Patrick Noling
Highlands Bar and Grill
Birmingham, Alabama
***

Date: January 21, 2019
Location: Highlands Bar and Grill, Birmingham, Alabama
Interviewer: Eric Velasco
Transcription: Technitype Transcripts
Length: One hour and forty eight minutes
Project: Highlands Bar and Grill at Work

[Interviewer's note: This took place on a Monday, when Highlands is closed. People still work that day – cleaning, stocking, taking inventory, doing office work – but they usually do it in another part of the restaurant. This day, however, someone was painting a cabinet in the dining room, and conversation can be heard in the background. Also, the phone is constantly ringing as people call in for reservations, which open a month in advance, and a grandfather clock periodically chimes.]

Eric Velasco: This is Eric Velasco for the Southern Foodways Alliance. This is an oral history interview about Highlands Bar & Grill with Patrick Noling, a longtime waiter. In their devotion to the guests' pleasure, the front-of-the-house workers at Highlands hit the highest levels of grace and professionalism. When you're at Patrick's table, you feel like you're dining at an old friend's home.

Today is Monday, January 21, 2019. We are sitting in the dining room at Highlands. Mr. Noling, please introduce yourself, spell your name, and give your date of birth for the record.

[0:00:33.9]

Patrick Noling: Hi. I'm Patrick Noling. It's P-a-t-r-i-c-k N-o-l-i-n-g. I was born on July 13th, 1959.

[0:00:45.2]

Eric Velasco: What part of town do you live in?

[0:00:47.8]

Patrick Noling: I live in Mountain Brook [Interviewer's note: Mountain Brook is a suburban municipality south of Birmingham].

[0:00:50.6]

Eric Velasco: What part of Mountain Brook?

[0:00:51.8]

Patrick Noling: Redmont Gardens Apartments.

[0:00:54.6]

Eric Velasco: So how long have you worked at Highlands?

[0:00:56.3]

Patrick Noling: I've worked here almost seventeen years.

[0:01:00.2]

Eric Velasco: How'd you come to work here?

[0:01:01.8]

Patrick Noling: Well, I worked at Hot & Hot Fish Club before this for about five years. Before that, at the Tutwiler, so I was in the Birmingham restaurant scene. I was ready for a change, and Highlands was always the ultimate goal for me, so I put in my application

and they said, "Yes, please come down," so I did. [Interviewer's note: Hot and Hot Fish Club is a restaurant owned by Chris and Idie Hastings. The restaurant is relocating this year to the Martin Biscuit Building on 29th Street South near the Lakeview district.]

[0:01:26.7]

Eric Velasco: For listeners, what is the Tutwiler and what restaurant was there at the time?

[0:01:30.3]

Patrick Noling: So the Tutwiler's very different today. Back when I worked there, it was part of the Camberley Hotel chain, which is a small chain of like independent historic hotels. It was a pretty unique gig, because it was just very formal dining room, very like early [19]90s dining room. It had Kelly green walls and pink tablecloths. It was very formal. We had a very small staff. There was typically three waiters that worked the floor, and we worked it all as one group. We weren't very busy, maybe thirty or forty covers a night, but it was people that wanted to have a good time and spend.

We had a really good wine sommelier who was also like the floor manager, and I learned so much about wine from him. He was the type of person, no matter what bottle we had in the wine inventory, he would open it up and serve it by the glass, so it really gave people an opportunity to try things that they would never have a chance to try. It was kind of a tricky thing to do, because once that bottle was open, then you really had to convince some other people they wanted to drink that wine as well.

We were fairly autonomous. We really didn't have any other supervisory staff above us, so I think that's kind of lent to my independent nature of doing things, and it was a pretty interesting place. I learned a lot about food, I learned a lot about wine.

But then it was sold, and the new owners came in. It was a restaurant called Christian's here in town. Bernard Axle took over, and it kind of changed the nature of the restaurant. It wasn't the same as what I would know it as. It didn't have as much corporate money behind it.

So I left and moved to Florida, down to Destin, which is my hometown, and started to work at a restaurant called The Ocean Club, which was owned by the Shahids. They had Beachside Café, which was one of the first nice restaurants in Destin, and they opened a second location called The Ocean Club. I really learned a lot down there as well, because it was very, very busy, of course, in the summer, but I was living there full-time.

[0:03:39.3]

Eric Velasco: I'm sorry, we took a little pause there while the worker was cleaning up some paper inside, but now we're back to it. So you were down in Destin.

[0:03:45.7]

Patrick Noling: I was. And so I was working at The Ocean Club. Like Destin at the time, especially, was a summer town. It was a resort town, but I lived there full-time, actually lived in Pensacola and would drive that 50-some-odd miles each way every day.

[0:04:01.4]

Eric Velasco: Very slowly.

[0:04:02.0]

Patrick Noling: Very slowly, but I didn't want to live in Destin, but I wanted to work there because Pensacola had no fine dining that I could use as a means of employment. So I worked there for several years. I also worked during the wintertime when it was slow, and so the staff was very, very reduced. And again, I kind of started building up regulars that were down there all year long and everything, so I really—it was such a plum position at The Ocean Club, because, again, you know, it's something you don't want to do to me is give me like control, and they're like, "You can do whatever you want." And so that's kind of what I did. It was a good setup. I had my own personal WA [waiter's assistant], something I've never had since. It was a nice restaurant.

Then I decided to leave and come back to Birmingham, and so I came back to Birmingham and that's when I started working at Hot & Hot, but I still had an open invitation to come back to Ocean Club whenever. So, years after that, I would sometimes go down on New Year's Eve and just work a couple days and, again, just kind of step in and do whatever I wanted to [Chuckles], was fine. But that kind of petered out because it was more because I wanted to be there at New Year's.

Then I worked at Hot & Hot. I started in [19]97, and they had been open almost a year when I started there.

[0:05:21.0]

Eric Velasco: What is Hot & Hot Fish Club?

