasco: —to be a finalist, a nominee for Outstanding Restaurant ten years in a row, little ol' Birmingham, Alabama. What else is involved in maintaining that excellence besides that passion, that hands-on, the strict standards they set?

[2:05:27.0]

Chris Conner: You mean besides the—you've got to have a certain level of insanity too. I mean, you have to look at things in a different way. I really believe that. I mean, I believe that people go into things and they do things, and maybe you don't find the exact perfect fit in this world, but not many people actually do. I mean, I would say even presidents stumble into presidencies. So what you do is you have to look at things a little different lens. For us, the employees, in this level, we have to look at them and understand that sometimes—Chef even says, he's like, "Sometimes I could go a little out there, and you kind of look at me like I'm crazy. Maybe I was a little crazy then." So you take what they're saying to you, you want to take it and run with it. You develop it, tweak it, because literally when you're in the face of a sort of genius like that, sometimes, boom, it's a pop, and so that's kind of our job, is to take that little pop that he gives us and make it work, and that means tweaking. That means all the fine-tuning.

So, you know, the way that we managed to do this, when I started—I still laugh about this. When I first started, ten years, I started working six months before our tenth anniversary. For our tenth anniversary, we had one of the most over-the-top bands, just like crazy, sort of like B-52s style of music.

[2:07:19.9]

Eric Velasco: Was that the Sugar LaLas one?

[2:07:21.7]

Chris Conner: Yes, yeah.

[2:07:23.4]

Eric Velasco: Just for listeners, who was the lead singer of the Sugar Lalas?

[2:07:25.4]

Chris Conner: Mats! Mats and—oh, my god. Carole.

[2:07:29.9]

Eric Velasco: Carole Griffin.

[2:07:30.5]

Chris Conner: Carole Griffin.

[2:07:30.9]

Eric Velasco: Who owns what?

[2:07:32.0]

Chris Conner: Chez Lulu. Yeah, Chez Lulu out there. [Carole Griffin opened Continental Bakery about the same time Stitt opened Highlands, and they've had a food-

based mutual admiration since, rooted in their love for the Parisian baker Lionel Poilane. Griffin's Chez Lulu is a bistro adjoining Continental Bakery, which also serves pizzas from a wood-fired oven. Both are in the English Village section of Mountain Brook, a suburban city south of Birmingham. In the early 1990s Griffin sang for the Sugar LaLas, free-spirited band led by Mats Roden. After gigs she'd head to the bakery. There's a Sugar LaLas page on Facebook, and video is posted on YouTube.]

So, yeah, actually saw her probably three weeks ago. But anyway, yeah, so she got taken into across the crowd, this sea of people, on like a—how you would see Cleopatra being carried into the room, and she launched onto the stage with Mats, and the band goes crazy. And this is not the kind of thing you'd expect from Highlands, but that's what we were then. We were Bohemian. Like you look at things then, we were like the cutting edge. We wanted to be cutting edge, and it wasn't to be haute cuisine or avant-garde, it was just that we wanted to be a little bit Bohemian. We wanted our attitude to be that, like, you know, thumb your nose at the authority, like the personality was there. I mean, Chef—

Eric Velasco: He was like twenty-eight when he started this place?

[2:08:24.1]

Chris Conner: Yeah, and he came to be a fan of food by going to Berkeley, you know. [Interviewer's note: While Stitt was attending University of California at Berkeley studying philosophy in the mid-1970s, he also started cooking in the kitchen of Chez Panisse.] I've seen the pictures of him riding his motorcycle. It's a different—it's that

kind of attitude. And maybe that's the secret of our success, is that when we get somebody in, it's easy enough for us to tell if that person might just have a little bit of that sort of attitude, that just different way of looking at things, and that is almost an imperative for success here. I believe that you have to have—even if my legs aren't still there, but my heart and brain's still in it. I mean, I look in the mirror and I say, "That guy, who is that guy?" Because I'm still thinking the same way, but I'm just aging, and that's part of it. And to be able to grow gracefully like we have, but to still maintain a little bit of that sort of outlaw attitude, like—it's fantastic. I mean, it really has—it's been this gigantic work in progress.

I told Chef before we went up to Chicago for the awards, I said, "God, it's so weird now," because of the previous year, the way they had introduced us, was like "A standard in Birmingham, Alabama." And I was like, "I remember when we wanted to call ourselves Bohemians, you know." I mean, and that—-

[2:09:57.0]

Eric Velasco: Now you're the establishment you were fighting. [Laughter]

[2:09:58.4]

Chris Conner: Right. Now we're the old guard. We're the old guard. I think about that tenth anniversary party, and, like, one of the chefs had a motorcycle, so I'm on his motorcycle in the tent at the end of the night, just doing rolling burnouts. [Laughter] This is after the cops had been called [Laughter] to break up "Those rowdy hooligans over at the Highlands are all crazy again."

[2:10:25.0]

Eric Velasco: This was an outdoor party in what is now your valet parking.

[2:10:27.9]

Chris Conner: Yeah, the valet parking. Where these people parked, I don't know. I don't know, but there were thousands of people. It was insane, people smoking cigars, walking around, and, like, we ran out of—we wanted to have—everything was donated. People really have embraced us since we came into the community, so there were all these wines and all this beer and all this stuff. Well, we went through that in about fifteen minutes. [Laughter] So now we're into personal stock here and we're, like, losing money, but it didn't matter. We managed to talk the Budweiser guys to bring a truck and park it over—and it was like—it held up one corner of the tent. So we're tapping the beer, and, like, literally so we're out of cups, and this is where you're going to run to, as I call them, the Illuminati under the beer truck, just dumping beer in his face. [Laughter]

[2:11:18.9]

Eric Velasco: Straight from the tap?

