



Zak Redes
Highlands Bar and Grill
Birmingham, Alabama

Date: October 29, 2018
Interviewer: Eric Velasco
Transcription: Shelley Chance, Pro-Docs
Length: Two hours and thirty three minutes
Project: Highlands Bar and Grill at Work

[Interviewer's note: Although it's a Monday, and Highlands Bar and Grill is closed, the house phone constantly rings with people seeking reservations. The restaurant has been packed in the five months since Highlands was named Outstanding Restaurant by the James Beard Foundation.]

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Eric Velasco: This is Eric Velasco for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm conducting an oral history interview with Zack Redes, the current Chef de Cuisine at Highlands Bar and Grill. Chef Redes worked in Highlands' kitchen for eight of the ten years the restaurant was a finalist for a James Beard Award as the nation's outstanding restaurant. When Highlands won the award on May 7, 2018, Redes was among the Highlands' crew celebrating it on-stage at the Lyric Opera in Chicago.

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Today is October 29, 2018. We're in the dining room at Highlands. Please introduce yourself, Chef Redes, and if you would please also spell your name and give us your date of birth for the record?

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Zack Redes: Zack Redes.

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EV: Spell it for me please.

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ZR: Z-a-c-k--R-e-d-e-s, 8-30-81.

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EV: So tell me about the night that Highlands won the James Beard Award for outstanding restaurant. Set the scene for us please.

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ZR: One of the better parts of my life was a little bit, you know, having been year-to-year you have these expectations of what could be, what should be, kind of the culmination of life's work. There's this excitement. There's this energy. Getting to the Lyric is always a challenge with the traffic and just it still doesn't take away from any of that excitement. Walking in and kind of seeing the--the building and they always have like a theme with it and that's always fun so **[House Phone Rings]** so we grab our bag of popcorn and we kind of get in there and get settled. Frank and Pardis and Dol obviously go do the red carpet.

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Get seated and there's just this vibe in the room and excitement. You're with your peers. You're with your fellow co-workers, people you look up to and it gets into it quick. And this year was--with Dol going up rather early with the pastry part, outstanding pastry program, when her name was called it was probably one of the--the coolest things to have worked with somebody like that who has put so much time into her craft and the excitement she had and the shock that she had was--was truly exciting in its own thing. [Interviewer's note: Chef Redes is referring to Dolester Miles, longtime pastry chef for Frank Stitt's restaurants. She was named Outstanding Pastry Chef that night, in her third year as a finalist.] But then it kind of gives you

the idea that this could be a--the year for us, not getting too far into that, you know because eight years with the company and eight years not winning it--.

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As the night--it--to be honest, it seemed like the night went by a lot faster than previous years. I can remember sitting in the seat, still enjoying myself; the--the Beard Foundation does a fantastic job with kind of keeping you kind of in your seats and interested with the acts--I guess acts is a wrong way to put it but the hosts and so on and so forth.

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But it sure seemed like it--it kind of flew by this year. And then Jose had his amazing speech that was just truly inspirational.

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EV: Let's catch up for a second here. Who is Jose?

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ZR: Jose Andres, major hitter in the DC area, also big relief now in--in the process of doing some relief in the Gulf for the last hurricane we had. [Interviewer's note: He is referring to Hurricane Michael, which devastated the town of Mexico Beach, Florida, after making landfall in Florida in October 2018. Andres also spent months in Puerto Rico leading efforts to feed people displaced in 2016 by Hurricane Maria; he was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.]

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EV: Hero in Puerto Rico?

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ZR: Hero in Puerto Rico, truly an inspirational human that I—I appreciate in more than one way—an immigrant that comes to this country with high expectations and is able to exceed those expectations. If you can't be inspired by that then--then you stop doing what you do. So--

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EV: And for the benefit of the audience, who is Dol?

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ZR: Dol is the Pastry Chef, the Pastry Queen of Highlands Bar and Grill, *Outstanding Pastry Chef*, James Beard 2018 and someone that I consider a friend and probably the sweetest woman you ever met. [Dolester Miles and her crew make desserts for all four Stitt restaurants, Highlands, Chez Fonfon, Bottega dining room and Bottega Café; she is based at Bottega.]

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So it's time; it's--it's our category and when our name is called out it is—there's this – with all the chaos and all the commotion and all this excitement, there's this moment of serenity if you will that is just like, no way. Turning to Chef and embracing him and Pardis and then getting up-stage and all those lights and just looking back on eight years, the growth as a chef, as a human, as a group of people, I've been really fortunate to have a lot of core people in the kitchen for a long time, so I mean words still can't describe the feeling. And getting back there and just kind of raising glasses of champagne and congratulating everybody and seeing the look on Frank's face and Pardis' --I mean a night I won't forget.

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EV: Was that the last award for the evening?

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ZR: No; the Outstanding is it Chef? I believe it's Outstanding Chef is the last award. We're the first to last.

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EV: And who else was--was up there with you, as one of the things about Highlands is there's a very strong team concept?

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ZR: We had front of the house--or we had Maître D Ryan Ford, Matt Gilpin--Beverage Manager--kind of everything. Matt – this place would fall apart without a lot of people but Matt is definitely one of those people that it would not – not run without. Gray Maddox who is the – who runs the wine program for Highlands, also is the General Manager at Bottega and was the Manager at Fonfon at the time. God, Dol was up there, Miss Dol, carrying her--carrying her medal already. Who else did we have?

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EV: Was Chris up there?

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ZR: Chris; yes, Chris Conner, how do I forget Chris, my partner in crime when we go to Chicago? He's--he's the aficionado of all things Chicago, so to be able to kind of see Chicago with him for three years back-to-back was really, really a good experience for me and hear stories of his time there and always a partner in crime. But and Pardis obviously -- Chris—Chris has been a bartender, I mean here for 28 years. You know he's kind of throughout his career here, you know Bar Manager and then I think he started -- I know he started doing a little bit more with his family and kind of took a step back from that. But I mean once again a lot of these people are placed -- are people that wouldn't -- this place wouldn't be the same if we didn't have them here, so— .

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EV: How many years had you gone to the Awards?

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ZR: I believe I've gone to all of them but two, maybe it was three, so I think I've gone to five, if not six. I know five for sure. The first year--the last year in New York, skipped a year in Chicago, and then it's been in Chicago four years; yeah, so five.

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EV: So what is--what is the significance of the Beard Award for--for a Birmingham restaurant and what does that say about Highlands?

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ZR: The significance for Birmingham is huge. You were with us on Saturday and you heard me say it. [Interviewer's note: Redes is referring to a cooking demonstration he did at the Pepper Place Saturday Market in October 2018.] When you have guests that are speaking of buying plane tickets when they get a reservation that kind of puts it into perspective; you know I mean here we are in Birmingham, Alabama, the southeast which I think finally is getting the credit that it needs for the food culture that it has and a lot of that is from Frank you know, the Godfather of Southern Cooking.

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But it brings a bigger picture to Birmingham. There's a spotlight on us for food but the culture here is equally as big. And for this award, these two awards to allow that to put kind of pressure on us as a restaurant but as a city to continue to grow, to continue to you know just come together as a community. But seeing Birmingham now as opposed to 18 years when I got here and to see what we have planned for the future and to think that Highlands is going to continue playing a part in that and this award is going to bring that even further to the kind of future is really, really exciting. It's exhilarating. It's--it's kind of just like that bottle of wine, champagne, when you pop it, you know you pop it--all those bubbles come out and it's effervescent and it's just like [*Gestures*]. It's exciting and [*House phone Rings*] and that's kind of what I think about the future and where I see Highlands as being a part of it and I guess where my--you know where I put--play a part in that. [*Redes' cell phone Rings*] That wasn't planned.

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EV: [*Laughs*]

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ZR: [*Laughs*]

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EV: And one of the things that struck me about this is you're normally up against major metropolitan areas. There have been--there have been other people who--who--other cities, maybe about the same size as Birmingham that have been honored before but I mean they're tourist destinations. They're Charleston, New Orleans, places like that. It's--it seems extra-significant when it's Birmingham that gets a national attention on that because it's not a natural draw.

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ZR: I honestly, sitting here thinking about the question, what is the draw to Birmingham, Alabama? We have a minor league baseball team. We have an international airport. We have UAB which is probably one of the bigger draws. [Interviewer's note: UAB is the University of Alabama at Birmingham.] I mean football season, people come and stay in Birmingham because they don't have enough rooms in Tuscaloosa. [Interviewer's note: for when the Crimson Tide football team plays home games at the University of Alabama.] But for Highlands to be the spot that is bringing people here so that they can see the bigger picture of our city I don't think there are words that can put the importance of it.

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We have so much to offer cultural-wise, farming-wise, school-wise, restaurant-wise; I mean from chefs', kind of lineage, you know, I mean it's starting to grow the food scene. More and more people are putting up restaurants or opening restaurants that are successful and a lot of them are from Frank's kind of teachings and mentors. So that says a lot about him as a person and a chef I think.

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He doesn't just--he invests in people and I think when you invest in people you can get the best out of them, so--

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EV: And it's a long-term investment.

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ZR: It is.

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EV: If possible.

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ZR: Sorry; it is a long-term investment. I definitely have been the longest Chef de Cuisine here, which I'm proud of and you know if I still didn't have things to learn or if I didn't have things that I continue--could continue to grow on being a chef, being a cook, I like to call it more of a

cook--just kind of me--being inspired is something that makes you better and when you're not inspired it's kind of stale and boring and you don't have the growth you need.

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So if it--I didn't still get that here; I probably wouldn't be here. But every day has a new challenge. Every day has a new curveball as I like to talk to my guys in the kitchen about. And every day I've been able to invest in myself as a cook, as a professional, as a person. And Pardis has had a lot to do with that as well.

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EV: How so?

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ZR: She tries to get the best out of you and she is not willing to compromise that at all. A lot--you probably call it tough love. I've never seen someone so persistent other than Frank on greatness.

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EV: I'm curious why you prefer the term *cook* to *chef*.

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ZR: Good question. I don't know. I mean I started this journey cooking with my mom, with my grandma, and didn't think it would give me--going to be anything other than that.

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I actually call myself a teacher more than a chef, too, because if you don't teach the people underneath you then you're not going to have the--I mean you're not going to have the work that you need done, you're not going to have the--I mean if you don't teach people what you need or what you want or lead them then you're not going to get what you have--want out of them. And then your expectations and their expectations are cloudy. So I mean "chef" to me is this like--like Frank is Chef, you know and I guess I am--I am the chef de cuisine and but I guess the funny side of that too is so here's the other part--.

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So I kind of got deep and a little emotional but--so here's the funny part of this to me. So everybody is a home cook, everybody is a home chef, so I get off of work on a Friday night, 12-hour shift, you know there's that pressure cooker that we love, you know if you don't love that you're probably not going to love the kitchen because it's this big ball of energy that I consider a pressure cooker. And you go out and you have that drink just unwind and more than likely you just want to have it by yourself or your significant other or maybe your one friend that you want to hang out with. And there's that one person that may be new to Birmingham that's like oh, what do you do? And you're like oh, I'm a chef. Well I'm a chef, too and it's like this whole--and I love talking about what I do. I do. I love it more than anything in the world but sometimes when you tell someone you're a cook **[Laughs]** it's a little less involved than telling them you're a chef. **[Laughs]** So you--you see where I'm going with that? **[House phone rings]**

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Oh you're a chef? Oh well, I did this the other night. What do you think about that? And I love answering that question too. But sometimes when I get off of that shift I just want to sit down and not be the chef and not have to answer chef questions. **[Laughs]**

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EV: That's your decompression time.

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ZR: It is and okay, here's the other funny one or part of it, you know. So going back to everybody is a chef, everybody is a cook, whatever, whatever you want to call yourself, I definitely think the professional is the chef. It's just funny that I call myself the cook.

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You don't sit down to an accountant and sit down to me and then sit down with a carpenter, okay--whatever they may be. None of you know each other and then everybody finds out what you do. And then I don't look to the accountant and go, "So, I got this Roth IRA; what should I do with it?" But nine times out of ten someone is going to go, "So I was cooking this dish the other day; what do you think of that?" It's--it's a normal conversation and I enjoy those conversations but sometimes I do find that when I say I'm a chef it implies a little bit more of that conversation than a cook. And that conversation is due for a time and place, not necessarily when I'm trying to talk to my girlfriend about our life or what happened in our day or just decompress [*Laughs*], so--.

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EV: You mentioned the teaching role. The people who work in the kitchen what are they trying to accomplish?