[0:05:21.3]

Patrick Noling: So, Hot & Hot Fish Club is Chris Hastings' restaurant. It was in a building that used to hold the Upside Down Plaza. It was a very unique restaurant, very different than any place I'd worked before. It was very much fine dining, but very, at the time, more fusion cuisine to me. He was bringing in a lot of California sensibilities to what he did. It wasn't white tablecloth; they had all-stone tables. It was very, very busy. [Interviewer's note: Hastings was the chef de cuisine at Highlands Bar and Grill and helped open Frank Stitt's second restaurant, Bottega, before moving to California in 1989 to work under Bradley Ogden opening the Lark Creek Inn restaurant in the Bay Area. Chris and Idie, his wife and business partner, moved back east, opening Hot and Hot in 1995. The James Beard Foundation awarded Hastings as Best Chef: South in 2012.]

My first day at work, my training there consisted of showing up for work, they were short a waiter, they said, "Here. Team up with this waiter. Work the shift." And I worked the shift, and that was my training. Period. Then from that point on, I was the waiter. So it took me a while to kind of assert myself, because I was brand new, but I eventually became, you know, kind of one of their favorite waiters, and so it was a really good gig. I liked the people I worked with. It was a nice setup to have.

But sometimes Hot & Hot would be a little unorganized, and I don't do well when things aren't organized or things go smoothly, and so it went on. I left at one time, kind of out of protest, and worked at a restaurant called Armand's for about six months. Then I

went back to Hot & Hot and stayed for another couple of years. [Interviewer's note: Arman DeLorenz opened Arman's restaurant in 1994.]

Then the maître d' here used to work at Hot & Hot, and she was always like, "Please come to Highlands. Please come to Highlands."

[0:06:48.3]

Eric Velasco: What is her name?

[0:06:49.3]

Patrick Noling: Cheri Robinson is her name.

[0:06:49.3]

Eric Velasco: Sherry with a Y?

[0:06:52.4]

Patrick Noling: Cheri with an I, C-h-e-r-i. So she was down here, and so I put in my application. They said, "Yeah, please come work." And this is really a true story. So they always told me at Hot & Hot that I had to give a month's notice when I left, and so I came in and told them, I said, "All right, I'm just letting you know next month I'm leaving. I'm going to Highlands."

Well, that was it right there. They were like, "Okay, bye." And so I left. So it was a little bit traumatic at the time. Luckily, Highlands was like, "You can start tomorrow if you want to." I didn't have to wait a month. So that's how I ended up here.

[0:07:31.3]

Eric Velasco: There's a little history between Hot & Hot and Highlands.

[0:07:34.9]

Patrick Noling: There is. I mean, people like to, you know, gossip about it and things like that. I always felt like, I mean, Highlands was *it*. It was the pinnacle restaurant, so it was very, I think, natural for Hot & Hot to kind of have their focus on them. But when I came to Highlands, I found there was no focus on Hot & Hot. I mean, Highlands was Highlands, you know. Everything else that existed, great. I mean, it wasn't like there was a competition from this way. But, I mean, I think things have much changed over the years as Hot & Hot's gotten much more, you know, into the limelight and then his second restaurant. [Interviewer's note: Ovenbird.] So I think, you know, that doesn't really exist anymore like people thought it did.

[0:08:16.9]

Eric Velasco: Right. There seems to be more room for everybody at this point, versus in the mid-[19]90s, early 19[90]s, when Hot & Hot was opening.

[0:08:25.1]

Patrick Noling: Exactly. And, you know, Frank [Stitt] has told us before, like, one thing he likes about Charleston is the proximity of all the really nice restaurants to each other because he says it really keeps people focused on doing the best they can. They're not the

only game in town and, you know, you just have to do what you do and do it exceptionally well, and, you know, things will take care of themselves.

[0:08:46.5]

Eric Velasco: And that's kind of what exists here around the Frank Stitt restaurants. You've got Hot & Hot and the variety of fine dining restaurants.

[0:08:55.6]

Patrick Noling: Exactly. And all of them, you can almost trace their lineage back to here, I mean with Highlands being open thirty-six years now, plus there's so many people that have come through here that have either started their new restaurants or gone somewhere else, and I think that's one of the reasons Birmingham is so successful as a restaurant town, because everybody had really good training and, you know, kind of a good philosophy of what they were going to do when they would open a restaurant. I think it's great that Birmingham is this way. I tell people all the time that are from out of town that maybe if you did a study, like per capita, Birmingham might have more nice dining options than any city in the country. I mean, it's just crazy when you go to other towns, you know, what their restaurant scene is like compared to what it is here. It's so vital. I've never seen people that eat out as much as they do in Birmingham. They really eat out often.

[0:09:50.3]

Eric Velasco: You made a conscious decision to make waiting tables your profession.

[0:09:57.7]

Patrick Noling: I don't know how conscious it was. I mean, I went to Birmingham Southern [University, in Birmingham], I graduated with a degree in accounting, which I loved accounting in school. I mean, this is like early [19]80s when it was all, you know, business, business, business, let's make money, let's do that. And I really liked it at school, but only I would go to a really great liberal arts college and major in accounting. [Laughter] It's just kind of what I thought I was expected to do.

So I graduated, I went to work for a CPA firm, I *hated* it. It was *so* horrible. It was just like—I'm like, "This is nothing like I want to do." So I shifted into employee benefits with Southern Natural Gas, which used to be headquartered here, Sonat, in Birmingham, and had a really nice job, I was the benefits coordinator, but I was horribly unhappy. I felt like I was in a cage all day long. And it was a hard thing for me to figure out in my mind what I wanted to do, so I shifted that job and went and worked with another company here in town. That still wasn't working.

So I had worked at restaurants when I was in high school. Because I needed money because I was just like, "I quit," and I was just like, "Okay, what am I going to do that I can make some money?" I started waiting tables, and it just started to click a little bit.

[0:11:15.1]

Eric Velasco: You've always worked front of the house?