[2:11:20.3]

Chris Conner: Yeah! [Laughter] It was like, "We're out of cups, guys. We don't have glasses. We're out of everything."

He's like, "Well, I've got to get something."

And I'm like, "All right."

And then eventually the noise complaint kind of shut us down, but we pared it back to, like, a group of people we could get in here, so it was still 150 people in here, just kind of—and this was all on a day we weren't open, you know. This was just a thank-you from Frank. It was like, "Yeah! Have this huge party!"

Like I said, literally at the end of the night, everything's now—the newbies, we get the newbies out there to clean up. It was kind of like pledging a fraternity or something. [Laughter] Somebody's got to clean up the parking lot, so we get the youngest of the WAs go out there. I was, unfortunately, at that time I was under the six-month limit, so I had to be one of the people that got to clean up all this.

[2:12:12.0]

Eric Velasco: Just so people know, what is a WA?

[2:12:13.5]

Chris Conner: A WA is a Waiter Assistant. It's more than—earlier I said "busboy" because when I first started, that's kind of—we were just following around with—we used bus pans, you know, much like you do see it in a diner. But now we're well past that. So these WAs are kids that are basically, to me, they're waiters-in-training. It's kind of like a Minor League system of baseball, you know. You start off, you've got your teeth, so you start off being a WA at the Highlands or Bottega. Then you move into the café as a server. Then if there's ever an opening, which rarely ever happens around here, then you get bumped up. You get to come to work at one of the big restaurants as a waiter

or as a server, I should say, because we do have a lot of—we figured out that it's smart to have back-and-forth. Like we'll have waiters and bartenders, but we prefer to all be called servers because they help out behind the bar, we help out running food. So, you know, you all have to do a job, and the job is to get the job done. It's not bartending or waiting tables; it's to help each other out.

[2:13:30.2]

Eric Velasco: And as far as the training—I know it's this way over in Bottega—are the servers-in-training put in kitchen shifts and bar shifts too?

[2:13:37.7]

Chris Conner: Yeah, you have to. Everybody goes through—it's extended. It's supposed to be about six weeks, so you put in a week in the kitchen, a week in bar, put in a week of being a WA, and then you move into whatever position you're going to be in in the company. But a lot of it, the last two weeks are essentially focused on what you're going to be doing, so if you're going to be a WA, you don't have to be going through the menus as much, because WAs, or waiter assistants, their job is primarily to help the waiters, and their way of doing that is to get coffees, to get bread for the tables, to get water for the tables, to take empty plates from the tables, to reset the tables. So, really, they are everything except for the talking part. [Laughter] They don't necessarily deliver so much food, but they do run it, so a WA here is way more than a busboy. They do so much, that without them, nobody goes. I mean, the whole thing would just fall apart.

[2:14:54.0]

Eric Velasco: And by the time they're done, they've having to pass a test not only just on setting tables and all of that, but who's providing the pork, how it's cooked—

[2:15:01.8]

Chris Conner: Right. Cooking terminology.

[2:15:03.9]

Eric Velasco: —what sets go with it.

[2:15:05.0]

Chris Conner: Yes.

[2:15:06.2]

Eric Velasco: How to build basic drinks in the bar and all that good stuff.

[2:15:08.6]

Chris Conner: Exactly. What goes in a marinade, how are the crab claws prepared, to a basic breakdown of the pecan orgeat. You need to know what you're selling. You may not need to know it as much as the guy who's actually doing the prep on it, but you need to know it. You need to be able to—like, there are some ways—like sometimes when I go home and I cook and I accidentally get something right, I'm like, "Wow! I guess it's sunk in." Because I'm a terrible, terrible cook.

And Dawn's like, "Where did you come up with—?"

I was like, "Well, they were talking about it and I figured it's got to be something like this." Because we talk about the ingredients in it, but we don't talk about the proportions, like, well, it's a tablespoon of this with a dash of that. We'll say "a dash." We'll say that, but that's, you know, hardly an official term. So the idea of us being able to do, to recreate the dishes they do, people are like, "Oh, so you must be like a really good cook." Noooo. [Laughter] The best thing I make it I can do some ceviche and like raw tuna. [Laughter] And that wows people when I—but, you know—

[2:16:20.2]

Eric Velasco: But you're well trained.

[2:16:21.3]

Chris Conner: Yes, exactly. I know what goes in it, but I do know—I mean, there's different love. I mean, if you're a chef, if you spend any time around chefs, they're a different breed. They're far from the standard cloth. They're the kind of people that get in here at 8:00 o'clock in the morning just to start doing some of the most inane tasks. I see these things and I watch them, and I'm just like—like Lupe plucking the shell off of every single crab claw, and everything gets done like that, the trimming of this to the—we do all our own butchering here, and when you see how labor-intensive that is and how—you know, that's a whole different thing.

[2:17:10.5]

Eric Velasco: And all the different things that side of pig's going to be used for.

[2:17:13.0]

Chris Conner: Right. And we try to—I mean, as you were saying earlier, we buy—I mean, Chef's kind of the grandfather of biodynamic, organic growing, and so many of these farms now exist for a large part because of the restaurants that are able to become offshoots of Highlands, now enough to make it worth somebody's while to do this kind of farming, to be able to get this to us and to give the kind of love and care and attention to the product that you won't get in a mass-pro farm. So once there was enough and enough people started getting behind the notion of it, then we've seen all these farms spring up, and some specialize in something, some—like got biodynamic lettuces that are just insane, and some people do a lot of—but, like, lettuces in the heat—I don't know if you've ever farmed—that's practically impossible. It's like doing herbs. Well, these guys have devised a way of the system of doing it, still organic, but it has a screen that goes across it, and the water they apply goes, like, over the screen and it drips down, but it keeps the heat off of it, and these are some of the most beautiful lettuces you've ever seen in your life.