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ZR: I think that depends. I think everybody has a different idea of what they want to get out of this business. You know it starts from all walks of life, *stages* that come in that are just trying to learn things that might be in school in neuro-science and literature or someone that appreciates what we do and loves it but knows that this isn't going to be their profession but knows that they can learn something from it. [Interviewer's note: "*stage*" refers to an unpaid internship in a restaurant, or to the actual intern/chef. The first syllable rhymes with ahh.]

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Then you've got someone who is really good at several different things and they're kind of trying to play their life out and I'm young. What do I want to do? A good example here--
Drean who--

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EV: Drean who?

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ZR: Whittern. He's been with me for a period of time, off and on six years, came to me out of high school, full of life, semi-pro long-board skateboarder, loves accountants but loves to cook, but knows that right now semi--semi-pro skateboarding isn't really paying the bills. What do I do? And to see him grow and become somebody that I rely on daily who is here all the time but is also trying to go to Yale. I mean the guy comes in; the kid comes in at 8 o'clock in the morning, works his way up until he has to go to school, goes to school; after school goes to the library until 1:00 a.m. and then he comes back. And he does it every single day.

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EV: And he's in high school or college?

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ZR: No; he's in college now.

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EV: In college?

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ZR: At UAB and then you've got— [Interviewer's note: University of Alabama at Birmingham.]

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EV: And do you know how to spell his name?

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ZR: D-r-e-a-n; last name I'm going to--W-h-i-t-t-e-r-n I believe.

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EV: The transcriptionists generally appreciate these things. *[Laughs]*

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ZR: Then you have someone like Zack--Zack Smith -- in the kitchen.

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EV: Known as Little Zack.

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ZR: Known as Little Zack, yes, who came in right out of high school and went to culinary school and--at Jeff State, who has a great program, and I think this is going to touch on just kind of everybody has their own place and how they find their way in this business. [Interviewer's note: Jefferson State Community College is the lone culinary school remaining in Birmingham, after the Culinar school closed in 2018.]

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He's going to culinary school and coming in and working here and found out that man I'm just learning so much more here than I am paying to learn it there because let's be honest. A lot of what we do you can learn the terminologies and you can learn the history but a lot of what we do is hands-on and on-the-job training--and I'll touch on that later, too--but he came to me one day and he's like what do you think about me not going to school anymore? And I--for some reason thought he had just asked me and I was like well, you know pros and cons, this and that; he had went--he had gone to multiple people, which shows the kind of person he is--Frank, just people he respected, people in the business, and sat down with his family, one thing that I would have never done at his age and talked to my parents about dropping out of school, and made the decision to drop out of school so he could fully commit here and to see that commitment and to

see that growth is part of that training, is a part of that training, is part of that teaching. And everybody is going to make mistakes and how I can lead that person, teach that person, and look at him now, we just had my sous chef go over to be Fonfon's, John Finney, and now he's [Interviewer's note: Zack Smith] going to be coming up to be the sous chef here at Highlands which is a great opportunity for him.

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You know--okay, let's go onto another kind of person, speaking on the others and now high schools have these--you know when I took home-ec, I don't know if you took home-ec but when I took home-ec it was 60 percent sewing and 40 percent you know cooking an egg and casserole this, and more importantly it was a little bit different in high school, something to do, definitely got you around a lot more women. But now you got these guys--Noah, his last name is definitely being lost right now--

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EV: Maybe you could email me later.

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ZR: I will. But he's in the--he's in home-ec in school in Albertville, which I believe is an hour and something away.

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EV: It's a fair distance. [Interviewer's note: Albertville, Alabama, is about 80 miles northeast of Birmingham.]

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ZR: They're going to competitions; actually won two competitions two years in a row, was able to get a scholarship from Jeff State through the high school, which allows them so much more of an opportunity to be ahead of the game when they get here.

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So that's another type of person. And then you have just the person that comes off the street that just needs a job that has the work ethic that you — that it takes. And to be honest, sometimes I prefer that much more than somebody who has a bunch of their own ideas.

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EV: Because you can build them from the ground-up?

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ZR: You can build them. They're impressionable in--in a good way. So then that falls on me. You know so now you've got all these different people that you have to make sure they have the same goal because if we don't have the same goal then how can we achieve what we want to achieve? But then you have to find out how you can make--how you can teach the individual to work as a team with someone that is not like them, so it's so--it's like layering--it's like here's--here's a chef term, it's like layering a cake or lasagna. You've got all these different people at all these--all there--a different place in their life, in their career, and being able to bring them together for one goal but lead them and teach them.

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I looked up one day and I said--and this is bad because I was not the best kid to my teachers in high school or--or elementary school. I mean I didn't pay attention. I was loud. I was a hellion; let's say it. I mean I feel horrible for it now. But I looked up one day and I was like holy smokes; I'm a teacher. I mean it's crazy. And it--and just to touch on the teaching things a little bit more, it's teaching organization, it's teaching timeliness, it's teaching--it might sound common or it might sound like this is how you should do it, but time management like teaching time management is something that if you can manage your time properly you can achieve much more than you thought ever. It just makes sense.

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If you're doing something that takes an hour but that entire hour that you're doing it, you're not physically touching it, there's places--there's time that you can do other things. But if you do those other things before you do the thing that takes an hour and a half because then you'll only have that to do, you're not maximizing your time. It's little things like that; it's teaching prep lists, it's teaching menu development, it's teaching--Zack [Smith] now is going to learn how to do some ordering and why you don't order 10 pounds of this today even though you might use 10 pounds for the week. It's so much that--and not in a--not in an overwhelming way but the teaching aspect alone is something that I never expected. But to say that--to recap on that, I know the expectations of what this job was going to bring me have been so exceeded and met and just I just didn't know where this job was going to take me or this career, so--.

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EV: So how much a part of--how much of your job as chef de cuisine is this teaching component?

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ZR: [*Laughs*] Ah, 60 percent; I mean yeah 60 percent, you know the way it goes there's me, there's the sous chef, you've obviously got two sets of the line, the hot side and the cold side, so you've got someone that you lean on--on the cold side and the hot side that you kind of speak directly to and then there's people under them. But throughout the day it's traveling, making sure you're traveling throughout the kitchen and making sure that you're, you know, having a well-thought-out conversation with everybody so they don't feel like they're left out or that someone doesn't see you as much. I mean the part of being a good leader is everybody knows that you've got their back; that you can do what they can do. If you--if they can't do it you're going to show them how to do it; you know lead by example. So I mean it's--it's tricky because sometimes depending on what we have going on at Highlands you know parties that are traveling, things that are going on, I mean it's--it's tough. But if you don't invest that teaching time in the person, the expectations that you have for them when they're not met, the only person that you can look at is yourself. You know so either buck up and you do it, or you sit back at the end of the night and say, "What's going on? Why am I not getting the results I want?" And at the end of the day it all falls on you because my job as the chef de cuisine is to facilitate the kitchen run in the best manner it can so that the guests have the best experience they can.

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And to not do that would be disrespecting Frank and Pardis and that's not something that I'm willing to do. If you can't [*Laughs*] work--if you can't outwork everybody and you can't work harder and smarter then you don't need to be in here. And--

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EV: Who are your hot and cold side people?

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ZR: So right--well, we're--you know right now we're in a little bit of a switch. It's always moving parts in the kitchen. I have been fortunate to have a lot of the same people. Right now we have Noah Matthews; I knew it would come to me, N-o-a-h--Matthews would be--

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EV: Two T's probably.

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ZR: Two T's. Wayman--W-a-y-m-a-n--last name starts with a C; that might come to me. Issac--I-s-s-a-c; that's the three garde manger lines. Eric McKinnish [phonetic] is the grill--butcher/grill. Zack Smith aka Little Zack is the middle who--middle at Highlands, middle hotline at Highlands is probably the most important position in the kitchen outside of the management. Any plate that goes out--excuse me--to the dining room, entrée-wise, you touch every single one of them. They're in charge of all the vegetable prep which here at Highlands is almost the most important prep. And then there is Kevin; he is our sauté cook and his last name I don't know. Is that bad I don't know their last names?

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EV: Well if you're not writing the checks you probably don't know the last name as well.

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ZR: [*Laughs*]

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EV: And describe for--for people who may not be familiar what the hot and cold lines are and garde manger.

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ZR: So start on garde manger, cold line, the preparation of appetizers, one, but obviously cold side, a lot of cold apps, salads, soups; the upper half of Highlands' menu would also be known as that. You know kind of that introductory level--Pardis and I kind of joke from time to time; we call it the entry level but the knowledge that we expect out of him is so vast that entry level is a little bit of an understatement because you know the difference in our hot line and our cold line, the hot line we have a butcher and a grill, and the grill only grills proteins and butchers. Sauté deals with soups, sauces, braises, and sautéing some of the proteins obviously during service. And then the middle deals with the vegetable prep and what we call in the industry, sets. So--

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EV: Which is everything but the protein?

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ZR: Which is everything but the protein and the sauces. But then you have garde manger, they're--they're responsible for the dish top to bottom. I mean okay we've got a butcher, so maybe the pork belly that we might be roasting in the oven with lots of herbs and spices might not come from them. You better believe everything else is. So that "entry level" is--is not so entry.

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EV: Let's use the famous baked grits as an example of what you're talking about there.

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ZR: So the baked grits are famous. They don't come off. For example there, they're in charge of the beurre blanc which is a reduction of shallots and white wine and vinegar and aromatics. And when I speak of aromatics, bay, chili, thyme, all reduced down with a lot of shallots and then at the end--right before service we'll mount lots of butter and tabasco and make this really luxurious sauce. Then that rolls into what goes on top of the beurre blanc which is the actual grit itself. A lot of people call it a soufflé. It's not you know, Bottega's parmesan soufflé is more of that; it's much more egg.

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Ours is more that just--it is what it is; it's a baked grit. There's egg that sets it but it's not a soufflé.

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EV: More of a binder?

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ZR: More of a binder. But you know that's a two--two and a half hour process. You know you come in and you start the grits with the McEwan & Sons grits from scratch with water and you have to simmer them for a certain period of time and then you've got to flavor them and if you are wondering, there's more butter and parmesan that goes into this than you can ever imagine. Then you got to temper them with eggs, which we talked about as just the binder; it's not--I mean if I've got four quarts of product--you know if I've got a gallon of product, we're only putting four eggs in it, you know. I mean we're not talking about a ton of eggs.

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Then you got to cup them up which the cups involve buttering them with butter so they don't stick and then you've got to make a water bath and you've got to bake them for 30 minutes and then rotate them and then bake them again. You got to pull--you have to pull them out and cool them. And that's only half your prep. You've also got your mushrooms that you've got to chop or--or cut; ham, Benton's ham that you've got to make in the most perfect julienne strips but it can't be too thick and it can't have too much fat. Thank God we have the servers that take time for us because that's the most tedious job out of all and we don't have the time for that. But then after the mushrooms are cooked--cut you have to cook them almost to order. So then comes service and we're doing 220 people in a night and we're doing 35 grits and you've got to put them in the oven but you can't overbake them and you've got to make sure they're the right temperature. And the plate has got to be hot because if the plate is not hot I'm going to be barking at them about the plate not being hot. And if I'm not barking about it, Frank is going to bark at them about it.

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So the grits are this--it's this love/hate thing because it's--it's almost like the lifeline of our--our garde manger line but the preparation once you master it is much easier. But getting back into time management, if you're not managing your time properly from the start to the finish there's a lot of things that can be done in between the baking and the cooking of the grit. But then service end there's a lot of things that can be done while the grits are in the oven getting hot. So it's this ball that just rolls and rolls. But, you know, it is an intense thing labor-wise and that's something that they're responsible for solely, you know. And so to say that it's this intermediate kind of--but it's where everybody starts.

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But I think it instills early that the work ethic has--it's going to have to be what it is or you're not going to make it. And that's where I can find really quick--really quickly can I figure and find out where my teaching starts and all right, what needs to be addressed now and this needs to be addressed before this because of, you know, a lot of times you can almost--it's like a Catch 22. There's that period where you might let things fly for a couple days just to see how it all, you know, pans out. And that's going to make Five-thirty tough for us. But you--

00:38:25

EV: Five-thirty being--?

00:38:26

ZR: Being opening time. But I find--I have found that if you bail people out too early then there's nothing for them to learn from. If you let someone make mistakes for themselves--now

let's be honest; my job is to make sure it runs smooth and nothing--it's not going--I'm not going to let that fail like we're not going to end up oh it's Five-thirty and we can't serve the grit. That's not what I'm saying but I'm going to definitely let people make mistakes and I'm going to let them make them a couple times. It's not going to happen very often and then that's when that kind of touching back on teaching--that's when you implement that teaching is all right, what do you see? How do you think you can get better, having not done this before? Well, this is coming from someone who has done it--me; this is what I see. Now think about doing it this way. And when you talk to them about that it's that light switch. It turns on and they're like well, I didn't think about that.