[0:11:15.7]

Patrick Noling: Yes, always. I have zero cooking skills. I can talk about food almost to a molecular level about how they cook it around here, but if you give me the tools to do it, it's a disaster. And I don't know why that is. I think part of it is impatience and I don't have the coordination to do it, so I give so much credit to the kitchen for what they do, because I can't even come close to doing what they do.

Goren [Avery], who's one of the other waiters here that's worked here since we've opened, he and I will occasionally work private parties together, not so much anymore because we're so busy down here, and he not only knows everything there is to know about food, he's an amazing chef as well. So when we do these parties, he'll be wanting me to help him prep, and it's like shocking to him how little I can do, and he's just like, "Okay, why don't you just go out and make drinks for people, talk to people, you know, just get out of my way," that kind of thing.

[0:12:05.7]

Eric Velasco: Would he do a digit count to make sure you walked out with all the digits you walked in with?

[0:12:09.2]

Patrick Noling: No, it's just like—he's like, "How can your skills be this low? You can't even turn on a stove, practically." So it's kind of funny. I mean, it works. We balance each other out. But that's just not my forte at all. It's too much pressure, it's too hot. I

miss that interaction with people. That's kind of what I enjoy about waiting tables so much.

[0:12:30.7]

Eric Velasco: One of the things that's always impressed me about you is you can talk somebody through making a dish, because you know so much about how they're done and how they're put together and the steps that lead to the next step.

[0:12:42.1]

Patrick Noling: Exactly. And I think that's what people enjoy, because anybody can read a menu back to you, and I think that's a lot of times what you get in a restaurant, but that doesn't help you. When I first started waiting tables, one of the things I did is like I kind of put myself in the guest's position. Okay, if I was sitting here, what kind of information would I know? What would I need to make my decision? And so we just spend so much time at Highlands going over the menu. I mean, it changes every day, and if you don't keep up, you're lost. So I've probably forgotten way more than I've ever learned here about food, but you have to get into it. And Frank's really good about telling us, you know, why he's doing things and why we're doing it now and why this is important and why that's not important, and I translate to the guest.

Because it's good here because there's nothing I have to keep people from ordering on the menu because I think all of it has equal weight and goodness to it, so then I feel like I have to get inside the person's head and figure out where they want to be and make sure they get there. Like you could close your eyes and point at the menu, and you

would love whatever you got, but is that really what you want? So that's kind of like what I do when I come to the table, I think.

[0:13:55.0]

Eric Velasco: Well, let's focus on that area for a while. First of all, how do you learn the menu and what's on it and how it's all going together? How are you learning what you're able to recite to a guest?

[0:14:05.9]

Patrick Noling: A lot of it is through repetition. You hear it. You have to be willing to want to learn new things. You have to be willing to watch. I think you have to be willing to listen. I mean, because I think for me, like if there are new things going on, I'll always dig a little bit deeper. I'll want to look at the history. I'll do some research offline. I want to know, you know, what this is, so if there's a new ingredient or new fish—I mean, my nickname here at Highlands is "Fishipedia" because I just feel like I know so much about fish, and it's kind of like a running joke of everybody, like if there's some new fish on the menu, like all eyes will be at me, and I'm like, "God, I hope I know what this fish is," because they're expecting me to tell them what it is. But, I mean, I'll tell them where they live, how deep they are, you know, how they swim, where they feed, which is all stupid stuff to know, but it's the kind of thing that I really get into. But it helps you explain things. Like people who don't live in the South, that have never heard of triggerfish before, like, "Why should I eat this?" And so you have to kind of tell them what triggerfish is, you tell them the history of triggerfish. I'll work in, you know, it's

restricted nature now in the Gulf. Where they used to throw it away, now it's probably like the most restricted fish that you can catch. So there's a lot of history that goes into that, and I enjoy doing it.

[0:15:22.4]

Eric Velasco: Is that something that came up from growing up on the coast?

[0:15:25.2]

Patrick Noling: It did a little bit, just because I've got three brothers. Two of the three are professional fishermen, one at a very high level, one at a very low level. And as a kid, like before we moved to Destin, because I grew up in Michigan, we'd always vacation in Destin back in the early [19]70s when there was no Destin to speak of. So all we would do is fish, so, of course, I had to go along on fishing trips. So even though I didn't love it, you can't help but learn about it. So it's nothing I would want to do, but, you know, I saw the fish being pulled out of the water, I saw how they caught it, where they caught it, you know, what's good, what's not good, that kind of thing.

[0:16:05.2]

Eric Velasco: What's the value in knowing these things and translating it on to the guest?

[0:16:09.3]

Patrick Noling: Well, I mean, people need to know what they're eating. I think one thing about Highlands especially is how fresh everything is and how close we are to the Gulf, and even fish that comes far away, you have to know how it gets here as quickly as it does. I mean, these days, I mean, you've got to know everything. You need to know potentially like does that fish have a lot of mercury? What does it eat? Where is it from? Is it in season? You know, that kind of thing. And so it helps them make more informed decisions.

I mean, you have to know the texture of the fish. Some people, they'll ask, "Is it fishy?" And you're like, in your mind, "Well, yeah, it's a fish." But there is different levels. Like pompano's not for everybody. Snapper is for most people, but only because they think it is, so there's so many other fish they could eat, that you have to be willing to kind of like coax them along a little bit and try something new, but kind of give them the reassurance, like, "I understand what you're saying you like, and this is going to match up with what you like." I said, "Once you have it here, you'll kind of add it to your list of things to try." So I try to reassure people where they're going.

[0:17:16.2]

Eric Velasco: That seems to be a lot of the Highlands experience, is having that kind of knowledge and walking away knowing more than you did before you sat down at the table.

[0:17:26.0]

Patrick Noling: Yeah, and sometimes in my head I feel like I'm too much like putting somebody through school and they're hearing too much. You just have to kind of read people. Some people really get into it, I think, and they eat it up. Other people, you know, they're not here for that. They've been here a lot, they have a business meeting or something. And so you have to have that ability to kind of read your table. But most people want to know, "Why's it on your menu?"