[2:18:29.8]

Eric Velasco: Is this Michael Dean?

[2:18:31.9]

Chris Conner: No, this is Bois d'Arc Farms down by Union Springs.

[2:18:34.6]

Eric Velasco: Black Belt.

[2:18:35.3]

Chris Conner: Yeah, down in the Black Belt. [Interviewer's note: The Black Belt is in south-central Alabama, so called for its rich dark soil. Michael Dean is a former Bottega waiter who went into farming, building a clientele mostly among Stitt's restaurants and those run by his former chefs.] But Michael Dean, same way. But these guys are—he's bringing sort of a better thinking to the farming thing. Michael Dean is just—like he's just—he's dirt under the nails. He's there. He's doing it every day. He's producing some of the best stuff you've ever seen. Literally, I mean, you go to our farmers' market now, and it's not the farmers' market it used to be. Now you see the kind of things—like there's a place that's coming out of Clanton, I get these strawberries at their kiosk, and when you bite into them, they're just—they're blood red all the way through, just the sweetest, best strawberries, and that wasn't always the case. And so—

[2:19:19.5]

Eric Velasco: You'd been working here for a while before we really got that first big pop-up market at Pepper Place. [Pepper Place Saturday Market, Birmingham's first pop-up farmers market, started in 2000. Stitt sits on its board of directors. In 2018, more than two dozen one-day markets were operating across Birmingham and Jefferson County, as

well as adjoining Shelby County. At least one is open every day, except Sunday. Some are open most weeks of the year.]

[2:19:26.0]

Chris Conner: Right. Oh, yeah. I was here ten years before all that was coming around, and then it became—and even then it was just—it wasn't—I mean, there still, you know—I'm from Gadsden, so a lot of agrarian there, and that's a—tire plant and farming, and that's all there was, a little bit of textile mills sort of sprinkled in, but you go to those markets and these would be the kind of things that people would, I would say—and maybe this is what this has become. These are the kind of things these people were growing for themselves, put enough care and attention, but they had some overage, so they'd open up a little stand right there on the side of the road, you know, in Glencoe, Alabama.

That's kind of what we're finally back to that. We're back to that on a much larger scale. We're back to that where we're beginning to think of feeding the planet this way instead of the mass produced—I mean when you think about what goes into your body, then you should probably—I mean, I didn't really—I didn't get it at first, but now I do. When you see this and you think, "I'm eating that," you know, and especially when it comes to, like, animal husbandry and humane animal treatment, that is an amazing difference. I mean, Henry Fudge, I mean, there's so many of these guys are out there making a difference, like Joyce Farms, the way they're treating the animals, the way they're not just feeding. I mean, like I think sometimes feeding gets a little maybe overblown, because grass-fed is definitely going to change the way your beef tastes, so—

[2:21:13.4]

Eric Velasco: But they were always finished off on corn.

[2:21:14.8]

Chris Conner: Right.

[2:21:16.1]

Eric Velasco: traditionally.

[2:21:16.3]

Chris Conner: When you get into this new—yeah. So now it's going back to that a little, this midwestern style. These Halperin's are doing that kind of thing, and you're just like, "Okay, this tastes good. This tastes like the steak that I want it to taste like." It's a whole different—it's a different day. It's a whole different day, and literally since I've been working here for twenty-six years, and that biodynamic, organic movement was nowhere near taking root, but Chef brought it with him from California, and Alice Waters, and just the ideas, and that's kind of big.

[2:21:55.5]

Eric Velasco: And from France, too, his time with Richard Olney as well. [After Stitt's time at Chez Panisse, Alice Waters wrote him an introduction to Olney, who was working on the Time-Life cookbook series. Stitt spent time that summer with Olney in

France as his assistant, soaking up his passion for food and wine. It was there that Stitt made the connection between the foodways of rural France and the similar opportunities with the food of his native Alabama, planting the seed for Highlands Bar and Grill.]

[2:21:57.7]

Chris Conner: Oh, and Richard. Yeah, his time in France is—you know, I really think that's where he was really born, you know. That's where he kind of took on not just the food, but the wine. I don't know. It seems like when you talk to him about it, you'll see it's different. It's like there's a spark there. There's something that you're just like—we all remember our youth fondly, you know, whether it was some party in college or—but to look back and to see what he sees when he looks back at all this, like how it must have felt for him to just be that touched and that moved by it, that's rare. That just doesn't happen to a lot of people. I mean, it doesn't happen to that degree that you want to go embrace it and come to Birmingham, Alabama, and change literally thousands of people's lives.

[2:23:01.9]

Eric Velasco: And to make that connection to that, "What I experienced at Chez Panisse, what I experienced on Richard Olney's property, working with him, made me realize all this I had back at home."

[2:23:13.2]

Chris Conner: Yeah.

[2:23:13.2]

Eric Velasco: "This is what I saw on my grandmother's farm."

[2:23:16.0]

Chris Conner: Yeah.

[2:23:16.5]

Eric Velasco: "And what I saw with all the other people she dealt with."

[2:23:19.1]

Chris Conner: Exactly. I mean, when—you know, like we all have our spiels that we give, but when people ask me, "What would you say the Highlands Bar & Grill is?" I would say it's southern Provençale. It's France meets the South of the U.S. We try to utilize the best local ingredients, the freshest stuff, get the product, and it's beautiful. I mean, it's a beautiful product, and so you can't—like I said earlier, Chef just says, "I just want to make sure this product gets its due." You give it the proper, you know, presentation. You make it pop. And if you've got a great product, sometimes it's just hard to screw it up, it really is. It does it by itself, and it's a beautiful thing.