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You know it's like well, I guess that's my job to teach you that. So I mean then you think about lettuces. We get these beautiful lettuces from some of our farmers. And they take so much pride in growing them and harvesting them and washing them and then we make them shine with simple vinaigrettes and really nice ingredients. But they have to wash the lettuce. They have to make the vinaigrette, the vinaigrette has to be macerated so if you don't make the vinaigrette early enough you're not going to have a good--your maceration is not going to be done in time.

00:40:17

And you've got nuts that we toast low and slow so we're--you know a nut is not going to toast in 15 minutes; it's going to toast in 30 to 45 minutes.

00:40:28

Different cheeses and getting those on line and different vegetables that we pair up with them, so they're doing it all as opposed to being able to like, Eric the butcher and the grill--and

the grill cook or chef, he's able to spend all day butchering. And now yeah; there's a time management to that as well but--

00:40:53

EV: Especially with the pre-firing needs and things like that. [Interviewer's note: When grill cooks "pre-fire," they start the meat when the order comes in, to allow time for it to come to temperature and properly rest before the entrees are plated.]

00:40:55

ZR: You know and that's this whole other story when you start during service the pre-firing meats, but as far as like just--let's just talk about the prep aspect of it. I have this to do and the curveball may be that I need more of it rather than, oh goodness, chef has added this to me, you know? So the garde manger line has their hands full. You know I expect a lot out of them; we expect a lot out of them. But we expect a lot out of everybody. You know myself, everybody in the kitchen, the dishwashers, Dol, the front of the house. But what's really cool to me is we've talked about the 5:30 that kind of -- 4:30 I go to the meeting with the servers and the bartenders and we talk about the food from last night. We talk about the food that we're having tonight. Maybe we have some new fish. Maybe we have some new dishes. [Interviewer's note: This is a daily pre-service meeting with wait staff and floor managers.]

00:42:06

You know that--depending on what's going on that's normally a 15- to 30-minute meeting and then I get in the kitchen and you haven't been there for 30 minutes possibly and the reality of 30 minutes from now is service. So I call it like that period of like, if you're in that spot

and you're not looking forward to 5:30 then you don't need to be in the kitchen, right? There's this like--it's almost like reference-wise and it's like a basketball player. They get paid millions of dollars to go play basketball. But I promise you they get fired up right before the game. And when they don't get fired up right before the game that's when they retire because they don't have the passion.

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There's that 5 o'clock passion that comes and you see all that kind of conversation with Zack, the conversation with Eric, and the conversation with Wayman, and all that kind of comes together and you see everybody get down on line and hopefully we're prepped in enough time to get outside and have that fresh--breath of fresh air because you're not moving from that spot for the next four and half--five hours. To see that still happen every single day is still something that fires me up. I've been able to kind of tone that down through working with Pardis obviously, just a little bit more about kind of having that emotion but being able to you know be calm, cool, collected. But when that first ticket rings in from there on out it doesn't matter what you did throughout the day; it's this kind of symphony almost of people talking to each other, the plates moving, you know the utensils hitting different things, me talking--I need to get away from barking--talking about what needs to happen. You know servers coming in, firing tickets; Frank coming in from the dining room and maybe seeing something that we need to tweak and just conversation amongst the hot line or the garde manger line and myself about just making something better. And at that point it doesn't matter if it's hot or cold or me or who it is; at that point the only thing that's important is the guest's experience and making it the best possible experience for them.

00:44:45

EV: And people will jump in and help out in other stations at times like that as well?

00:44:50

ZR: Oh most definitely. You obviously have people that are better at time management than others that have some time but let's be honest. I mean some days people just have off-days and you know you're walking into a job that never stops and, you know, I mean sometimes you just don't have the option in this industry. If you woke up just, "I'm not feeling well." You're not sick but you're not feeling well and you still have to be here and you still have to be on. And everybody is going to have those days but that's what--that's what generates the team. I mean if you don't have a strong team that can rely on people and lean on each other then you're not going to have a successful kitchen that's for sure.

00:45:37

EV: Tell us a little bit about you, growing up and your journey to Birmingham.

00:45:42

ZR: Growing up, South Alabama, Perdido Beach. Not a lot goes on in Perdido Beach still today; like I said on Saturday, we still don't have a traffic light. We just— just I mean four years ago had— we received our own zip code. It's a little peninsula in Soldier's Creek which is off of Perdido Bay, so if you can imagine, I spent a lot of time on the water boating, fishing, skiing, scuba diving, all that you know.

00:46:27

School in Alberta, Alabama, for K through 5 and then 6th intermediate was still in Alberta and then for high school we all transitioned to Foley, Alabama, at that point. Foley, Gulf Shores, Orange Beach, I'm just going to say. Alberta School Systems because Perdido Beach and Lillian and all shipped into Alberta.

00:46:54

Then there was a couple kids on the line of Summerdale, Robertsdale, we all went to the same school. And that's the school system in Baldwin County. So you go from this small school system to all the sudden you're thrown into this you know at the time we're the biggest class. I mean I went from--when I graduated 8th--when I was in 8th grade there was--I mean maybe 25 people in my class to all of the sudden--maybe that's an understatement. Maybe it was more like 40, you know, but still. I mean we're not talking about a lot of people to all the sudden you're in a 4A school with I think we ended up graduating, you know, four years--people drop out; I think we ended up graduating with 286 people in our class. [Interviewer's note: 4A is an ascending classification for high school sports teams, based on school size. When Redes was in high school, the state's largest schools were in the 6A classification. The top tier became 7A in 2015.] You know so that's this big change but still you know it introduced you to a lot of people and at that point you know school, sports--my parents always made me in the summer have a job.

00:48:12

EV: What kinds of jobs?

00:48:12

ZR: You know my--my best friend from elementary school, his dad had a construction company and I did a little bit of that and didn't enjoy it but it was a job. You know it put money in your pocket. During school as long as I--we were in sports and extracurricular activities and had good grades we didn't have to have a job. But you better believe, summer came around and they were asking what was going on. And then there was that last summer--well I guess I did the construction up into graduating high school; always at the--at home just cooking and enjoying it. My dad tells this funny story that you know, and I try and rationalize it somehow in my head, he's like I can remember Zack; I knew he'd be a chef when he cooked eggs and he started putting like cinnamon in them and just a couple different things and they weren't the best eggs but we ate them. And I was like, and I try and rationalize it like yeah, I was really thinking I was going to make like French toast but never did, you know.

00:49:21

EV: But forgot the toast?

00:49:22

ZR: Forgot the toast. *[Laughs]* So but you know I just always fell back to that, you know, and it comes from one reason why I'm in this business other than I love doing it, four kids, two sisters, two--me and a brother, extracurricular activities, sports, you name it, we--we sat down at a dinner table, still, four to five nights a week which is impressive.

00:49:56

EV: It's tough to do.

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ZR: It is very impressive. Now some of them were quick meals; some of them you know on weekends were meals that I made with my mother. But you're able to sit down, talk about your day, enjoy each other, and to me that's what going out is about. I mean the food makes it better, or the food could make it worse, but at the end of the day you're going to remember conversations that you had with people.

00:50:29

But back to working--

00:50:33

EV: First of all, what did you--what kinds of food did you eat at home? What did you grow up eating?

00:50:37

ZR: So I grew up eating a lot of Italian food. My mom is Italian--a lot of sausage and peppers, obviously a lot of quick casseroles. My mom was adventurous; a lot of seafood. My dad you know my dad cooked a good bit. He loves to fish and he always had fresh fish. But then there's me you know; I would always kind of be pushing the--you know I liked for some reason to cook or what I thought was cooking like Asian food. You know you go to the market and you have some like sausage and peppers and then you buy that like package of like whatever package of mix that you mix with soy sauce and like some kind of rice wine and tried and cook some like Asian sauté or stir-fry.

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My grandmother on my dad's side does a lot of like--she does this one called Chop Suey which is you know pork-based and water chestnuts and roux and those--what are they called, the little crispy nuggets or brown, like things on top, just a big mix. I always was interested in looking at things. It's funny; now that we're talking about it, it kind of is a memory that pops up. So my parents for their wedding anniversary received--or for their wedding present excuse me--received the *Time/Life Cookbook Series*. So that's the first cookbook I ever watched--or looked at and that--my dad had this--my dad was a carpenter and built a lot of things with his hands. My dad built this bookcase for my mom's recipes and those books were on the bottom and I could always reach them.

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So I can--right now I can see the pictures in my mind, you know because that book is very cook--or picture-centric if you will. And one thing that I enjoy so much is trussing things and but it was also one of the first things I ever remember seeing in those books. Funny thing about those books now is that Chef [Stitt] helped his mentor on those books and some of his books, so it's almost like this big full circle.

00:53:04

EV: And the mentor is Richard Olney? [After Stitt worked at Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California, Alice Waters wrote an introductory letter to Olney, who was working on the Time/Life cookbook series at the time. Stitt's time in France with Olney in 1978 helped the chef realize the parallels between country French and his native Southern foodways, ultimately

inspiring Highlands Bar and Grill when it opened in 1982. Olney also helped Stitt develop a deep passion for wine, also reflected in the offerings at Highlands and its sister restaurants.]

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ZR: Richard Olney, yes. So it was the first cookbook series that I looked at and my mom did a little bit of cooking out of it but let's be realistic, four kids, two girls--twins that are in Girl Scouts, volleyball, cheerleading, two boys--baseball, soccer, basketball, Boy Scouts, I mean there's only so much southern Provence cooking that you can get accomplished especially when some of them are braise this in heavy--or you know, having worked a lot of those, when you look at those dishes, they look like they're straightforward and simple but there's so much work that goes into three or four ingredients that there's no way a mom with four kids doing that much can get it all done.

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EV: Especially since she was driving y'all hither, there and yon.

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ZR: Right; so you know those--those were some of the first memories of cookbooks that I can remember and kind of another funny story--fast-forward to a few years ago. I'm like mom, what--I had gone home for Christmas I believe and I was like "Where are those cookbooks?" My mom was like well, "I had given them away to the Fire Department for a donation because they were doing a charity to sell"--. I was like really? Like, well, did you ever think that I might want them? And this is the most--this is the funniest thing and it's just my dad not--and he was like well, what are you going to do with those? And I'm like did you just say that, dad? And like we

chuckle about it now, so that--re--rewind to a few months ago; my mom tracked down the entire series on eBay and gave it to me for my birthday.

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So there's not that nostalgic, these are the ones I looked at when I was younger, but it's safe to say now I have the entire series of them.

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EV: And you could pretend.

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ZR: I can pretend. I'll still sit on the floor Indian style like I did and look at them, so--

00:55:09

EV: What are your parents' names?

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ZR: Phyllis Redes and Gary Redes.

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EV: And the grandmother you mentioned cooking with this is your paternal grandmother?

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ZR: Yes.

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EV: What's her name?

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ZR: Margaret--Peggy is what we call her--Redes.

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EV: How did she get the Peggy?

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ZR: I think you know it's just--and I learned this through younger *stage* that was working here and a couple years ago and her name is Margaret. And I'm like my grandmother's name is Margaret and she goes. "Let me guess, her nickname is Peggy." I think it's just a kind of like it--I don't think it has a--a where it came from. I think it's just kind of like a known like Margaret and Peggy are kind of like this--. It was--it was strange; it was like well I call my grandmother--she goes let me guess Peggy. I was like where did that come from? She goes "People tell me that that's kind of like a nickname" that--so strange.

00:56:04

But yeah; so back to construction which I did not do long obviously, out of high school I knew I did not want to sit in a four-year classroom. I did well in school but it's just you know my attention span is not of sit in a classroom and pay attention. And if I did pay attention to be honest I--it's not like retaining it came easily either.

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But I had to have a job [*Laughs*] of course--

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EV: That's a given.

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ZR: Given. If you had to have one when you're on school break, you definitely had to have one if you weren't in school.

00:56:45

EV: And you better be at the dinner table that evening.

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ZR: Exactly. So my mom suggested; he's like why don't you--you know at that point my cooking was so much more of a hobby and I told the story Saturday, which you were there, realizing now 20-something years ago, 23 years ago that I was kind of catering parties then, is that kind of like wow; you were, you know. I told the story of dating a girl and spending a lot of time at her house and cooking at her house and her mom was wanting to do a birthday party for the guy she was dating and she asked me if I would do it, and gladly said yes, and you know at that time me--I mean 17 [years old], 15--20 people, you know she--I asked her what she wanted. I mean, off-hand the only thing that comes to mind is chicken cordon bleu which isn't necessarily the easiest thing. You know I mean we've got to take a chicken breast and you've got to brine it,

pound it. You've got to stuff it with you know Swiss cheese and ham and you've got to roll it up, toothpick it and then bread it. And that's just the--the one thing.