I'm like, "Well, I'll tell you why it's on the menu and why we're doing it and why we're not doing it this time of year because there are no tomatoes being grown in Alabama in December, so that's why you can't have a tomato salad." So it's just things like that, but in a nice way you have to tell people, and it kind of helps them understand how the world works a little bit, as far as freshness and produce and things like that.

[0:18:11.7]

Eric Velasco: How do you size a person up? You're about to come out to the table for the first time. What's going through your head? How are you getting ready, and what cues are you listening for?

[0:18:24.0]

Patrick Noling: I'm kind of a blank slate when I go to the table. I hate people that pre-judge people on the way they look, because you're going to be proven wrong most of the time as you go up to the table. So it's that interaction, you know, initially, when you're handing them the wine list and asking them if they want anything to drink, you can watch

their body language, you can see if they're making eye contact with you, you can tell, like, okay, I can be a little bit playful with this table or, no, they want to be pretty serious.

So, I mean, it just is an intuitive thing. Because we talk about that a lot in training. It's like, "How do we make people do this?" I'm like, "I don't know." I think it's just you have that ability to do it or you don't. You can't really like train someone to have that intuitive nature about other people.

[0:19:09.4]

Eric Velasco: That's more personality than coming from experience? Or does experience build on the personality?

[0:19:13.8]

Patrick Noling: The experience, I think, gives me the confidence to do what I do. I tend to—and this sounds bad, but I tend to want to dominate the table a little bit. I will really jockey for control, because I like being in control and, you know, there's a give-and-take, but eventually most people like that I'm at least showing enough interest in them that I want to make sure they have a good time, so they can relax and say, "Okay, take it over to you."

Because I have a lot of people that'll just turn it all over to me, like, "Pick out my wine, pick out my food," you know.

And I'll say, "What don't you like?" And then we'll just go from there. And I like that. I like being able to do things like that.

[0:19:55.1]

Eric Velasco: That's part of your personality, too.

[0:19:56.8]

Patrick Noling: It is part of my personality. It's probably, some would say, a detrimental part of my personality, but, you know, it's who I am. I can't help it.

[0:20:03.6]

Eric Velasco: But it seems in this setting that that's something that really comes in handy for what you do.

[0:20:07.5]

Patrick Noling: It does. I mean, people expect an awful lot when they come into this restaurant, especially now, you know, we're getting the accolades that we've gotten, you know, they're just looking for any kind of like wedge they can drive. "Oh, you just think you're so good." [Interviewer's note: This interview took place 10 months after Highlands was named Outstanding Restaurant by the James Beard Foundation.]

I mean, I would never say anything about what I think we are. I mean, the proof is in the pudding, as they say. I mean, I'll just have a good time and then you be the judge of where we are as a restaurant. I won't ever make a pronouncement like, well, we're this and we're that. I'm like, well, no, that's not for me to say. That's for you to decide. And that's kind of where I take that.

[0:20:43.1]

Eric Velasco: Let's talk about training here. When you came here, what did you have to go through to be ready to hit the floor?

[0:20:55.4]

Patrick Noling: Well, when I came here, things were a little bit different in the restaurant business. There weren't as many restaurants in town. You did have a pool of wait staff that had a pretty good bit of experience. So I remember taking like the server test, and Pardis [Stitt] wrote on the test, "Why aren't there more of you out here?" Because I did have a pretty good basic understanding of wine, more so than a lot of people would have. Of course, with wine, the more you think you know, the more you realize you don't know anything, but, you know, it gave me a groundswell.

Now, the style of service here was very different than at Hot & Hot, so I had to, you know, learn to be a little bit more formal and go through more formal service techniques, which I knew, but I just didn't do them. So there's kind of that transition of seeing—I mean, one thing about Highlands, there's one way to do it, and one way to do it only here, and I try to tell new staff when they come in, it's like, "Don't fight it. This is the way it's supposed to be done. Just do it that way. Things will go so much easier for you."

So training started—I probably worked a week behind a waiter, just kind of following him around, seeing where things are. It's very uncomfortable for me to be in new situations, because I don't know where things are and I have to think about everything. It really, you know, ties me up in knots almost. So you spend that first week

kind of getting to know where everything is, seeing how things are done. I watch how other people do things. I kind of get a feel for the kitchen and personalities and things like that.

And then they're pretty smart here, because a lot of restaurants won't do that, but you also have to do training in the kitchen. You need that appreciation for what's being done back there, because they work very, very hard and you need to see like the food prep and all that goes into it. And, of course, me not having great skills, I mean, that caused a lot of anxiety for me, because I'm like, "I don't even know if I can adequately chop these herbs for you the way you want them to." But, you know, you have to do it. And, you know, there's a good relationship between front and back of the house at Highlands. There's not that antagonistic kind of barrier that some restaurants have. I think we're very much in this together, and so they're willing to kind of help me through and things like that.

Then you spend a lot of time on the expo side when the plates are coming out. It helps you learn the plates, because you have to know what they are to expo the order. Like you'll have triggerfish coming out, lamb chops, you know, and venison and duck, and venison and duck might look similar, and so you have to be able to know like what is what and why is why, and how to finally put the final touches on the plates. So that was really—

[0:23:35.1]

Eric Velasco: The garnishes and all?

[0:23:36.6]

Patrick Noling: The garnishes. A lot of the sauces are done, because you want things to go out like really hot and just prepared right then and there. You don't want them to have to sit. And typically, that's what the expo does, and so that was good.

[0:23:51.1]

Eric Velasco: What is an expo?

[0:23:51.8]

Patrick Noling: Expo is the expeditor. So in our kitchen, we'll have three people on the hot line, you'll have like the middle guy that does like all the vegetable prep and the side preps, have a grill guy, and you have a sauté guy. Then on *garde manger*, our kitchen is tiny, but Frank has told us before that kitchens are much more efficient when they're small like that, because you don't have to take many steps. You're just there. But it's hot and it's crowded.