That can be said in our bar to our employees. I mean, literally you—I mean, there are going to be employees you have to let go. That's part of the job. I hate doing it, I don't like it, but some people just aren't made for this kind of thing. They're not made for this lifestyle. They're not—like I said, they're not looking at things with a little different

lens. They're not kind of embracing the idea that, believe it or not, this is kind of—this is groundbreaking. This is groundbreaking stuff, and it really does affect a whole lot of people.

I mean, people ask me how many people do I see a year. I mean, I don't know. It's like the question of how many martinis do I think. Well, it was an elbow surgery, but I think it was just as exacerbated by making Orange Things as anything. And you meet tons and tons of people, and some of those people you will maintain friendships and relationships with for the rest of your life, and some are, just by nature, they're ephemeral. You'll see them, they'll come, they'll go. But the thing about being here is that these people, they come in and I haven't seen them in two, three years, they're going to come give me a big hug. They're going to be like, "Oh, man!" And that's the thing, because they feel like this is home, and that means that we're doing all right, you know. We put the system into place he has, but we translate it. I mean, he can only do so much, and the basic thing is, Chef gives us the tools, and we have to take that and translate that to the public, because unless you buy it, unless you're in for it, unless you're willing to do this and it's not just to succeed at a job but willing to do this to succeed at building relationships, then you're probably not cut out for this place. I get it. That's fine. There's the banking industry, there's places you can go.

[2:26:23.9]

Eric Velasco: Or even other restaurants.

[2:26:24.9]

Chris Conner: Right. Yeah, there are other restaurants where you don't have to be this detailed, this involved, this communicative, this invested, and it's easier just to walk out, you know, that night and take—if you leave—I've always said if you're high-speed bartending, you're making tons of money. You're making money that's, you know, ridiculous. But if you're here and you're doing it, you're doing it because you see there's something else. You're not doing it because you're a bartender. You're not doing it because you're a waiter. You're doing it because you're a part of something.

[2:27:03.5]

Eric Velasco: You're not slinging drinks.

[2:27:04.5]

Chris Conner: Right. You're not slinging drinks to make enough money for you yourself to go to the beach and give somebody a lot of tote money. That's not—you're not part of the cycle. You're part of actually creating something for yourself and for your family and for, you know—and then to be appreciated for it, that makes it even better, you know. That really does. I'm not saying the Beard Awards, but I'm just saying for the community itself.

[2:27:30.5]

Eric Velasco: The person who comes in and gives you a hug or writes you the personal note.

[2:27:32.8]

Chris Conner: Right. That's the kind of thing. You really are—you're doing it for that. I mean, yes, you're right, it's great living, but that's—I always said, like, sometimes I think there's a certain kind of people that are the a-hole sort of—are very linear businesslike, they tip great but they're real jerks, and so they think that it's okay for them to be real jerks because they tip great. I'm like I don't have time for that. I really don't. I appreciate the money and I'm going to give you the service, but don't expect that I'm going to fawn over you just because you're in here throwing money around. I need to feel a connection. You need to be disarmed.

One of the guys, actually, for a long time he was like that. Finally, like five years ago, he kind of decided to become a human being. Of course, his tips went down. [Laughter] But you just think, okay, there are people like that. They think that money solves things, and money, it's good to have, but it's also not the end-all, be-all. It facilitates what you need for your kids, your family, and it's nice to be able to take a vacation. But it's not necessarily why we do this. This is not—as I said, we're not here because of inertia. We're here because of involvement. We're here because we—it's not necessarily that you—we're here because we have to. We're compelled to do this. This is the kind of thing we do. Like if you take me and put me in a different environment, I don't know. I don't know how I'd—I know how I reacted when I tried it for a year and it wasn't great. So I can't imagine—and all these people, they're like that. If you watch this place, these people are high energy. Even at our age, when it's game time, it's like you see these—and it's like we may be drinking coffee by the quart the second we hit the

door, but come game time, it's like everything just goes "boom!" and it's like you're doing a play, you know. It's like you're doing a show.

Somebody once wrote an article about us, saying it was kind of like theatre, watching it, and that's kind of how you felt. It's like you're just waiting for the curtain to rise. Put the coffee down, let's go do this *now*. Let's go because that's how important this is. We want this to be choreographed right. We don't want any missteps. We don't want, you know—we don't want to be the star of the show, but we do like being the bit players, and so that's kind of a—that's a lot of what we do.

[2:30:19.7]

Eric Velasco: Had you spent much time around moneyed people before you started working around here?

[2:30:23.4]

Chris Conner: Yeah, a little growing up. Yeah, quite a bit. I was Vestavia. [Interviewer's note: Vestavia Hills is a suburban municipality south of Birmingham. The four cities south of Birmingham – Homewood, Mountain Brook, Vestavia Hills and Hoover – have higher household incomes citywide than the other 34 municipalities in Jefferson County, including Birmingham.] But I knew that—somebody once—and there was an interview that I did like fifteen years ago, and they were asking me about, oh, all the snobby people that come into Highlands Bar & Grill. I said no. As I told them, you're a jerk with or without money, you know. It doesn't matter if you have money. Money doesn't necessarily make you a jerk. In fact, I believe quite the opposite. Sometimes you

see people that are almost embarrassed by their success or their wealth, and there's a certain level of humility to it, whereas people who are trying too hard and not succeeding are always chasing, so they're the kind of guys that are going to be real jerks about things. So money is not a factor in what or who people necessarily are, especially when you bring them all on to a level playing field.

[2:31:32.6]

Eric Velasco: And that's part of what I was getting to, is I was wondering if your time here had changed your viewpoint or gave you a more nuanced view.