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I just--what else I did , you know, I know I had a sauce with it; I'm not sure, but I mean she picked what it was. But I can remember being at her boyfriend's house, doing the prep at my house and transporting it and sitting back and cooking it. And it was definitely a very loose kind of thing. And I sat down at the table with them and ate, of course. But having done that and being able to look back at it years later, and we're not talking about five--six years ago, like I said I mean I sat down and I had this epiphany like three years ago that I was doing this at a young age and had not even known it. But I think that speaks volumes for if you love doing something it's not really going to be work.

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Let's be clear. I do have a job and yes, now it's a little bit more work, just based--based on I'm not touching as much raw ingredients and I'm not physically doing the actual work of cooking anymore. But and I still love my job but there's a little bit of disconnect. But that makes me appreciate cooking more at home now than you know you get that--well do you cook at home, and Kate--I call her Kat-e but easy Kate, she smiles when we're in a group of people and she just says, "Oddly enough it's what he loves doing." You know I mean yes; we go out and eat. But I would prefer to be at home, having a glass of wine with her, cooking a dinner that we're going to enjoy, maybe inviting a couple friends over. It just makes me appreciate what I do so much more is that there's probably not--going back to that accountant, probably not a lot of accountants that go home and, "Let me get to work on my computer and write down numbers,"

you know. I mean they might only do their finances based on that they're better at it than their significant other, so--.

01:00:38

EV: And please explain who Kate is.

01:00:40

ZR: Kate is my girlfriend, life partner that – met 10 months ago and is someone that inspires me. One thing I've learned in this business is that it takes a whole group of people to make it happen. And immigrants are one of those people. But immigrants aren't just in the kitchen. They're all throughout. And they're people that should inspire you. And that's what she does for me, so she's--

01:01:22

EV: Is she an immigrant?

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ZR: She is; Macedonia.

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EV: Oh cool.

01:01:27

ZR: Or if you're speaking to Russians, Mack-a-donia. Yeah; she came over at the age of 17.

She was helping a group of individuals from Rice [University], the archaeologists over there in Macedonia translate so she was working on her English. And then just the funny thing is I didn't--you know the more I get to know her the more I find out. It wasn't like she had this like dream of like oh, I'm going to come to America. Just through meeting people, they left after a couple--you know every summer they would come over obviously and the last summer they left, like a month or two later, they had written a letter to her, her parents, the school system, like we've got this opportunity for her to come over and live here and kind of go to school here, and she like three weeks later, you know, so that's the crazy thing, three weeks later to come over here all by herself with a family; ended up majoring in English and minor in Spanish, graduate degree in Public Health at UAB, and a law degree just to have fun.

01:02:55

EV: What an impressive person.

01:02:55

ZR: Right. I mean but and it's--she is an impressive person but I think it touches on a lot of immigrants are impressive people. So yes; impressive almost makes me need to be more impressive I think. So but that's--that's--

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EV: That's the best kind of partner you could have.

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ZR: Yes; it is, someone that pushes you and makes you better, so--.

01:03:23

EV: What was your first cooking job?

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ZR: My first cooking job was a month after high school, when I was on--I left the job and said I can't do this the rest of my life. You love it and I ended up going to work at this place. It was called Gulf Seafood on Canal Road in Orange Beach, which let's not confuse it with Canal Road now of Orange Beach because it is so much more cultivated and just commercialized. [*Laughs*]

01:04:03

EV: It's been Disney-fied.

01:04:04

ZR: It's been Disney-fied; it definitely has. Fry cook which those of you that have been to this--the South I think is a bad--but Gulf Shores, Alabama, and some of those kind of beach destinations, even though you have other things on your menu—fried is definitely what people want. And it was--it was a whole new game. It was a whole new world because having never worked in the industry, walking into that and it's like holy smokes, because it is a different world. I think that's the biggest thing that people come in that have never worked in a kitchen when they see it they're like what is going on here?

01:04:46

EV: What's the difference?

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ZR: I mean it is--it is intense from the time you walk in the door. The language and the verbiage is definitely different. The affection towards people is different. The camaraderie is different.

01:05:06

EV: How many languages are you able to curse in now?

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ZR: Well [*Laughs*] cursing is a few, multiple actually. And then--but then also you know--by no means am I fluent, but I mean it opens you up to different languages and I think I could probably hear it a lot better than I can say it--a lot of things, but there are definitely things that you can learn that allows you a better opportunity to communicate with people. But so fry cook; I can remember that first night, you know, I think it was 15 pounds of shrimp I had to peel that first day, oysters, you know they were pre-shucked, what were we--scallops, they were pre-shucked, but I mean so the prep wasn't that heavy. And I ended up being a little bit more of like a prep cook early on in the morning and then rolled into the fry and setting up your station.

01:06:10

But man that first night just getting rocked, I mean you got like six fryers and they are all filled to the max and it's almost like a time portal at that point because if you stop [*House phone*

rings] for one second you are five minutes behind. And that doesn't change whether you're a fry cook at the beach or a sauté cook at Highlands or someone that's making tacos at Gordo's where I was yesterday. [Interviewer's note: Gordo's is a taqueria, carniceria, tienda and panaderia in Birmingham.] You know I mean it--it--it doesn't really matter. I mean in our business if you stop when the rush starts you are behind the eight-ball the second you stop.

01:06:52

But I can remember--I mean now that we are talking about it I can see the kitchen right now and I can see the grill to the right and the sauté to the left and they're--they're equally as busy. Now obviously it's a little bit more step-oriented so it's a different kind of busy. But I remember it being done and you go out back and just kind of relax for a second, but just for a second because there's a still a lot of work to be done. And then you walk in and you're like oof, there's a lot of cleaning to be done.

01:07:26

But I also remember--excited about being back the next day and that was the first time that I honestly had been excited about being back at--back to work the next day.

01:07:40

EV: Unlike construction.

01:07:41

ZR: Yeah [*Laughs*] and you know okay; so here's--to backtrack on our work. First job ever, great job for a 15 year-old, so then my parents didn't have to drive me there. They just had to drive the car back. And we're--let's be clear; it was at that time because not--none of the extra

roads--I mean it was a 25-minute drive--25 to 30-minute drive to work and then my parents would drive home and then they would have to drive to pick me up and then I would drive us home, so we're talking about, you know, time. I was working at Polo at Outlet Malls just hanging out, folding clothes, chilling--

01:08:32

EV: Talking to girls.

01:08:33

ZR: Talking--perfect job for a 15 year-old kid, guy or girl, because I mean the--I mean we all know what Polo is and they just come in from all walks of life and Lord forbid it rains at the beach because it was--it's the only thing that I can--raining at the beach and working in an outlet mall is the only thing that I can think would be even close to working in the kitchen because it's like there's only one thing for them to do and it's to go shopping.

01:09:02

But that was my first job so it wasn't all construction. But--

01:09:11

EV: So what--did you decide to make cooking your, your career, that what you would do?

01:09:15

ZR: So that summer or that--I call it summer because we--that would have been one of the summers that I worked after fall break or summer break. I remember working that whole summer

and my mom was pushing school but she didn't necessarily say I had to but Faulkner State has a really good culinary program. She was like why don't you do culinary arts?

01:09:42

And I was like, well sure. And so I enrolled in the fall and really enjoyed it because it was a lot more of the kind of lab-centric things for the first part. And then we started working our way into actual bookwork and I just became so disinterested and, you know, it's right time, right place because I ended up going to culinary school in Birmingham anyways. So I dropped out, reluctantly, but it was you know--it just wasn't fun. And go back to that on-the-job training and worked at Gulf Bay for quite some time. I mean you know for me at that point it was a period of time that was worth noting. You know eight months; no, maybe it was a little bit less because you know it's so--I mean down there it's tourist-built a lot, so in the fall months when it starts slowing up there's a lot less work.

01:10:55

So I remember having made it through a--the fry station, earned my stripes rather quickly and then obviously the business, just people leaving and going, moving to different positions but then also just tired of working there. I ended up going and working at the--I forget the name of the place; I definitely remember making perogies for a Valentine's Day menu for days it seemed like, though. And I also remember working an omelet station for the first time and that was the first time I had been in front of someone cooking and it was just like oh my God, because now I'm so comfortable obviously I'm giving an interview that people are going to hear and I'm comfortable with it, or the demo on Saturday but I remember being like oh my God, like--. And a lot of that is just confidence in your person, you know. [*House phone rings*]

01:11:46

But I definitely remember I was a dishwasher and kind of a cook there, right; they-- everybody in this business washes dishes at some point. That's--let's--it might not have been the first job but the second job was definitely dishwasher/kind of what's a better word than [*unintelligible*]-his name was Charlie. I do remember that. He's a gray-haired, big--big gray beard, kind of make you think of Santa Claus. And he was--he was a really good guy and, you know, now that I'm sitting back looking at it, had I been a little bit more like Little Zack in a better spot I would have utilized him because he had a--he--he was a very smart, smart man and had been cooking a long time and I didn't utilize him enough for sure.

01:12:43

But just little things of, you know, he was big on making--he'd make a roux to where he wanted it, perfect, and this is a real French thing. And when he was picking a sauce up for service he would take a little bit of that roux off the line and pop it in there so he wouldn't have to over-reduce it. You know it gives it that body and just little things like that. But I just didn't--you know I wasn't in the mindset of some of these--of someone that needed to be. And I didn't last long there. And then I went to another restaurant that was a little bit bigger that could keep me more occupied during the season and it was right on the beach and learned a little bit there and didn't take full opportunity there. And just bounced around at several places for probably two or three years; let's see--hold on. Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen--yeah; so until about twenty-one just off and on jobs; people that I had built relationships would open a restaurant and then I would go help them which I think has been beneficial for me because I mean opening a restaurant is definitely something.

01:13:58

Now I was looking at differently then than I would be now, but I still remember those things. I mean the--the--the years went by and the more you realize it you're going to do it. And then right around 21 I was really looking for a change and just kind of bored, you know what am I going to do; the beach isn't for me. It takes a certain mindset to live at the beach full-time. It really does. And maybe when I retire that's the mindset to have but when you're a 20- to 21-year-old young adult it's not the place for me.

01:14:35

So I took a summer practicing my culinary arts [*House phone rings*]-you're going to be surprised here--traveling with the band Phish, made burritos on tour, [*Laughs*]-

01:14:49

EV: Way-kind veggie burritos? [Interviewer's note: Phish, based in Vermont, is a jam band that formed in the mid-1980s – often compared to its contemporary, Widespread Panic, and their antecedent, The Grateful Dead. Deadheads, the Dead's rabid fans, started a tradition of hanging out in the parking lot for hours before and after concerts. Some would sell t-shirts and other wares; others cooked food to sell, including what was commonly called “way-kind veggie burritos.” Fans like Redes continue that practice at Phish (and Panic) shows.]

01:14:50

ZR: I didn't--no; chicken, Italian chicken wraps, you know I can eat veggie but I'd rather eat protein.

01:15:00

EV: That's actually from Dead show parking lots when I was--.

01:15:04

ZR: Oh no, yeah the falafels, I know them. I do like to note that with my serve safe sanitation that I did get at the previous culinary school I had the most sanitized station in the lot mind you. And spent a summer just kind of seeing the Northeast, traveling; I have a huge travel bug. It is the--it's the thing that inspires me. It's the thing that makes me--I mean seeing different cultures, if you can't take that back into the culinary arts then something is wrong, right?

01:15:37

So I spent the entire summer doing that, but with the anticipation I had already enrolled in a school here and knew that I was moving to Birmingham. So prior to me leaving I had done the legwork and knew that I was going to be leaving, or moving to Birmingham.

01:15:53

EV: Where--where were you going to go to Culinary or Jeff State?

01:15:56

ZR: Yeah Culinary; at that point they had the--the associates program. So I moved back here and started the associates program and then started working--excuse me; started working for Daniel George in Mount Brook Village, now known as DG. And worked there for eight years under Daniel Briggs and George McMillan and just kind of really started refining my technique and what I liked to do and how I liked to do it. [Interviewer's note: The restaurant name switched to DG after McMillan left in 2011. McMillan is chef/owner of FoodBar in the suburban

community, Cahaba Heights.] And I can't thank those two enough for allowing me that eight-year period to do that, you know, because there's plenty of bumps and plenty of mistakes and they allowed me that opportunity to kind of learn from those mistakes.