So we've got three people on *garde manger*, typically, that are doing cold and hot appetizers, and it's in an L-shape, so the expo kind of stands on the other side of the "L" where the plates are coming up. Appetizers don't need a lot of expediting, like the waiters can expedite those. There's very little prep that needs to be done to them. The entrées, though, the plates are bigger, they take up more space. The expo will be responsible for, you know, putting the order together, making sure everything's ready, because you don't want to send anything out, and you're like, oh, you've got three of your four entrées, the

other one's not on the plate. Now these are going to be sitting on the table. So you have to be able to see that.

And then they'll have sauces, they'll have—like we do a lot of like relishes and things like that for fish, but they have to be prepared to order. I mean, they're not made at 4:00 o'clock and sitting in a big bucket. I mean, they're chopped right then, they're mixed right then, because you want that freshness, so you have to be able to do that as an expo.

So it really helps you learn the food and, you know, Frank will be there like, "Okay, that's too much pepper you're putting in. There's not enough oil. That's too wet. That's too dry." And so all of that kind of is that fine-tuning that you need, and it helps you as a waiter when you bring your food to the table, because you can look at your plate and say, "Well, this plate doesn't look right to me." And so you don't serve it; you make sure it's right before it goes to the table.

[0:25:39.1]

Eric Velasco: So that's part of the thinking behind having somebody who's been waiting tables be spending time in the kitchen—

[0:25:44.8]

Patrick Noling: That's right.

[0:25:45.2]

Eric Velasco: —and see how that's done.

[0:25:46.3]

Patrick Noling: Because one thing about Highlands, and this is true with most restaurants, like no job should be not your job. I mean, if something needs doing, you should be expected to do it. Now, certainly they're not going to expect me to go back there and jump on the sauté line, but, you know, if there's trash on the floor, if coffee needs filled, if it's a table on the other side of the restaurant that's four sections away from mine, I mean, they're as much by responsibility as anyone else's. And, you know, we all kind of tend to kind of focus on our own little world, but there's a lot of that training that you have to keep your eyes up, you have to be watching, because it's so easy to tell when somebody needs something. Their body language is different, they're trying to make eye contact with somebody, and if you're not looking, you're never going to make eye contact back. So you can go over and either take care of what they need or you can have somebody else do it that's doing it, and make sure things are put together properly.

[0:26:38.4]

Eric Velasco: As you go out and places you've worked, how unusual is that protocol?

[0:26:43.1]

Patrick Noling: I think it was most pronounced here over any place. I mean, Hot & Hot was a little bit smaller. We were a pretty tight group of waiters, so we would try to look out for each other. I mean, one thing about Birmingham, we have so many regular guests

that come in, I mean, you just feel responsible for them in the room. If nothing else, you want to go and say hello and see how they're doing and things like that. But it's most pronounced here of any place I've ever worked. A lot of places, it's like every man for themselves and no thought of what the person next to them is doing, and no care to what the person is doing next to them, and I think that shows in a lot of restaurants, that, you know, "I'm sorry, you're not my table. I'm not going to do anything to help you."

[0:27:26.7]

Eric Velasco: That would not be said twice in this dining room, would it? [Laughter]

[0:27:28.5]

Patrick Noling: No, not out loud.

[0:27:33.1]

Eric Velasco: So, regulars. How do you get assigned tables, I guess is what I'm getting at, and when does this happen?

[0:27:43.9]

Patrick Noling: It's a tricky thing. I have a pretty deep thing of—a deep list of regulars, some that come in once a week, some that come in every other week, they have to sit at a certain table, I have to be their waiter. The maître d's thoughts are, you know, if this person wants you to wait on them, they want me to wait on them, so they'll kind of adjust the map accordingly. Sometimes there's more request tables than I have tables in my

section, and so they'll see, "Go by and visit." So I'm like, "Okay." Well, that just kind of expands my evening, because I'll want to kind of really take care of them when I do.

[0:28:26.8]

Eric Velasco: Take over the table.

[0:28:26.5]

Patrick Noling: Well, this sounds kind of bad, but over the years, like more difficult people that are a little bit hard to deal with, I'm really good at dealing with them, so I've created this trap for myself that I have a lot of regular guests—not lot, but some, that are not much fun to wait on, but I know how to wait on them. It keeps things calm. It does. But, you know, people will get upset if I'm not waiting on them or Goren's not waiting on them or Brian's not waiting on them. Everybody has their request tables, so we try as hard as we can to do that.

How they do it, I don't know, because I'm one of those people, like I never tell my table my name, I never introduce myself, because I just don't like that kind of canned introduction that people do, because it's like it doesn't really matter what my name is. I mean, that's not what I'm here for. But if they ask, I'll tell them. And then they'll be like, "Well, can I ask for you next time?"

I'm like, "Sure." But I've never been one to fish for tables, though. I don't like that. I want them to come to me. I don't want to like ask them to ask for me again. I want it to be on their own terms.

[0:29:33.1]

Eric Velasco: So a lot of these will be when a person's making a reservation, they'll say, "And I want to sit in Patrick's section"?

[0:29:37.9]

Patrick Noling: Exactly. And a lot of people have it built into like the maître d's head and into the reservation files, that I really need to wait on them or Goren really needs to wait on them, and, you know, they prefer this table and they don't like that table. You know, we've got people that do come in once a week. We have some people that come in two or three times a week, and, you know, they have certain places they want to sit. I mean, I think that's something they've kind of earned. It's not always going to happen, but, you know, if that's what they want, I mean, they're part of the family.

[0:30:11.5]

Eric Velasco: Part of the perk of being a regular.

[0:30:12.4]

Patrick Noling: Well, it is, and, you know, they really do feel like they're a part of this restaurant. It's not like they come in just because they feel removed from it and feel important. They come in because they feel like they're part of it, like they get to know everybody, they watch things, they enjoy being part of this big show that we're putting on every night, which I like.

[0:30:38.3]

Eric Velasco: It's an interesting description of it too.

[0:30:39.8]

Patrick Noling: Well, it is. I mean, we're on stage when we're on the floor out here. I mean, you know, it's funny to me like when I'm working sometimes things seem so busy and so hectic and crazy, but then on the few times that you come in and actually have dinner at Highlands, like your perspective from the table is totally different. Things look controlled and, you know, effortless, and I'm just like I'm glad they do, because sometimes to me they don't seem that way. But, you know, it's an interesting difference, you know, depending on your perspective of where it is.