[2:31:43.9]

Chris Conner: No, I mean, it's—

[2:31:43.8]

Eric Velasco: Or is it just "people are people."

[2:31:45.4]

Chris Conner: Yeah, exactly. They really are. I mean, I think that as you get older, I mean, this is nothing new, but as we get older, we begin to identify with people that we've known that—like our memories stay the same age. So there are people that come in that are big regular customers for two or three years. Then they move or someone dies, you know. So what you do is you start identifying what these people that are sort of frozen at that time in your memory, like when I'm twenty-eight, I'm listening to

somebody that—like a lot of what I do is I really am interested in the people that I find interesting, the people that are at the bar. There's a lot of really great, cool, interesting people that come into our restaurant.

[2:32:34.8]

Eric Velasco: That's the skill set you brought to the job.

[2:32:36.2]

Chris Conner: Yeah. You just want to be able to like, "Hey, that's cool. I want to hear about this." So when I'm twenty-eight, I'm listening to a story of a thirty-five-year-old person who impresses me with their wisdom and their—so I'm storing it away. Now, ten years later, I remember this person. I'm like, "What was it? Oh, yeah, that was Tony. He moved to Texas and he was super—." I mean, that's the kind of thing you recall, your experiences with the individuals, and there are some you continue to see, but I mean, nobody lives forever, and you have these experiences that you want to take what you can from not just the people you work with, but the people you work for.

And like I said, a lot of these people—and money, I mean, sometimes money's not an accident. I mean, they're successful because they are super intelligent or they are hyper personable, they're great, but they have something you want to hear, I promise you that. I mean, you give them five minutes, say, "Hey, so how did—where do you—," you know, just open the door a little bit. Like I hate the old saying, "What do you do?" You know? I'm like, "So, where are you from?" Because that's one of the great things about

working here, is you don't know. You really don't. I mean, half of our customers are not from here.

[2:34:07.3]

Eric Velasco: They're not throwing out a neighborhood. They're [unclear].

[2:34:10.3]

Chris Conner: Yeah, exactly. So you're like—well, you're obviously—they'll tell you where they're from. Chicago. "I'm from New York." "I'm from California." But you also get just as many as, you know, "I'm from Wyoming." "I'm from Poughkeepsie." I don't know. I mean, you get a lot of these that sort of blend. But then that kind of gives you an idea, like, "Well, what brings you here?" And most of it's jobs. You know, in this town, the great thing about this town is that especially now the medical end of this, you get a lot of really intelligent people that have moved here to be a part of UAB, and you can tell kind of where they are, like if they're a resident [Laughter] or if they're in retirement, just by their level of how tired they are. But they're always—

[2:34:57.1]

Eric Velasco: What they're wearing when they come in. [Laughter]

[2:34:58.9]

Chris Conner: Yeah, exactly, you know. They're still in scrubs. And I've befriended—like literally become—I've got a lot of friends that are doctors, and you just think, wow,

these guys are interesting. But everybody's interesting. Really, one of the coolest—I could go on for this forever, but, like, one of the coolest guys ever was this country guy that used to come in here and didn't—he wasn't a whole big lot of talking, you know, but when he did tell you something, you'd straight up laugh. You were going to laugh because it had something that you just like, "Oh, yeah, I get it. I totally relate to that."

So that's the thing. I mean, I guess it's just being interested in the people that you're—and sometimes now when it's so crazy busy, that kind of tires you because I used to—I mean, that sort of relationship, that interaction kind of fuels you. It gives you a little bit to go on. When I got home, I would, you know, tell my wife these stories, be like, "Dawn, this person told me this, this person told me that." It's all so interesting. And she finds it, you know, fun and fascinating. You know, she's a social worker. She's into this kind of stuff, too, just a different level of it. And that's—

[2:36:18.3]

Eric Velasco: But it speaks to the quality of your work environment, too, because so many bartenders I know, they know you by your drink—

[2:36:25.4]

Chris Conner: Right.

[2:36:25.7]

Eric Velasco: —but not your backstory.

[2:36:27.2]

Chris Conner: Yeah. [Laughter] Exactly. Yeah. And that's the thing. Yeah, I guess we could—it would be easy to slip into that, to your drink, but it's also—it's just about as easy to find out a little bit about a person as it is to find out what they drink, because, you know, a lot of people—one of the great customers I've ever had—and he doesn't come in as much anymore, he's moved, he retired—he never drank the same thing twice and he never drank alcohol. So you knew it was going to be in the beer and/or wine area. You just didn't know which one it was going to be. So it was always—so that way you had to come up and immediately sort of engage. He's a retired attorney, maybe one of the brightest guys I've ever met in my life, and he was a man of so few words that when he talked, you wanted to listen. You wanted to hear it. I think he was so used to talking all day for his job that he came in and he would—but he was a big environmental attorney. He retired to basically just champion causes of the environment. And he didn't talk enough to me, you know. It was just like, "Man, say something more. I'm here. I'm waiting. I want to hear your story." And some people give you more of it and some people will tell you the same story fifteen times. That's fine, too, you know, just as long as you still have a laugh left in there to give them. Then you're all good.

[2:38:03.6]

Eric Velasco: We've got to yakking about so many different things I forgot to get into the Temperance Drinks list.

[2:38:10.5]

Chris Conner: Oh, yeah.

[2:38:11.4]

Eric Velasco: Talk to me about the development of that, please.

[2:38:12.5]

Chris Conner: Okay. Well, Temperance Drinks are drinks for people that either don't or can't drink. I would say it was originally developed—I remember—I'm from a family of ministers, and in our old school of family Bibles, there was a whole bunch of paperwork that you filled out, and this was kind of passed from one to another, and in every one of these Bibles there was a Temperance Pledge. [Laughter]

[2:38:41.5]

Eric Velasco: What kind of ministers?