01:16:50

And all throughout I had formed a really good relationship with two of my best friends in town, Kyle Knoll--

01:17:01

EV: How does he spell his last name?

01:17:02

ZR: K-n-o-l-l. And Mark Christie who is--helps--the equivalent to Dol's sous chef at Bottega.

[Interviewer's note: Christie is one of the pastry chefs supplying desserts for all four Stitt restaurants.]

01:17:17

EV: It's Mark with a K and Christie--what Y or I-e?

01:17:21

ZR: I-e.

01:17:22

EV: Okay.

01:17:23

ZR: And Kyle worked with us at Daniel George for a little bit but he got an opportunity to go work at Chez Fonfon after that first year of me working there. And he spent, yeah I guess the other seven years working for Frank and then me and Mark worked for seven more years at DG. But through--

01:17:52

EV: For context; I'm sorry to interrupt but for context this is now fine dining?

01:17:57

ZR: Yes; it's--yeah oh it's--yes it's fine dining.

01:18:01

EV: And what is Fonfon just so people understand?

01:18:04

ZR: Chez Fonfon is a French bistro that Frank and Pardis own. Having been to France and having been to some of those bistros, I mean they couldn't have done a better job. For those of you that have been to France and been to bistros--very lively atmosphere, all the colors are right, the food is really spot-on to what you would find there, but obviously a little twist to it, you know. I mean they do the--they do the crab cake once a week. But Kyle was over there and he kept--he was that kind of--he was that line for me to know when there were openings in the company. And he had told me about a couple and told me about a couple and I'm one of those

people that it's--you know you go on your gut. The couple times I've went against my gut or gone against my gut it's not been--worked out well. It took me a couple years to find that out but I figured it out finally.

01:19:08

And I just--it just wasn't the right opportunity for me. I was still learning things at Daniel George. And truth be told, none of them were specifically Highlands jobs. And not that--I knew at the time what Highlands was but I--I obviously have a different respect for it now, and I'm not saying it had to be Highlands but it was just that thing--it wasn't time, wasn't time. And then finally he told me; he's like there's a job open at Highlands and so I came. I came in; I filled out an application. And, had the *stage*, as we know in the restaurant industry which is that kind of working interview where you come in, and [*House phone Rings*]--

01:19:58

EV: Yeah; what's--walk people through that process please.

01:20:00

ZR: So the hiring in a kitchen is a two-part thing. The interview where you sit down and speak with them about your previous work, obviously your normal interview; the only difference is you know it's a high-pace energy with lots of things going on and they need to be able to see your skill sets. So they put you in the kitchen; sometimes throw you to the wolves, sometimes maybe give you just a task to see how you accomplish it. But more importantly it's that kind of working interview where you can see how your team-building or team-working skills are, your knife skills, your knowledge of a recipe, work you through the night a little bit, see how you interact

and what your familiarity with working on the line is. I mean it's more important than the sit-down interview in our business because, I mean, someone can tell you all the things that they can do but if they can't do them--there's something to be said about telling you and then doing it.

01:21:10

So it's more important to me than you know the sit-down interview.

01:21:16

EV: And how many *stage* sessions would there be?

01:21:18

ZR: Two; typically two. If you do well, if you do good, you know at the end of the night, "Hey this is what I saw that I liked, this is what I saw that I didn't like; let's see about the, you know, fixing it." And then bring them in tomorrow or the next day for a little bit shorter period of time just to see if they're able to adapt and correct some of those things and then kind of go forward from there. Also it gives you a good evaluation of where someone is at; I mean you don't-- someone says they grill but they step on the grill and then they don't know how to clean the grill before they put something on it, it's a good indication that they might grill at home as opposed to at a restaurant, so--

01:21:57

EV: And the interview would be with Chef Stitt and the chef de cuisine or--?

01:22:02

ZR: Yeah; you know it's morphed over the years. Mine was with Frank. Now I think with me being here long enough there's a lot more trust that goes with that. They're allowing--you know and Frank is so busy with things that he's doing between Chez Fonfon and Bottega restaurants and, you know, working with Jones Valley Teaching Farm and just certain things that it allows me that trust that they give me and also allows me to kind of refine also learning more about my craft. [Interviewer's note: Jones Valley Teaching Farm is an urban farm in downtown Birmingham that uses its gardens to teach students about food and nutrition. Frank Stitt is a board member and longtime supporter.]

01:22:37

So typically that will be me now or maybe Pardis, depending on the situation. If they come in with an application it would be maybe more me, but if they fill out one on the website it would go straight to Pardis and then she would set up. So it--you know it kind of depends.

01:22:55

Mine was with Frank and came in and set it up and at this time at Daniel George--and this is nothing on them; it just shows the--I think this is going to touch on what Frank and Pardis expect. [Interviewer's note: Daniel George is a fine-dining restaurant in Mountain Brook, a suburban city south of Birmingham. Daniel Briggs is now exclusive owner of the 19-year-old restaurant, rebranded as dg. George McMillan III left in 2011, opening FoodBar restaurant in 2013 in the Cahaba Heights community, some six miles south of Birmingham.]

My ex-wife at the time— or my wife, ex-wife now, she was telling me she was like, I was just dressing like I was going to Daniel George, you know a pair of black pants that had bleach stains on them and a jacket that was clean but not pressed. I even had a brand new coat in my--in my closet and she was like, "You should wear that." And I'm like, "No; I'm good." Hat

backwards. I was rocking this scruffy ugly beard at the time. didn't even trim that up and--came in and right here--I'm looking at it now in the dining room is this big round table that's no longer there and they were having a managers' meeting and all--everybody was there. David Parker, who was the general manager for a long, long time here, Frank, Pardis, I mean all my--like all the people that I look up to and admire, Matt Gilpin, I mean everybody is here—Gray [Maddox], obviously Gray— they all had a little bit different role. I mean we're talking about eight years ago.

01:24:29

EV: And just for listeners, Gray is a good dresser. I mean this guy is always to the nines.

01:24:36

ZR: Oh fresh; I mean he doesn't walk out of the house without a bow tie. If I could tie a bow tie as well as him I might do the same, but my skills are not there— very well-dressed. And I come in to grab a piece of paper for a prep list which is one of the lifelines of your--your job in the kitchen and I get back in there and get to work and I'm starting to work. And I guess I had created a conversation at the table to say the least. David Parker, who, mind you, in a meeting is dressed in a suit, shirt, and tie and even has a jacket on, comes up, taps me on the shoulder and I've never met him before, you know. And those of you that have not met David, he's a tall--I'm a tall guy but he was taller than me and I'm six-three. I mean he has to be six-five--six-six, just a big guy, big personality, amazing. Taps me on my shoulder and he goes, "Can I— excuse me; can I speak to you for a second?" And he pulls me aside and one thing I appreciate and that I've learned from it was not in front of anybody; it was very professional, very— it was done right.

He mentions to me, he's like. "You know here at Highlands we— we like to hold ourselves in a professional manner. And saying that, if you'd like to leave and come back dressed in a little bit more of a professional manner we'd love to see what you have to do. But right now we're not going to be--we're not going to allow you to kind of come in and work with us here." And I'm just like oh my God because then it's like my opportunity is gone and the people that saw me in the kitchen that I knew some of, you know I mean I knew some of the guys in the kitchen and it's like holy cow.

01:26:31

And at the time we only had one car so my ex-wife had dropped me off. And then it's like, "Oh my God; now I get her to pick me up." So I called her a couple times, she doesn't answer and I'm sweating and I'm like what am I going to do? You can only imagine; you're married, having had that conversation, what her words out of her mouth were: "I told you, you should have worn that jacket." **[Laughs]** Not that the jacket alone would have maybe helped but it probably would have given me a better opportunity.

01:27:06

So having to tuck my tail but the more important thing is, I mean, coming back, you know that's a big pill— pill to swallow. So I did; I— I ironed the jacket and I ironed the pants— brand new. I mean a pair of slacks; I wouldn't say brand new but it's something I would have worn like at that time I mean you see me now--I'm pretty well-dressed. I was not always that way. I'm not near Greg's— or Gray's status right now but—.

01:27:37

So what would have been my Sunday's finest you know pulled it out and **[Sighs]** took a long ride back. Scruffy beard. I trimmed it up a little bit but I was not--you know still going to

Phish shows and Widespread Panic shows. So I still wasn't willing to, you know, that's a status symbol there, so you know you're not willing to trim that yet, but little bit.

01:28:00

But man walking in that door it—it—it's the best decision of my life because I wouldn't have had the opportunity that I have now. But it was a nerve- **[Laughs]**— nerve-racking walk through that door. But so I *staged* that night; I think I rebounded well. I—I did not have a second *stage* for that. I didn't.

I do remember, you know, having the inside over at Chez Fonfon with Kyle. I did know that they needed somebody. I didn't know that they didn't need somebody immediately. They had somebody do the position but they didn't need me immediately. But you know a week had gone by and I hadn't heard of--from anybody and I'm like oh God. It was the clothes you know.

01:28:57

So you made--I made the phone call to my contact and was like look guys; I'm still really interested. If there's ever an opportunity and they did bring me back for a second *stage* then. And you better believe I was in that fresh coat. I think I had even gotten a haircut by then, so on and so forth. And I was able to get the job. So I came in and they--the two chef de cuisines knew my skill set at that point. JT McKissick and Trip Hartselle. No, Hartselle is not his last name. I combined two friends anyways. And having done the chef de cuisine job and worked the line in my last eight years I know how challenging it is. And they were working the line in the middle position doing the chef de cuisine job. So they were really kind of looking--looking for somebody that could help them out.

01:30:08

So my first week I was expo, so expo all the finishing parts, like if we've got a relish on a fish that's going to be it, the sauces on the fish, you're not making the sauces but you're putting them on, calling out tickets, you know you're that kind of communication line between the front of the house and everybody in the kitchen. So me being loud and liking to talk I was obviously good at it.

01:30:35

But really quickly they were like so why don't you pay attention to what's going on over here? Why don't you pay attention to what's going on over here? So the second week that Wednesday I prepped expo and walked on middle and worked it. And that--that--I continued doing that for a few weeks and then they started working me into actually prepping it and it's such a labor intensive thing; in order to kind of monitor my hours I was working four days a week here, all middle, and then I'd go work a day at Bottega just to pick up an extra shift and get some extra learning, or, you know, learn different stuff.

01:31:21

EV: Did you work dining side or café side?

01:31:23

ZR: You know it was more preps, so just whatever either of them needed. It was still at night. I didn't work in the morning. I just worked at night. I never worked on line or anything.

[Interviewer's note: Bottega Café is open all day starting at lunch. The dining room is open for dinner only.]

But finally – so I did that for a year and a half and right after that I switched to sauté and Trip had gone--had left by then and JT was the only sous chef. But he found a new job and I was already working sauté and yeah maybe a year and a half and then I went--I had gone onto sauté and JT left and there was that opportunity for me and they kind of put me in it with another guy, Huck Huckabee, who used to work at Highlands and also at Chez Fonfon. [Interviewer's note: Huckaby is now head chef at Blueprint on 3rd, owned by former Bottega managing partner Dean Robb. Both are examples of how Stitt restaurant alums are helping expand Birmingham's dining scene.] So we were kind doing the dual role and that worked for a little bit and then Huck found something else to do and left me kind of solo working a station solo.

01:32:36

So, and that's--I've been the chef de cuisine solo ever since and I guess that was looking at time realistically, two years into me being here I was solo doing it.

01:32:53

Went from--I had went from sauté to grill, and grill was much easier just being the butcher and being the chef de cuisine. You know what you're ordering anyways; you're touching it. [*Phone Rings*] And then it's--you're in a position long enough and you're like all right; what can I do to make this easier, right--if not you're the idiot. So then I started realizing like all right; we've got people here that are--have been with them--the company for multiple years that you know you've done this for a certain amount of time, so there's obviously more trust. You trust yourself more; they trust you more. And then that's when I started really looking at that traditional like there's a chef de cuisine, there's a chef--there's an executive chef, there's a chef de cuisine, there's a sous chef; you've got to have somebody that you can report, and not that they didn't have that before. It was just almost as much as I wasn't thrown into it, you're thrown

into it. You know and it's like you can only tread water and breathe for so long or you're going to drown. So you have to find out ways to make it work. So I finally started kind of looking at all right; how can I start making my job easier but honing my skills? You know I'm obviously going to be the chef de cuisine and I'm not going to stop but what can I do to continue growing and continue making it easier? And not--not that you--things in life that are easy are fun but work can be easier and you still be having fun--kind of mindset and started just trying to train people and teaching them some of the things that I've learned, not necessarily management-wise, but, you know, just some of those little tasks that can make my job easier like ordering and pars and if we had this, we're--we're going to go to this--just kind of the menu development and design. And by that time Frank and I had obviously started being more comfortable with each other and that's just exponentially grown. I mean you can see from the day you walked in and I've got a Highlands' menu with things that he's just jotted on it home and over a couple of coffee or wherever it may be and we talk briefly about them and then it's my job to kind of make those ideas come to mind but also putting a little of my own ideas in there as well, so--

01:35:28

EV: What's he jotting on that menu?