[0:31:15.8]

Eric Velasco: John Rolen over at Bottega likes to say, "We make the magic happen. We just don't let you know how we do it."

[0:31:19.7]

Patrick Noling: Yeah, and that's, you know, the truth with any magic trick. You don't ever want to let anybody know what to do. So something that seems very hard and that you're working very hard to do, you want it to seem effortless to the guests, because, I mean, anything that will take the guests kind of out of their little zone, like if somebody's carrying plates awkwardly or somebody's walking awkwardly, I mean, they'll get their attention, and you don't want that. You want things to be very smooth, and you don't

want to cause any anxieties with tables, like, "I think he's going to drop that," you know, that kind of thing. So you try to have as little of that as possible.

[0:31:55.4]

Eric Velasco: Now, there's a lot of attention paid to when the reservations are coming in, who's coming in, when, obviously, pacing and all that. Do the waiters review this with the management, the maître d's, or—

[0:32:14.2]

Patrick Noling: We do, during lineup every day, which starts at 4:30 and we'll have thirty minutes, sometimes a little bit more, we'll go over the menu in depth, especially like brand-new things that we've never done before. They'll want us to describe the menu back, but kind of how we would describe it to the guest, not clinically, but how do we get this—and that's when Frank will fine-tune us a little bit and say, "Well, no, really it's more like this. I'd prefer you say this." And I'm like, "Okay, that makes perfect sense to me." So we'll do that.

Then we'll talk about who's coming in, and we'll go table by table, because there's always going to be birthdays or special events or somebody wants champagne and they want it waiting here and they want this and they want that. So you kind of review that so everybody knows about it. It's not just individually with the person. That way if something hasn't been done, you can step in and help it get done. Then we'll talk—

[0:33:14.8]

Eric Velasco: Somebody may go by one of Goren's tables and say happy birthday to them or happy anniversary.

[0:33:18.7]

Patrick Noling: Exactly, that kind of thing. So we go in depth. There's a lot of special instructions sometimes with tables, you know, business dinners, make sure so-and-so gets the check, or somebody will say, "I want to pick up somebody's tab." Nothing worse than somebody wanting to buy someone's dinner and then it doesn't get done. I mean, you don't want things like that to happen.

So we do spend a lot of time. We talk about, like say if you have a regular coming in, and maybe they don't have like a requested waiter, but they come in often and they might have certain things, like they're salt-sensitive, they don't like salt, or they prefer something this way, it's much nicer for them if they don't have to re-explain their world every time they come in, that that person knows what they want so they can anticipate it. It really puts people's minds at ease. I mean, a lot of people want a specific cocktail and, you know, you can bring it to the table when they sit down. They don't even have to order it, because some people are very, you know, much like clockwork, they never vary on what they do. So we do those kind of things at the meeting as well.

[0:34:20.5]

Eric Velasco: And how do you keep track of that?

[0:34:21.6]

Patrick Noling: Memory. I mean, the maître d's and everything have written-down notes about people, but you just learn certain things about people, and that's when you rely on your waiter coworkers. You'll ask them, "Well, what about this person? What do they like? What don't they like?" I interact with Goren quite a bit with our call tables. I've kind of like—he had such a big group of call tables that he can't possibly do them all, so over the years, I've kind of cycled in a lot of his, to where they've gone from only Goren can wait on them to, well, no, "Only Patrick and Goren can wait on me." You know, I won their confidence or whatever. So I have to know like, okay, when so-and-so says they want to order in two minutes, they really mean two minutes. Like you have to look at your watch and go to the table in two minutes. It's not just a saying. Other people, it would be. This particular person, no. So you just know those kind of things to keep the night running as smooth as possible.

[0:35:19.8]

Eric Velasco: And, again, is this taking place at that 4:30 meeting?

[0:35:23.3]

Patrick Noling: It is. We meet here in the dining room, we stand kind of in a semicircle. I take copious amount of notes. So we'll print out a rough draft of the menu that we're doing that night. We'll go item by item. Some things, like the baked grits or something like that, that we've done so much, you don't really need to review that, but, you know, we'll have all kinds of just brand-new things, so I'll write down ingredients. You have to know your ingredients because you've got people who have food allergies, they have

food issues. You don't want them to step into a place they don't want to go or don't need to go. I mean, sometimes it can be life-threatening, especially nut allergies and things like that. So we're very careful about pointing that out, so I take copious notes.

So usually with the meeting I'll come with a stack of maybe ten of the previous menus, and so I'll have a history built up of where we kind of are stylistically, so I can refer back to it, I can add new notes. We might be out of things. I mean, this is Alabama. Sometimes it's hard to get certain alcohols in. Like bourbon's really hard to get right now, so there might be bourbons we're out of. And you need to know we're out of them instead of like taking an order, going to the bar, "I don't have that," and going back to the table. At least you can get that out of the way when they order and say, "I'm sorry, we're out of Blanton's today. I'm not sure when the state's going to get it back in. But might I suggest this instead?" So I write down all those things on the menu we're out of.

The wine list is big, and it's a very breathable list. I mean, things we maybe don't have a lot of, we might have sold the last bottle last night, and we're certainly not going to reprint the whole wine list just for one item. I mean, they're very conscious about waste and things like that. I mean, it's much easier just to say, "Well, I don't have this particular burgundy tonight, but I've got this instead." So you have to write those things down so you kind of have an idea of what the night is going to look like, so you do all of that during the meeting as well.

[0:37:20.6]

Eric Velasco: Here, how many wines do you have to have a working knowledge of?