[2:38:42.3]

Chris Conner: My grandfather—both my grandfathers were Baptist. One was hellfire, brimstone, Primitive. And my mom's Methodist. My uncle—I have two uncles that are Baptist ministers and one that is Episcopalian, but by marriage, my mom's sister's husband. So, you know, there's a lot of that running through the family. I always thought that was kind of funny, like, okay, sure, just because I sign this in the Bible. But these people took it kind of seriously.

Well, the temperance is you don't drink. Well, it turns out there's a lot of people—and you shouldn't be handcuffed where you can't come to a bar because you don't drink or because you can't drink or you don't want to—like a lot of—if people are alcoholics, I get that they—and it's turned out—I've figured out that moreover, the people that are alcoholics don't tend to go back to drinks that remind them of drinks. So, like, if somebody's just like temporarily booting it for Lent or something of that nature, or what is probably the most common is pregnancy, so women come in and they're pregnant and they want to have something fun because they can't wait till they can have a drink again, and this is more of a way for them to kind of branch out.

It all started because of our illustrious "Red Dog," Goren Avery, was a—he was a big drinker. I mean, he was—

[2:40:19.0]

Eric Velasco: He came by that Dog name honestly.

[2:40:21.4]

Chris Conner: Yeah. He was a scary drinker. Like, he would be drinking—he would leave work to go somewhere, while he was working, to get a drink, that kind of drinker. And finally, it caught up to him and the doc said he had a condition. He had to quit drinking. And when he was drinking, and me being a young pup I was, he would dupe me into making him a shot of just vodka and cranberry because he said it didn't make him feel bad. Well, the day came when the doctor said, "If you have another one of those, you may not make it to next week." He had to quit drinking.

We decided to sit down and talk, and essentially this is a punch we came up with. It was originally done the same way he did his alcohol, in a shot form, just in a glass, but it's just orange juice, a little bit of grapefruit juice. He's not as crazy about that. At one point, we even used pineapple in there, kind of a take on my mom's wedding punch, being from a Baptist family and all. And Sprites to kind of sweeten it up. And that was basically a psychological bandage for him for the moment. It was just kind of like for him to not be drinking anymore, he would have this little this, a taste of it, and it helped him. And he's been twenty-something years now he's not had a drink.

So it came to be that he was like, "Oh, wow. These people want a drink, but they don't want anything with alcohol in it. So what's that thing you did for me?" So we put it in the form of a martini and we call it the Dog Juice. So it goes out to the tables for people. The Dog Juice was originally a huge hit with kids. Kids love it because they're like, "Wow, I've got a martini glass." And parents are terrified, but the thing about kids is that when you bring kids in here, they're intimidated, and so your kids are probably going to act better than you ever thought they would in their lives, so if you give them a martini glass, they're going to treat it like it's the Hope Diamond. They're going to hold it just right. They're going to—so that became a thing.

Then it started expanding probably about ten years ago, and it was just because we would make—there's a drink called Orangina that they sell in the bottle, so we started doing sort of our version of that, a little less sweet. So it's still on next door, I believe, the Citron Pressé. Then we realized that there's a lot of stuff you can make for people that don't necessarily want to drink, or for kids or for—I mean, that's more fun, it's more exciting.

[2:43:09.9]

Eric Velasco: Even "tweeners."

[2:43:10.3]

Chris Conner: Right.

[2:43:10.9]

Eric Velasco: Between alcoholic drinks.

[2:43:12.2]

Chris Conner: Yeah, exactly. Right now we have—well, the one that's very tedious and takes a lot of time to make is the one I'd like to kill Matt over every time I make it, is the Faux-jito. That's very popular, and that could eat up more time than any drink we make.

[2:43:30.9]

Eric Velasco: A lot of mint muddling.

[2:43:32.0]

Chris Conner: Oh, yeah, mints and fresh apple all ground in there with soda and lime, and it takes forever, takes as long as a regular Mojito. So that can kind of—but the other drinks, like the Agua Fresca has got to be—it's just a simple—plenty of fresh juice,

whatever we have. I believe it's listed on there as muscadine, but we had a really bad crop of muscadines this year. We only had about three weeks of good juice.

So a lot of it's variations on juice-based drinks because we have great juice. I mean, we have fresh-squeezed OJ. The South of the Border is like a—we use agave nectar in that, so it's kind of supposed to—you know, it's just flippant, but we're kind of making a Hispanic nonalcoholic margarita with more lemon and lime in that one than the grapefruit, but OJ and a little agave nectar. So these are things that, believe it or not, there's a whole section of the population that really appreciates it, especially people—literally people that maybe are not drinking for a reason. Maybe they have health issues they don't want their family to know yet, you know, or they don't want to alarm their in-laws or whoever's with them, so they just want to give the appearance like ginger ale in a champagne flute, things like that. But for whatever reason, that's a big part of what we do. We do a lot of Temperance Drinks.

[2:45:01.5]

Eric Velasco: What kind of percentage, would you say?

[2:45:04.7]

Chris Conner: Percentage, it's hard to say, but I would say probably as a matter of how many we make a night, forty? Forty to fifty?

[2:45:16.5]

Eric Velasco: That's a fair number.

[2:45:17.0]

Chris Conner: Yeah, on a busy night, I'd say that's probably—you know, I would say probably ten to fifteen Dog Juices. I had one night where I did fifteen or twenty of the Faux-jito. But the Dog Juice and the Faux-jito are the two most popular, by far. The South of the Border, probably the third place. Agua Fresca, which to me is perfect because it's just San Pellegrino and fresh juice, and that provides the natural sweetness that you need.