01:35:29

ZR: [*Laughs*]

01:35:31

EV: Not specifically but what--what things does he--what kind of stuff is he writing about?

01:35:35

ZR: You know set changes, fish changes, what Gulf fish he might want to use this time of year as opposed to, you know, three months ago, different vegetables, you know we're— it's October 29th now so we're starting to really make that – all the summer vegetables have faded themselves out, you know there's that two weeks when fall sets in that you still have some of the vegetables that you can still utilize, but starting to kind of transition out of those and kind of into different things.

01:36:09

Just all around menu-planning— soups, where we might want to go with some of the soups that we've got going on, whether we want to leave something on longer than we have, different beans that we might be using, you know, all those ingredients are our playground so--

01:36:30

EV: Well now is a good time to talk about the food here. Describe--if you were describing to your soccer buddies what a meal at Highlands is about and what the food at Highlands is about what do you tell them?

01:36:41

ZR: I tell them— they all know for one, but we do have this conversation. They like to— they like to talk food with the chef— imagine that. I— I tell them that it is a take on southern Provence food done with Southern ingredients that are local, organic, and that the experience

they're going to get here through the service and the dining room and the food that we put on the— put on the plate is something that's going to be memorable to them and their guests for a long, long time.

01:37:26

And to elaborate on that I'll start with the food aspect and then I'll go into the service aspect because I have a funny— not a funny story but a good story about the service aspect of it. When you have a bunch of like-minded people that come into the kitchen every day to work [*Phone Rings*] really, really hard at what they love doing with the best ingredients locally from farmers, from seafood to farmers to people who are doing chickens, and when I say that you talk about your purveyors as well. You know when they are in the same mindset to give you the best quality product you can get, coming into work is the fun part of it because by then I've taken the time to look at what Frank has jotted down and I've kind of went— gone somewhere with it and then Frank and I sit down again and we kind of refine that and then they come in and they get to see what we've already talked about and then it inspires them, like Little Zack who works with our vegetables and our sets.

01:38:47

Okay; well you want this but what--what if I add a little honey to this while we cook it? Are you okay with that for some extra caramelization? Does that play in effect with it? I mean that's what the guests are getting when they come in; that's what my soccer buddies are getting. They're getting a bunch of professionals that love what they do and have bought into the ideas that Frank and Pardis have put out there. And yet, you know, that's what's cool about what we do. If I were to open a restaurant, French/Southern probably wouldn't be what it is, or what the-- what it would be. First off, the competition is way too big anyway.

01:39:30

You know you have to cook with what you're inspired by, and Frank was inspired by being in the south of Provence and working with Richard Olney and you know the stories that he's told me, I--they make the hair stand up on my arm. I can--I understand why he is but it's those stories that he's been able to relate to me that has inspired me to want to do this to the best of my ability.

01:39:59

Now me being able to take some of the things that have inspired me, although they're very similar, they're all, you know, everybody is not going to see the apple the same way. I'm able to use a little bit of that as well and he allows it, too, which allows this big like when you allow people to be a little bit of themselves in your model it still allows them to grow. And that's where Little Zack and Eric and Issac and all these people--and John for so long even though he's not here--we're able to use his ideas and his model but make them a little bit of a part of ourselves. And when there's a little bit of you in every dish it's going to make the guest-experience so much better.

01:40:45

So the service aspect of it, when I started doing the menu meetings, I had no clue, you know. I mean my first menu meeting I had been here for several times but you're in the kitchen getting ready when it's going on and I'm out here and David Parker is running the show and he's talking--I mean Open Table. What's Open Table? [Interviewer's note: Open Table is an online reservation system.] You're telling me about the guests' likes and dislikes and who they are and the last time they came in and who was their server and then the server chimes in about "I'm not going to be their server tonight but they really enjoyed this cocktail the last time they were in this

time of year.” And, you know, “Mrs. Hess, she really doesn’t like a lot of garlic or she doesn’t really like a lot of, you know, seafood. She’s more this.” And it’s just that attention to detail and it’s--

01:41:40

EV: And this is as you’re going through the reservations of the evening?

01:41:44

ZR: Right; I hadn't even touched on the menu yet. But it also goes to show that--the servers that we’ve had for years, this is what they enjoy and they love doing and it’s their profession and they’re very good at it.

01:41:58

And then we start touching on the menu and it was my first meeting and they’re all like just blowing me out of the way with, like, the knowledge on it, you know. It’s almost like their knowledge has to be more than what we have because you never know what a guest is going to ask. So it’s that attention to detail from every aspect of it. And then at that time we were doing a libation of the day so Matt Gilpin, who is now our everything; we talked about him earlier. I joke with him that he’s the general manager. He kind of is.

01:42:34

But he was doing a libation of the day, and we would have that to sample and just this whole kind of look in the dining room and just wow; this is what sets them apart. Now I’ll go into the actual story.

01:42:48

So when I started culinary school I wanted to finally go to all the kind of really nice restaurants, you know but being in school and not having a lot of money you just have to kind of span it out. So I forget which the first one was. I'm not sure if it was Hot & Hot or who--you know which ones they were. But I distinctly remember Highlands. The dining room was obviously configured a little--a lot differently now. But I put a blazer on and made the reservation and it was so much different because I had eaten here before but it was right after I had *staged*. I came in and sat at the bar just because some of the guys I had met and they were like come in and you know we'd love to have you. But this was like actually sitting in the dining room. You know I love what they say when it's--when people try and have--take reservations, like it's a little bit more-lively in the bar. And it is; you know it's that vibe--there's a--there's a different vibe in the dining room and the bar which I think is what makes part of Highlands special but--

01:43:58

EV: And for people listening these are two separate spaces within the same building.

01:44:00

ZR: Yes; two separate stations within the same building, same food, same white tablecloths, same service, but it was the first time I had made the reservation for the dining room you know. And I got my blazer on and I had just been in a viticulture class in culinary school which is the study of wine. We had done some testing or tastings--excuse me – and you know I was feeling like I knew it all and what was going on.

01:44:29

So we sit down and I--you know I wish I remembered my server's name because I'm almost certain at this time they were still here for sure. And probably you know the sad thing about it is there's a percentage of a chance and it's a high percentage that they probably are in this building today. And we're talking about you know 10--maybe more than that--probably 14 years ago, but this was my first dining experience. So we sit down and two-top and dining room is going and it's buzzing and we look at the menu and there's just so much that I want to eat but you know, baller on a budget here. So I distinctly remembering ordering venison and obviously I didn't have enough money to buy bottles of wine but wanted to have the experience, and this is what I think is important.

01:45:30

It wasn't what I had spent that made the server engage me; it's what the server was trying to teach me [*Phone Rings*] and lead me the way that made me feel important. You know like I think--I think there's this common thread that--or common thought--excuse me--that you go into a restaurant and you don't order a bottle of something that they're going to look at you differently or you don't order an aperitif before--they're going oh my God, who are these people? And that's--that may be some restaurants, to be honest. I have been to a lot of restaurants and it's not many that I've been in. I'm sure there are some. It is definitely not Highlands Bar and Grill.

01:46:21

So I'm getting there and I just had a pinot noir with my--in my viniculture class and we had talked about the tasting notes and that it goes really well with venison. Well there happened to be a-venison on the menu and I ordered it and actually think I can--I think it was a venison with spoonbread with what I--I didn't read the menu fully. I just knew that--I'm looking at it

now--what I thought were grapes had come out and they had peeled these grapes but anyways I'm--I'm getting excited actually. It had this really dark red wine jus but the server was like oh, you want this pinot noir? Well I did pick the most expensive pinot noir on the menu by the glass.

01:47:05

And what resonates with me so strong and I'll finish my story and I'll get back on it, what--because of what my ex-wife was drinking at the time, him talking to me and going you know I have a much better wine in mind for that--that doesn't cost as much. It's still pinot noir; it's still by the glass. Let me taste you on both of them and we'll gladly set you up with whatever you want. But it was the fact that they engaged me in that manner of what would you like that--that fits better than what are you spending?

01:47:49

So I obviously chose his wine. It was much better you know.

01:47:52

EV: And you know you're not the kind of typical person at that point--you're not the typical person who is dining in here, who is you know well-off, and--

01:47:59

ZR: Right.

01:48:00

EV: --captain of the industry and yet it sounds like you're being treated just as well if not better than that person.

01:48:06

ZR: A 100-percent and this is where the kind of funny part goes. Being that my counter-partner was drinking Malibu and pineapple, so [*Laughs*]--so--

01:48:16

EV: Did your waiter have any suggestions for her? [*Laughs*]

01:48:18

ZR: There wasn't much suggestion. Someone that drinks Malibu and pineapple you don't change that much because it's a sugar bomb on sugar bomb. So but you know that's my first experience in the Highlands dining room and to be welcomed in but also to have a little bit of knowledge that I had just learned oddly enough that day but still that continuing education that they were willing to talk to me about and invest that little bit of time is what separates us from everybody else. And I guess I can't say everybody else because I have been to a few restaurants where they do— do that but the continuing education that our servers push for and get and it's back of the house and front of the house but they really have to be on show every single night. It sets them apart from almost everybody that I've seen in the industry and that starts from Frank and Pardis in the menu meetings, having that kind of fun way of going about speaking to a table or addressing a table or maybe it's even just the approach or the--the wine seminars that they put on and just Frank's deep knowledge and just passion for wine and just you know it's still something I get to learn from and that's what sets us apart from everybody else that when all those people come together with that idea, front of the house, back of the house, that the guest

has the best experience that they can, and it's expected and we don't want it any other way than that.

01:50:03

EV: And you touched on this earlier; the--the knowledge of the menu is--is deep. I mean it's--I talked to--to a waiter here once and he was going through the whole thing. He says, "Of course I couldn't make it." I said "I bet you could walk me through it though."

01:50:22

ZR: That--walk you through it is an understatement. The farms that we deal with, Joyce Farms, BDA, Michael Dean from Terra Preta [Farm], Jones Valley Teaching Farm, the list goes on; they put so much work into their product whether it's regenerative agriculture or whether it's making sure you have the--the right breed for the right--the right breed for the job that you want done with cows and pigs and chickens or the right variety of kale as opposed to this other kale that we don't like, or carrots. There's so much attention to detail that goes into it, but knowing their story is equally as important as the product because when you can--when you can give someone a story behind an ingredient, when you can give someone an idea behind the ingredient it engages that person so much more and their senses are opened up so--so much more. And you can truly start learning something at that point.

01:51:36

I mean that's the reason why I enjoy traveling to different places, different cultures; a lot of times by myself, now with the amazing Kate that we talked about obviously, but when you put yourself in a situation where you're uncomfortable per chance the Highlands dining room and

you don't know what a sweetbread is and you've got someone that is engaging you in this fun, light-hearted manner talking to you about it, it kind of makes you relax a little bit and it doesn't make it so tight and stuffy and you're still heightened senses but you're like, Wow. This is something that I might not like but I might be willing to try based on the knowledge that someone has given to you in--

01:52:28

EV: Or like you said the stories.

01:52:30

ZR: --the stories and yeah. I mean I--to be honest, I'd like to think that the story of me eating the soup that Kate's mother made in Macedonia would change people's mind on intestines but I think I'm going to have a hard time doing that so--. Yeah; they--a whole goat--we'll have to get off so when I shut up, she pretty much--the baby goat cooked the entire thing, obviously in different days, but the entire thing was used--the head, I'm specifically speaking about the head and the intestines in the soup that they eat for breakfast. But yeah; I hope one day my story of this intestines and head soup--the name I would butcher so bad, but it's this really simple soup with obviously the bones in the head with mirepoix made into a broth. They simmer the entire head and then they pick you know the--the cheeks, the--the brain, the tongue; she did--she did hold the eyeballs out thank God. I will eat a lot but--. But then all that goes in the pot and then you take the intestines and cut them into small spots and lightly sauté them with a little bit of potato and celery and onion and then you re-introduce that broth and then just a little bit of a vinegar. And then they take--this is the neat part--I had never heard about this adding body to a

soup; they take--and it almost has to be the vinegar and what I'm about to tell you. They take an egg and they scramble it and they lightly temper it so it's of the same temperature and then they add that back to thicken the soup.