[0:37:23.2]

Patrick Noling: So many. I mean hundreds on the wine list. There's no way you can really know like each individual wine's characteristics, but you have to know like the basics of all the wines. Very French-centric with our wine list, so that's where I will spend most of my time learning things. A lot of Austrian and German wines, nothing really from Australia, New Zealand, and things like that, a pretty good California list as well. I mean, really for the wine list, anytime I taste something, I kind of file it away like it is, like you have to know like is this a really light, elegant pinot, is it more of a structured fruit-forward pinot, and that's the kinds of things you have to kind of find out when you're asking people, when they're asking for suggestions on wine. You kind of have to know the price point that they want, because some wines are exceptionally expensive, others are not. So usually I'll just kind of like say, "Well, indicate where you want to go with this wine," because there will be other people at the table and I don't want somebody to say, "I can only spend $50," because that might not be—so they'll just kind of, "Well, what about this one here?" And then I'll pick up like, okay, that's the range you want to stay in. It might not even be the wine they want. And I'll say, "I think this would be good. I think this would be good. You might not even think about this, but let's consider this wine, because I think it's really delicious for what you're looking for," that kind of thing.

[0:38:50.1]

Eric Velasco: That is one of your talents.

[0:38:52.3]

Patrick Noling: Yeah, and I don't know if it's a real talent or not. [Laughter] I think it is. In my own mind, I have what I think is good with anything else, especially by wines by the glass. So I do a lot of that pairing. I do that quite often with people. I will pick their wines for them. You know, and Frank's really good, you know, "If they don't like it, then tell them they don't have to drink it. We'll get them something else." So you don't want to push people too far out of their comfort zone, but you kind of get a feel for what they like and what they don't like. You know, people love that when they try something new by the glass they've never had before. One, you're only doing a glass, so it's not like you've committed to a whole bottle of a wine you might not love but find interesting, but a glass of wine is fine.

And I try to be good about my pairings with food. You know, I listen, I know what Frank likes to drink and what he likes to eat and how they come together and why he thinks they go together, and then I've got my own kind of thoughts about what I like and what I don't like. I'm not much of a drinker. I mean, I like wine, but I don't go out of my way to drink it, but I understand it. I don't have near the palate he does. It's really like astounding to me. Like we'll be tasting wines and things, and he'll pull out flavor profiles, and I'm like, "That's it exactly." Like I hadn't thought about it till he told me. So I kind of file that away as well.

[0:40:16.9]

Eric Velasco: So talk about the wine tastings. That's an important part of your ongoing training here.

[0:40:21.8]

Patrick Noling: It is. We do them quite often. A lot of times it'll be the actual winemaker that's in town on tour, and so we'll all gather together, sometimes in the main dining room, sometimes at the bar, and they'll open wines, they'll tell us about the wine, we'll taste the wine, then we're expected to kind of give our thoughts about the wine. Especially for new people, because everybody's kind of shy and nervous, they don't want to speak up, but Frank really wants to know what we think about it. So we have to tell him. I mean, he might say, "Maybe not so much that. Maybe it's a little bit more that," or, "Oh, yeah, you're right. It's kind of this, and I agree. I'm tasting this."

[0:41:04.3]

Eric Velasco: What's his thinking in doing that? Does it help you to refine the pitch?

[0:41:08.3]

Patrick Noling: It's helping us to learn, it really is. It's getting that confidence to speak about what you're tasting and how you're tasting it and how you're describing it, and I think that's an important part for us to do, because the people who come in here, they know a lot about wine, I mean guests. You can't bullshit them and say something that's not true. I try to be really good about that. If it's above my pay grade, as they say, I will go get some backup information from someone else, because it's too easy to be called out if you're just kind of saying it just because you think it sounds good.

[0:41:47.6]

Eric Velasco: So how are you making that assessment to the individual? Just kind of listen to questions they ask?

[0:41:52.1]

Patrick Noling: Yeah. I mean, you can tell right away, you know, if you're talking about, you know, a Chablis, what about this vineyard versus that vineyard by the same maker, I'm like, "Well, that I'm going to have to go find out," because, you know, of the hundreds that are on there, I might not know the difference between these two Chablis by the same maker in the same year. One will say, "Yeah, that's a little bit leaner. This has got a little bit more citrus." You kind of get that feel for the wines and then let the guests make their decision from that.

[0:42:24.9]

Eric Velasco: And who do you go to get that confirmation?

[0:42:27.2]

Patrick Noling: The bar manager, Matt Gilpin, he knows a lot about wine. Frank Stitt, always. Pardis, her wine knowledge is incredible, it's good. She's especially good about pronunciation, because I can barely speak English sometimes, and French words I'll butcher. I mean, just describing Austrian words can be a little bit of a handful as well. I usually will joke with the table, like, "Well, it doesn't matter. The French won't like any way I pronounce it anyway, so this is how I'm going to say it." But she's really good

about that, you know, and it gives us more confidence, you know, when we can pronounce something correctly and say this letter combination actually sounds this way, not that way. Everybody says it this way, but it's really supposed to be that way. Plus she knows a lot about wine. And they're so present in the restaurant, so it's very easy to go to them and get information.

[0:43:21.2]

Eric Velasco: How much interaction do you have with Frank and then with Pardis?

[0:43:24.2]

Patrick Noling: A lot. You know, they're both such hands-on owners, I mean, I'll kind of point it out to people, like after thirty-six-years-plus that we've been here, how involved they are with this restaurant, like every day. I mean, their days are so much longer than my day is, and I think that's the success of Highlands, is how present they are. I mean, Pardis out on the floor. Frank, he focuses more on the kitchen. He's not one that wants to just come out and visit and shoot the shit with people. He wants to be keeping an eye on his food, and he keeps an eye on that food, I mean not only the food going out, but the food coming back. Like if you've got like a lot of food left on a plate, you better know why there's a lot of food on that plate. I mean, if you're full, that's fine, but, you know, well, was it too salty? Was it not cooked right? Because he's constantly fine-tuning things.

[0:44:20.2]

Eric Velasco: Walk me through this autopsy process, because it's very interesting to see.