[2:45:48.0]

Eric Velasco: I love making versions of that at home, especially for my children.

[2:45:51.7]

Chris Conner: Yeah. I mean, it's great. We use all sorts of different juices, from apple to—we've done quite a bit.

[2:46:01.9]

Eric Velasco: Now, when you started here, did you ever think you'd make a career out of this or bartending?

[2:46:07.4]

Chris Conner: No. I mean, I really didn't. I mean, there was actually a period where I was given the opportunity to go back to doing the other thing about three years into it,

and I was—at that point, yeah, three or four years—I was like, "Well, you know, it might be nice to have a normal weekend to be able to go out to the lake with the guys and be able to hang out with—." And I actually went back for about two weeks, and I was doing the training program, and I just decided, no, I don't know that I could do sales. I could do the structural, like, site management of it, but I don't think I could do the just getting out and beating the streets and cold-calling and doing all that. I thought, "Well, okay, this is where I am. This is what I do." And this is literally the basis for everything I've ever done. I mean, it's how I met my wife, not through here, but because of friends of restaurant employees. And it's been all right. It's been crazy, but tiring. I'll say it's very, very tiring. Don't do it if you're low energy, you know. Coffee is your best friend. Thank God for espresso. But it's a very hard job.

[2:47:37.2]

Eric Velasco: Were you and Dawn married when you were considering that transition?

[2:47:39.5]

Chris Conner: No, actually. This was before I actually met her. I met her in '97, and we got married in 2000. So this was probably a year or two before that. I mean, she was, like I said, when I met her, she was in the restaurant industry, so she was kind of—she'd been doing that in college.

[2:48:00.4]

Eric Velasco: Where was she working?

[2:48:02.1]

Chris Conner: Little bitty place up the street called The Back Alley, was more of a patio kind of place, like it had a lot of outdoor seating. Truly, like, the owners of the place were two of my best friends ever. Unfortunately, one of them died about five years ago from brain cancer. But it was a great family place. It was a cool place to work.

[2:48:27.0]

Eric Velasco: Is that the Cobb Lane area?

[2:48:28.5]

Chris Conner: Yeah, yeah.

[2:48:30.1]

Eric Velasco: Little cobbled street.

[2:48:31.3]

Chris Conner: Right. It's where The J. Clyde is now. That's the old Back Alley, so it was there for a lot of years. But she worked there and she worked in the kitchen. [Cobb Lane is a two-block alley, brick cobbled, at the northern edge of the Five Points South entertainment district. J.Clyde is Birmingham's premiere craft-beer bar.]

Then, you know, so I met her through a friend who I'd actually grown up with, who I knew before, working in restaurants, and he was a bartender too. So he was a

bartender at The Back Alley, and went to meet him for lunch and she was with—and actually the girl that was with them was one of my friends growing up, his sister, but I was better friends with her than I was with Pat, and we all, like, okay. So next thing I know, I'm talking to her twenty—wow. What, twenty-four years now or twenty—yeah, 1997, so, wow. That's a long time. [laughs] Twenty-one years. I'm proud of it, though. It's one of those things that, you know, marriage is tough, work's tough, life's tough, but if you can get through all of it, you can look back and you can say, wow, did all right. Not to say I'm ready to hang up the spurs just yet, but sooner or later, this leg's going to go. [laughs]

[2:49:51.1]

Eric Velasco: When people ask you why you decided to make a career here and why you work here, continue to work here, what do you tell them?

[2:50:00.3]

Chris Conner: Well, I mean, it depends on who's asking. It really does. I mean, it's kind of relative to your audience, because if it's your mom, she's like, "Why'd you do this?" Because she's a minister. The last thing she wants to see her kid do is schlepping drinks to people for twenty-five years. But, I mean, if it's somebody who's here, like, "Wow, you've been here forever," you know, that's their opening line. [laughs] It's like, "You've been here forever. I remember you from—."

I'm like, "Yeah, you know, that makes me feel so young when you say it like that."

But, "Wow, you know—."

[2:50:38.8]

Eric Velasco: "You should see yourself." [Laughter]

[2:50:39.9]

Chris Conner: Yeah, exactly. You just say, well, you know, I mean, why does anybody do what they do? I mean, in some ways some people are, like Chef, they're driven by inspiration and genius. Some people are compelled to do things that are social, and some people are more reclusive and some people are more out to do—so I took, like, the sum total of what I consider my skill set and it was either down to teaching or being a bartender. So I decided to take the one that made more money [laughs], and went to doing this.

But literally, I mean, I tell people, you know, a lot happens when you're going along. It's just like your life. I mean, you're doing a job one day, then twenty years later you wake up and you realize that you've had a really fun time, you've had an unorthodox but yet very complete career, and you've raised a family. You've gotten married, you've made new friends, you've lost friends. You've done just what everybody does. It's just a matter of what you did in the meantime.

And so I think being in the restaurant industry is something that at times it can very much ground you, it can make you realize what's important, but at the same time can be a little disillusioning because you realize—and outside of life, I mean, this is a very hard job, but it's a job that stays here, you know. You take what you're thinking

about, you learn, but the overall stress levels can be contained to the window of where you're at your busiest, whereas life isn't always like that. Life's an ongoing process and you can't turn that. So in that way, it makes you want to turn everything into a three-hour situation instead of a three-week situation, and because of that, I think I've shortened a lot of the amount of time that I've spent on having problems in my life. I just don't really think of it—you know, when health is lost, everything's—but when you're just here doing this, it's a zone. You're in a place where this is all you can do. I mean, you can't be here and not be in that place, because if you're not, you're not doing it. You can see people that aren't. You're like, "You need to check out for a second, maybe get another cup of coffee, do whatever you got to do, but you're not—."