01:54:27

So I'm all--it's almost like it's got to be the vinegar with because it's a hint of vinegar--

01:54:32

EV: Kind of like the way you would poach an egg to help keep it intact?

01:54:34

ZR: I don't know if it's a reaction between the two but just lightly thickens it to a little bit of viscous and then they serve it with homemade yogurt and it was unreal. And I don't like intestines. Right; I hate them. I can't say I hate them because I like them now. But I think a lot of it goes with preparation but I hope one day that story can maybe open someone's mind to it. I mean I think it's that name; nobody wants to eat intestines. And I am going to be honest--

01:55:07

EV: They call it offal for a reason.

01:55:09

ZR: --yeah; I had an idea of what it was going into it because I know my parts if you will. But I wasn't close-minded to it and it was amazing. So one day maybe that story can inspire.

01:55:26

EV: So this place opened what--you were--the year before you were born?

01:55:30

ZR: Yeah; [19]81. [Interviewer's note: A correction is required here. Redes' birth in 1981 was a more than a year before Highlands opened on Nov. 22, 1982.]

01:55:32

EV: And at that time, there wasn't this network of farmers and fishers and all that--that there is now.

01:55:42

ZR: I think Frank has been very fortunate— fisher— with the fishing industry-wise. I definitely agree with the farming. I think the Alabama Farmers' Market on Finley [Avenue] was something that they relied on heavily until he was able to kind of cultivate that kind of farming community that he had seen in— in Europe.

01:56:10

But now I mean— but then to touch back on you know Lee Fish and Greg Abrams that he's been working with since day one, I mean to be able to have that connection 37 years— 38 years ago, yeah I'm 37, so it would be 38 years ago, I think it's this month actually, too—

01:56:34

EV: It is.

01:56:34

ZR: Yeah. To have that relationship with fishermen then and to continue to have that relationship and now I have a relationship with these guys, you know. Their stories, their family, but to see the farming industry grow has been a very, very inspirational thing. I mean now Paradise Farms, which is Frank and Pardis' farm in Harpersville, we get a lot of our produce from there. [Interviewer's note: Harpersville is 30 miles southeast of Birmingham, in Shelby County.] We've got chickens. We've got composts. We've got raised beds and we're able to see you know this kind of touches back on the learning and teaching. We have staff go out there; they're able to plant seeds. They're able to see the plants grow. They're able to then see it come in the back door. And then see it on the menu and if that isn't exactly what we're trying to do with farm to table then there's no you know--there's no way of it, you know. Our composts that we take out there, our certain vegetables and shrimp shells that we've poached that we feed to the chickens for high omega-3s and you know the different squashes that we come in and bring here and cook with, all is a part of that but it's just a small part. There's all those other farmers out there that are continuing to push themselves and try new things and are willing to say okay. Fifteen--twenty years ago this worked, but what--what can we do now to better that, to better the environment while we do that--is something that is really neat and to see that kind of progression over the last sixteen--seventeen years because when I was at Daniel George we were still working with some of the same farmers that Frank was here, so--.

01:58:45

But then also--

01:58:45

EV: That was kind of a rising tide lifting all ships for restaurants around here is--is having that kind of product available that wasn't available before.

01:58:54

ZR: It certainly was and when you can buy local, when you can support local it supports the economy, which a better economy means better everything for the city, but also farmers properly farming is better for our environment here and anything that we can do to provoke a better environment for our future is going to better--I mean it's just going to better Birmingham all around.

01:59:25

EV: And you mentioned the composts; this is kitchen scraps going--

01:59:27

ZR: Yeah.

01:59:28

EV: --back out? So it's a full circle kind of thing.

01:59:29

ZR: Yeah; so by now we have found out what the chickens will and will not eat. Believe it or not they can be a little bit picky. So we have some that is just for the chickens so that they'll eat

and then we also have all of our vegetable trim and whatnot that we take and then we turn back in the compost at the--at the farm so that we can kind of keep that full cycle so the vegetables that we use here that we grew out there go back in the compost and then feed the ground that we're growing new vegetables in. So it's you know--and I think from a cook's perspective or-- I'll get out of saying cook for this one; from a chef's perspective, for the new people coming in that haven't see that you know it's kind of fun to see that and know that maybe the places you've been before haven't done that. But if we're going to continue to be who we are and teach people and inspire people that hopefully when they leave that they might not have a farm but I guarantee you there's farmers out there that would be willing to pick up that and utilize it for their compost.

02:00:43

So--

02:00:43

EV: And but was it just the kitchen going out to Paradise Farm or--?

02:00:50

ZR: No; no, no, no. Front of the house, too, just anybody that wants to, is promoted. You know we promote doing it. I mean it's definitely much easier for the kitchen. They're kind of directed. But we have at least once a quarter we'll plan just a trip to the farm and get people to sign up and it's front of the house, back of the house, people bring their kids. You know run around the farm. But it's--it's a full--it's a full group thing. Everybody is involved. Everybody is invested.

02:01:29

EV: Talk to me a little bit about how you interact with the farmers who are supplying you.

02:01:32

ZR: Some of them I've grown to be friends with so that makes it much easier. Some of them we're working on friendships just because we deal with each other so much. It's typically—I have two or three—I have one farmer that I can get from every day of the week, Michael Dean from Terra Preta Farms. That relationship as all of them go, you know we're kind of talking to him now about what we might see in a couple weeks. We're talking about now what we might be looking for him to plant for us to have in three or four months. And this will go vice-versa with all of them; just the only difference is we can get deliveries from him daily.

02:02:13

But it's that just kind of open format kind of you can text me, you can call me, we can talk. When they come in the door we're definitely engaging them and what do you see that you like, what do you not like, what do you have more of than not? You know so if we can help buy more of something rather than less so it doesn't go bad. Belle Meadow Farms outside of Tuscaloosa has been big for us. They deliver two--three days a week. We'll pick up at the Farmers' Market on Saturday once. Bodock Farms in the Union--Union Station Alabama, a little bit of Petals from the Past. We've been dealing with them for some time. It's just that kind of--you know I think it's--it would be funny or if the person that didn't know any of the sauce in a group somewhere outside of work, outside of the farm, they'd probably think it's just oh, look at those guys. They've been around each other for quite some time and enjoy each other. You know because there's--it takes that much conversation and it takes that much communication and through that you get to know--you know Andrew's wife and you get to know everybody else's

family and their kids and their story. [Interviewer's note: Andrew and Laurie Beth Kesterson own and operate Belle Meadow Farms.] And it just kind of ties in that it's not just the people in this building when the guests are eating. It's everybody outside of the building that you know makes it a family.

02:03:44

I mean you as a journalist that writes about us and you know almost trails and *stages* with us when you're doing some of those stories you know. It all ties together. You know I mean I enjoyed the conversation with you outside of work on Saturday and those are the kinds of things that make me excited about what we do is camaraderie and knowing someone and respecting someone but also helping that business grow through something that we have here at Highlands which is a continuing growing business.

02:04:23

EV: And there's a lot of work, you know, that goes on before 5:30 around here. Tell people a little bit about what the prep work and when that's beginning and just kind of walk us through a day.

02:04:37

ZR: Lupe gets here at 6:00 a.m.

02:04:41

EV: Who is?

02:04:41

ZR: That's Guadalupe Castillo; most people would know him from the oyster bar as far as seeing him in person. But behind the scenes it's Veronica, his wife, his son, Uriel, who also works at night, his daughter who moved back to Mexico to go to school. She would come to work in the morning and then work at night. They get here and they start doing things for Chez Fonfon and Highlands. You know--

02:05:22

EV: And doing things like what?

02:05:22

ZR: Oh making French fries, making hamburgers, getting the oyster bar ready, making sauces, cocktail sauce, ginger aioli, champagne mignonette, checking in orders for the restaurant whether it be proteins, produce, putting them up so they're properly--properly stored. By the time all that has happened I'm typically getting here with the menu. Little Zack is typically here. We start going over the menu. Little Zack then delegates more vegetable prep to the Castillos. He starts getting on his day and organizing it whether it's gratins, purees, certain vegetables that take longer than others.

02:06:11

I've typically started on a little bit of the butchering by then to help Eric out. Dream like we talked about, he's here in the mornings at 8:00 a.m. getting sauces and soups and braises going, so he can get off to school. By 1 o'clock most everybody else has come into the kitchen and we're just getting up and rolling and that's when it's a busy--but you know I often want to

set my phone up for time lapse just to see it throughout the day because that's the time of day where you're going to stand in one place the least you know. Things are going on, timers are going off, people are asking because you're closer to that to help them you know--you know do you mind stirring those onions for me so they don't burn? Hey I'm going to the--the cooler for 10 minutes. Could you stir my grits for me? Oh you're cutting shallots? Can I give you a couple more shallots? You know, kind of this hustle and bustle.

02:07:19

EV: And meanwhile everybody that's coming to work comes through your kitchen? [*Phone Rings*]

02:07:22

ZR: Everybody comes through the kitchen.

02:07:24

EV: Through the back door.

02:07:25

ZR: And obviously I have a relationship and rapport with people and everybody has got their own entrance and own handshake and they also still want to kind of touch about what's going on so that they're a little bit more prepared for the menu meeting and kind of they're in the mindset of I'm just getting here. Let me get my cup of coffee. And we're in the mindset of an hour and a half until service, so let's move.

02:07:49

But if you don't give them a little bit of time then they're like is everything all right? Are you okay? So it's just like it's this dynamic that you have to show people attention but at the same time hopefully they'll respect you enough that they know if they--if you can't--that you're busy. You know at that point we've got pastries coming in the door getting ready, because all the pastries get done at Bottega up the street so they have to transport down for Highlands and Chez Fonfon. It--it's the crazy time. It's controlled chaos as I like to call it.

02:08:30

You know and then the servers get set in and I start coming out and speaking--speaking counts with--with Ryan Ford, the maître d and getting all those in line, servers are setting up the dining room and kind of that attention to detail, dusting and doing your final clean, getting everything organized. I mean that's finally when I get a little breath where I can kind of banter with them which is fun, so--.

02:08:58

EV: While they're trying to do their job.

02:09:00

ZR: Exactly. It all is a payback.

02:09:01

EV: Payback is tough.

02:09:03

ZR: [*Laughs*]

02:09:06

EV: And then after that little break there that's the--you're getting close to the--to the--the menu meeting.

02:09:12

ZR: Yes.

02:09:12

EV: In the evening before service begins.

02:09:15

ZR: Yep.

02:09:17

EV: And then there's--there's not just work going on here. [*Phone Rings*] There's not just service going on here in this building. There are lots of offsite events as well.

02:09:26

ZR: Yes; so that's kind of what I touched on earlier about what I end up doing a little bit more now than actually touching food, which to full circle the conversation kind of makes you rely on

the team and kind of your core group of people back there. You know it's not uncommon for me to go to Zack, aka Little Zack, or Eric and "hey by the way in a week from now I just got this menu that we've got a party that's going to travel for 120 people and we're going to go to North Carolina or we're going to go to South Alabama."

02:10:09

So to add more stress to what they already have as a very stressful job, there's that kind of symphony of its own of planning okay a week from now we're going to do 220 people in the dining room but I've also got to have a party for 120 people to go that I may be going with him or I may not be going with him, but regardless of if I'm there or not, the standard that the guest is going to get is going to be of Highlands anyways. So amongst what's going on in the dining room and in the kitchen there's all these other parties and it might not just be one. It might be two in one day. It might be one today and then one two days from now or some fund-raiser that we have going on that Frank is a part of with Pardis, and just this kind of I need to make sure this gets done so I don't have as much time to give to the staff as they need it. So then I have to rely on who was my sous chef, John, and now is going to be Zack and it kind of puts a little bit more pressure on them. And you know which they have pressure, but all that added pressure is a little bit different.

02:11:33

So then--

02:11:37

EV: It's not just put it on a plate; you're--

02:11:39

ZR: No; it's not put it on a plate at that point. It's get it transported. How are we going to package it enough--properly? Are we flying? If we're flying it can only be in 50 pound boxes as opposed to if we're driving it can be in coolers that can hold you know 150 pounds. Is this block of ice going to make it where it's overweight? If I have to take it out what can I do to keep it cold if it needs to be cold?