[2:53:25.9]

Eric Velasco: Especially when the expectation is to operate on the highest level—

[2:53:28.2]

Chris Conner: Exactly.

[2:53:28.7]

Eric Velasco: —at all times.

[2:53:30.0]

Chris Conner: Exactly. And when you're running this hard and you're running this fast, sometimes it gets tiring and sometimes you realize, man, maybe the corners of your

mouth aren't turned up the right direction at that moment. Go get a glass of water, go somewhere, go sit down for a second, and then just allow all the thoughts and all the things that are going on to catch up with you, I mean, to sort of unfurl it. And I think in that way, man that made me supreme for being a stay-at-home dad. [Laughs] I was like, "Yeah, I got this. This is nothing. Come on, kid." [Laughs]

[2:54:08.6]

Eric Velasco: You know, and in life, it's a combination of—and it's interesting to see the degree to which one comes out on this continuum of what you do defining who you are and making possible what you want out of life.

[2:54:21.6]

Chris Conner: Right.

[2:54:22.5]

Eric Velasco: Where do you come on that continuum?

[2:54:24.3]

Chris Conner: I would say—and I've always said this, and it's not a remark on the restaurant or anything—what you do is not who you are. I mean, they're two entirely different things. I mean, there's the persona and then there's the actual guy. So I think sometimes I get caught up in the hype. I turn on my persona. I'm not David Bowie or anything like that. I'm not quite that chameleon. But you bring it in here, you turn on that

persona. When I go home, I'm toes up in front of the fire, I'm just, you know, goofing off with my kids, like literally I'm just the biggest fan of my kids and my family, and that's all I want to do is, like, spend time with them.

But when I'm here, I'm a different guy, and it's not because I'm lying or acting or anything like that, it's just that I am—it's a person I've created. I mean, I know I've created this persona, so I've got to kind of stick with that. I'm willing to stick with it, but it's more akin to the guy I was when I was twenty-five than the guy I am now. And so sometimes I definitely say that I identify more with who I really think I am, is the dad, is the guy who spends a lot of time trying, you know, just helping his kids, goofing off with his kids, and the husband as much as I possibly can. I know I've let her down more than my share, but I try to be there for her when she's having a tough time.

And then I realize—and that's when I sort of—I had to compartmentalize, I really did. I had to sort of realize that one day, like I said, when my kids were young, I was doing all the management stuff. I was going eighty-five hours a week in here, and I was like, "I can't have it all." You really can't. You can't do this, be a part of this, so what you have to do, and as Pardis has told me, you've really got to learn to delegate. And so it took a year or two, but I learned. Now I'm the master of it. [laughs] I've delegated myself down to four days a week, so that's a good—

[2:56:45.9]

Eric Velasco: I've got to end this. We've got to get your children's names in this interview, in this transcript. What are your children's names?

[2:56:52.3]

Chris Conner: Sam and Jack.

[2:56:54.5]

Eric Velasco: Sam and Jack. Sam's the older?

[2:56:56.4]

Chris Conner: Sam is the older, and Jack, or "Jack Attack," as I still call him, is the younger one.

[2:57:04.5]

Eric Velasco: Has he developed a taste for spicy food?

[2:57:06.5]

Chris Conner: No, not at all. In fact, the older one does. That's the irony. The older one loves spicy food and gets, like, the Fuego Taquis, and the younger one wouldn't eat so much as black pepper on something, I think.

[2:57:18.9]

Eric Velasco: Well, he was scarred at age two. [Laughter]

[2:57:21.3]

Chris Conner: Yep! He was absolutely devastated. I didn't know what to do. I was trying to tell him to eat a cracker. I was like, "Have some milk. Drink the milk." [Laughter] And the old one's just sitting there.

I mean, I will say, like, this is, like, my story that I tell people, that my kids are—because of how involved I've been in their lives, they're very much my kids, and my poor wife is so outnumbered in our house. Even our pets are males. So she's had no chance. And, like, you know, there could always be just a tinge of sarcasm to anything said by any one of us at any time, which drives her a little nuts. But I remember when we were driving, and they were both so young, they had to sit in the backseat, in the car seats, so one was probably seven, the other one was five, and the older one says to me from the backseat, "Hey, Dad, you know what I'm going to be when I grow up?"

And the younger one goes, "Lonely." [Laughter]

[2:58:31.9]

Eric Velasco: Well, at least he can hold his own.

[2:58:34.9]

Chris Conner: So I immediately turned to him, I said, "That's wrong. You shouldn't say that. It's hilarious, so you're going to give me a knuckle, but after that, you're going to apologize to your brother." [Laughter] So as long as they have the—they understand that literally—and this is kind of like our credo, is, like, in life, you know, it's not life gives you lemons, you get lemonade. It's like you take, you do, and you make life great. Life is funny. It's always funny if you look at it to be funny. And so our thing is we always bring

up that story about, like, you know, "lonely." Well, it's called "You had it coming." Like, if you make a remark and you do something like that—we were driving somewhere one time and he woke his brother up, kicks him in the leg, bruises his leg. Next day, he's limping. I said, "Why are you limping?"

He goes, "Because Sam kicked me when I woke him up in the car."

I said, "Sam!"

And he goes, "No, Dad. Literally I had that coming." [Laughs]

I was like, "You're right. Okay, we're good then."

[2:59:30.6]

Eric Velasco: "As long as we both know."

[2:59:31.4]

Chris Conner: Yeah. "As long as we know you had it coming, then we'll call that punishment."

[2:59:34.3]

Eric Velasco: Well, that's a great note to end on. I do appreciate you take the time with me today. This has just been a joy. Thank you very much.

[2:59:41.8]

Chris Conner: Thank you, sir.

[End of interview]