02:12:11

It puts more stress on Lupe. It puts more stress on everybody, our purveyors, because we're not just needing you know 100 orders of chicken for the restaurant. Let me get 150 orders of chicken for the--the party but then well you know, the farm you want, they're not necessarily able to keep up with those, so are you guys able to change? And then that's me--go back to Frank. Hey they're not— they're saying that the Poulet Rouge [chicken] might not be the best thing for us right now. Are we able to kind of switch this? The other thing is all right what--when we get there on this travel party what do we have because more than likely you're not working in a real kitchen, you're working in a setup kitchen, so logistically what can we do to make this a Highlands dinner but it not be so labor intensive, but what's going to sacrifice the quality of that? So I mean it's just so many moving parts and there's so many logistics that go behind it that alongside of doing dinner at Highlands Bar and Grill just adds that much more of a challenge to the daily grind.

02:13:29

EV: It's kind of like a day and a half's worth of work in a day.

02:13:31

ZR: Yes; that is a great way to put it.

02:13:38

EV: Obviously you know during service you're very busy. You're focusing on what you're doing; focusing on left and right of you, see what things need to be done, but surely some strange things happen back there.

02:13:52

ZR: *[Laughs]* You know they do; it's going to maybe put me on the spot as far as strange things. I mean— I mean we can make strange you know in so many ways; strange non-so happy things you know like the time I'm rushing and coming around the corner and I've got a pot of hot water and I slip and it falls in the air and all this boiling water falls on my face, you know that's a strange thing but not so fun.

02:14:23

EV: It's an occupational hazard.

02:14:23

ZR: It's an occupational hazard. You know I mean I try and limit strange. It's too much of a curveball. *[Laughs]*

02:14:37

EV: That's part of the point, right. **[Laughs]** Do you ever get people--like diners wandering back there?

02:14:44

ZR: We do and some— you know some of them are more comfortable back there than others. And depending on the level of drink that they've had is also dependent on the conversation, so that's one of them. But another one is fun you know when Frank comes out in the dining room and we've got a younger guest who is dining with us who is interested in the restaurant and him kind of bringing them back and showing them the produce and showing them the proteins and letting them see the kind of walk of the line and how it goes about, not to mention the heat, is always fun.

02:15:21

Or when we have certain guests that come in that are a little bit more you know celebrity status. You know that's always fun, too.

02:15:33

EV: Drop some names for us.

02:15:33

ZR: We don't drop names here at Highlands Bar and Grill, so the one thing you can guarantee here is animosity. [Interviewer's note: anonymity.] So those will have to be for off-recording.

[Laughs]

02:15:47

EV: So Highlands has been open since 1982. They pretty much were at the top of their game when they started; stayed at the top of their game. Chef Stitt is getting these Beard Awards. Ten years in a row of--of finalists for outstanding restaurant. How is Highlands able to maintain that level of excellence?

02:16:11

ZR: Well it starts at the top; it starts when you walk in the door, Frank and Pardis expect it. It trickles down to me. I expect it. I— there's no other way to do it than with that high level. But truly it starts with them and ends with our staff and their commitment and their attention to detail and their work ethic whether it's Zack coming in earlier than he needs to so that he doesn't have to rush something or it's the talk of if we do this to the braise and it's going to make it a little bit better or Pardis coming into the menu meeting with a test for the servers to kind of keep them on their toe. It's that relentless— there's never anything that's perfect and we need to keep pushing and pushing and pushing to be perfect, to keep learning, to moving with the times, right.

02:17:20

I mean how much time has happened in between [19]82 and [20]18— 2018? And you know them being able to stay with those times [*Phone Rings*], stay with those kind of new-age things you know. I mean a few years ago everything was sous vide. Does that mean we sous vide everything? No, but have we found a way that it's applicable to what we do that gives us an edge? Yes.

02:17:52

So there's a lot of things that come into that and the most important thing is their drive and their commitment, which inspires me, which inspires me to inspire other people and that goes down the line to the dishwashers. When I can tell the dishwashers on a Saturday you guys have been doing a great job. Thank you but we've got some big people coming in on Tuesday. Can you stay a little bit later after you've cleaned everything to help clean some things, and then say we'd love to— that's the commitment that it takes for us to continue staying at the top of our game.

02:18:36

EV: Now over the years as— as the finalist and not the winner for the outstanding restaurant would you make adjustments, trying to kind of take it over the top or— ? I equate it to— to earn Michelin stars you have to do certain things and you have to meet certain expectations.

02:18:57

ZR: You know there were all those years that I— I'd come home and you'd take a look at it and you'd wonder is it because we're not in the big city which we touched on. What— what is it that I can do? And you know there are minor tweaks but there's not a lot. You can always get better and we can always do something to get better. But there's also nothing wrong with being in the category for ten years in a row and being able to hold that standard for ten years in a row.

02:19:34

Don't— let's not— don't— don't think that the Beard Award that we won isn't probably one of the highlights of my career working for Frank and Pardis. But really— almost even with it are the eight years that I was able to be with the company that allowed us to hold a standard that

other people couldn't. There are years that I've seen people on the list with us that the next year they did not make it on the list. And then the year after that they didn't make it back to the list and then finally they made it to the list.

02:20:14

But we have held the standard for ten years. It's unfortunate that some years we were just there but not— not the winners. But I think it took that for us to continue pushing. Now it's like-- now is the hard stuff. Now it's like well, you've won. Are we going to rest on our laurels? Are we going to--are we going to sit back and say way to go us? There's nothing to strive for because the--the--the--the medal that was right in front of our eyes for so many years we--we didn't get it? We've got it now.

02:20:55

Now is when the adjustments need to be made. What can we do to continue to hold that excellence? What can we do to continue to keep--because let's be honest. Having our name in the James Beard Award for ten years in a row is amazing. So all this publicity, let's hope there's--there's a category we can be in this year with outstanding service or wine program but if it--if we're not then we're not. We're going to have to keep pushing and holding ourselves accountable and pushing harder. So for me it's now is more important than what was going on then, because we're already doing it.

02:21:36

Now like I said, but all five trips I can remember coming back and obviously year-to-year you're in a different place in your personal life, too. So you're like oh god; what is it? You know is it--is it we didn't do this technique proper or you know specifically on my end you know because one thing I'm getting better at through Pardis is understanding the flow of the dining

room and how that is just as important as the kitchen and my communication to the maître d and all that. But it's not my--it's not my forte. I enjoy learning about it. And I enjoy seeing the happy guests, but--.

02:22:19

So at that point like what is it? I mean is it--is it we didn't have this protein or is it the menu? Maybe our menu needs to develop just a little bit. But those are the small things that we can tweak. Other than that there's nothing to change. You just keep doing it.

02:22:38

EV: The daily adjustments you're making anyway.

02:22:39

ZR: Yeah.

02:22:40

EV: What was the message on the first--first meeting after May 7th? [Interviewer's note: The date of the 2018 Beard Awards ceremony.]

02:22:45

ZR: You know when I saw the guys it was the first time I had seen them because we were--you know a lot of them kind of get together and watch it. The--you know it's a lot of non-verbal communication. It's just you see those people that you spent time with in that pressure cooker and [*Sighs*]--

02:23:26

EV: There's got to be a sense of ownership for them as well.

02:23:28

ZR: It--it--it's ownership, it's gratification, it's appreciation, it's friendship--. [Interviewer's note: Redes is starting to cry.]

02:23:51

EV: Means a lot to you doesn't it?

02:23:54

ZR: [*Emotional/Silence*] Words can't describe it.

02:24:19

EV: This visual sure does.

02:24:24

ZR: Sorry.

02:24:26

EV: Oh no; no, no, no. I mean this is--it can't get any more real than that.

02:24:34

ZR: I'm a softie. [*Emotional*] Yeah; words can't describe it. I mean I see them more than I see my family.

02:24:46

EV: And I think that--that same--it's cliché about--talking about the family but it seems to be that is what is fostered here and that is almost like the prime directive.

02:24:54

ZR: Yeah; oh yeah. I mean yes, 100-percent and I try and promote it. Frank and Pardis have been--I mean in eight years there's been so much professional that we've talked about, but personal growth that they've invested in--and they invest in you because they see that--they see the--the good in you and it's people like that--that you want to work for and you want to surround yourself with and I think it's a bit--I think it's one of the driving forces behind why we're able to have long-term employees here.

02:25:51

I mean you got people--you have people here that have been here--Goren, Goren has been here from the day it opened. Goren worked with Frank at the Hyatt. You know I mean Dol; Dol has been here forever. Matt Gilpin and Chris Connor, Tina, Pat, Nolan, I mean all of them have, even our younger--some of our younger servers have been here as long as I've been here you know.

02:26:19

Guadalupe and his family I mean and that's--Gray; I mean all of them. I mean you don't continue to have long-term employees because you treat people poorly. It's because you invest in people and you show them that you care and that speaks highly about them in this business specifically I think. I think any business, but this is a dog eat dog-business. And to be able to have long-term employees that want to continue to push for the best is--is also a positive around here.

02:26:58

EV: Yeah because you--you see--you look at the number of restaurants that have opened in the city not just since Highlands opened but since Bottega opened in 1988. It seems like they're--like it's drawing from the same talent pool. There are just so many people to go around and yet Highlands is able to retain people for decades.

02:27:20

ZR: They have and I don't--because it's hard. I mean what we do is hard and they don't--it's not like Frank and Pardis are just like making it easy. They push, push, push, push--

02:27:39

EV: Soon as you get comfortable they want to make it uncomfortable?

02:27:41

ZR: They do.

02:27:42

EV: Or even better?

02:27:42

ZR: They do but I think it's also important for the new employees to see that there's the long-term employees because at some point the new employees will become the long-term employees and let's be realistic. Some of our long-term employees are getting to the point where they're not going to be able to be long-term employees anymore. I mean not for health reasons but it's just like a time and place. Retirement is on the verge and it's sad to say that that's probably going to happen here before you know with some of them but it's just the nature of it and--. But that's what makes them equally as important as Frank and Pardis is for people to see that they have a career, a-longevity here is inspiring. It was inspiring to me. I know it's inspiring to other people as well, so--.

02:28:33

EV: Just the concept of retiring from a restaurant is--is odd when you look at the--the whole picture.

02:28:41

ZR: Yeah; to say the least.

02:28:43

EV: And a lot of people when they talk about their experience working for Highlands, especially when they're there for a long time, talk about how it has a fairly profound effect on them. How has working for Highlands affected you? What--what effect has it had on you?

02:28:56

ZR: It's made me appreciate a hard day's work much more. It has pushed me to be a better person, a better leader; there's just been so much growth in eight years. And it's fun to look back on and see that just off you know just--you know going to those [Phish] tours and just not a care in life and slowly progression--progressing to this person that Frank and Pardis trust to run their business and trust to be a part of their family and you know now they're allowing more freedom to kind of be me. But had it not been for them I wouldn't be where I am now. So I think I look back on it. I have been looking back on it a lot more in the last two years just because it's been crazy. I mean--

02:30:39

I mean even year to year--it's just year to year even the growth and it comes from that constant you know some people--it--it's as little as words. You know instead of huh. Really? Huh doesn't sound like an adult. You know so what you can do to get around that. Excuse me? It's just always trying to push you to be a better person and when you're pushed like that the growth is crazy.

02:31:22

And not--and let's be clear--

02:31:23

EV: Crazy good, not crazy bad.

02:31:25

ZR: Oh crazy good and let's--and let's--let's be clear. It also takes a certain person to be able to have that right. Like, I'm sure there's a lot of people out here that if Pardis is picking on the way they said something would get pissy and frustrated and be like she just won't let me be me. Well it's not that she's not letting you be you. If you flip it and look at it from the other's perspective, if you want to be respected in the community you have to have a good vocabulary and it's not saying you have a bad vocabulary but if you can change three words in your vocabulary and it makes you more well-spoken is it that bad of a thing? No; it's just her seeing better in you and pushing you to be that better person. But if you're a person that is not okay with being pushed to be better then you're probably not going to do okay in this business but definitely at Highlands or Chez Fonfon or Bottega because they're going to push. It's what you do when you're pushed. You know some people stand up and they say push me harder and some people sit down and say don't push me at all. And that just to me has something to say about the character of somebody and I guess the kind of people I want to align myself with.

02:32:44

EV: Listen; I do appreciate you taking the time with us today and telling us all about what's going on here and--and sharing such great insight about Highlands. Thank you very much.

02:32:54

ZR: I appreciate it. It's over? It wasn't that long.

02:32:58

EV: Okay; we're going to take 30 seconds here to pause and just let the--let things run out.

02:33:28

[End HGP-002 Zack Redes 102918 Interview]