[0:44:24.7]

Patrick Noling: It's not like super like, you know, intense or anything, but I mean the kitchen is small, so when you're bringing back plates, you know, if he notices there's a lot on the plate, I mean, he makes a very good point, like did you, in however subtle way you want, make sure they were enjoying what they were eating? And, you know, maybe someone in the kitchen is over-seasoning or under-seasoning that one particular dish, because he can't watch every single dish that goes out. So it just helps us to kind of look for those body language clues at the table, like, well, if somebody's kind of moving their food around but they're not really putting it in their mouth, sometimes it's people that just don't eat. I mean, they're just here. You'll just be able to judge that, because a lot of people will not say anything about their food if they feel like something's a little bit off, so you have to be able to coax it out of them and make it non-stressful for them.

A lot of times if I feel like somebody's not enjoying something, I mean, Frank will cook something else and I'll bring it out, and I'm like, "Here. Try this," that kind of thing. Or you come out and their plate's clean in like five seconds, and it's just like, "This person's hungry." So Frank's also a big proponent of like, "Well, bring them some more. I don't want anybody to leave hungry here," which doesn't happen very often, I mean, but there are some people that just will inhale their food.

[0:45:44.2]

Eric Velasco: What's one of the strangest excuses you've heard for food going back? I've heard one woman talk about how she doesn't look sexy enough eating this salad.

[0:45:53.5]

Patrick Noling: No, I mean, you'll have people that you'll watch them, I mean their food comes to the table, they won't taste it, they'll immediately pick up the salt spoon and salt it, and then they'll say it's too salty, and you're like, "Okay, well, I think you just made it that salty," but you can't really say anything. I mean, it's the way it is.

To me, it's temperatures on meats and things like that. You've got people that'll order a well-done steak and then they'll say, "The steak's kind of tough." And I'm like, well, you know. [Laughter]

One of my coworkers, she was kind of at my table with me when one of the guests had ordered a well-done steak, and she was kind of saying, "Well, my steak's kind of tough."

And Tina's like, "Well, how did you order it?"

And she said, "Well."

And Tina's like, "Well, you know," kind of thing. Because there are certain results that you're going to get if you're going to do it. It's just like, okay, you know, do that. But, you know, we'll get them something else if they want something else, but it's that kind of stuff.

I don't know if I've had really any kind of crazy people. I don't know. You have people that don't like textures of certain things, they don't like to look at certain things. Heaven help us if we're serving anything with a head on or something like that. I mean, I

let every person know like ahead of time, you know—no pun intended there—if there's going to be a head on the plate, because some people, it will put them into a really panic. So I get a little grief for that because I'll order some things like head-off when we order them, and it's like, well, it's only because I asked ahead of time, and they're like, "Well, just let them experience it." I'm like, "No." Certain people you can't let them experience that. But I've gotten better about that, so it's good. But it's just kind of me like wanting to take care of people and not traumatize them, and things like that.

[0:45:53.5]

Eric Velasco: That's a big thing for a lot of folks.

[0:47:45.6]

Patrick Noling: It is. It's becoming less and less, but, you know, to me it's funny that somebody'd be upset about a head on shrimp. I mean, it's just like, well, it had a head just five seconds ago. I mean, it's just like it's no different if you're seeing it or not.

[0:48:01.7]

Eric Velasco: I think a lot of folks, though, it's hard getting so up close and personal to their food.

[0:48:04.9]

Patrick Noling: They don't want their food looking at them. That's the line I'll hear more often.

[0:48:10.3]

Eric Velasco: There is a very stringent training protocol here.

[0:48:17.0]

Patrick Noling: Yes.

[0:48:17.6]

Eric Velasco: There's a stringent protocol for just about everything here.

[0:48:20.9]

Patrick Noling: Yes.

[0:48:20.9]

Eric Velasco: Talk to me about the training.

[0:48:24.8]

Patrick Noling: Training is ongoing. I mean, you're expected to always be learning, researching on your own, going over the wine list and things like that. As Birmingham has become more diverse with its restaurants, you know, there's fewer people to choose from that have restaurant experience, especially fine dining experience. I mean, it's the trend away from fine dining, and, you know, there's fewer and fewer people out there that can do this kind of work.

So it's a pretty involved training. I mean, typically we'll have someone come in and do a *stage*, where all they do—I mean, it's more like they haven't even decided they want to work here and we haven't decided if we want to hire them, so they'll come in and spend half an evening just shadowing and following around behind me or someone else, and they're seeing what we're doing. So it's kind of giving them an opportunity to see if this restaurant's a good fit. But to us, it gives us an opportunity to see them, how comfortable they are and how much they get and the type of questions they're asking about what we know. I mean, there's two schools of thought. If you get somebody that doesn't have any experience, it also means they don't have any bad habits, so you just have to train them.

But it's a pretty in-depth training because people expect you to know a lot about what you're doing, and you not only have to recite what it is, but you have to kind of know what you're talking about, because you'll get that a lot, where people will say, "Well, it's this."

And you're like, "Well, what is that?"

They're like, "I don't know. It's just that." So you have to kind of have that deeper knowledge of what food and what wine is.

Then if somebody's hired, typically they'll come in and they'll go through all the different stations of the restaurant. They'll work as a waiter assistant, they'll train with the waiter assistants, because that way you can see where linens are kept, where glassware is kept, how we handle things, how things are set up on the table. So they'll spend a lot of time with that.

Then they'll alternate between working with us on the floor, following and listening and asking questions. You know, it's awkward for me because I don't like to have people standing around me, so I'll just kind of have them stand behind me, because I feel like my voice is so nasal, they can hear me from across the room. But it also makes the guests—you know, they're a little bit aware that something is different going on, and so it's hard for me to be as natural as I want to be with that, but it's a necessary evil. You've got to have new employees. You want good employees. So they'll do that.

They'll also do training in the kitchen, like I talked about, so they'll understand about what goes on back there.

It's a hard training for people because it can last a month, and a lot of people aren't willing to do that. I mean at least a month, sometimes longer than that, before they're able to start generating tip income. So it's hard for people to kind of look at it as a big picture instead of a day-to-day kind of thing. So that kind of keeps some people from working here, where they can wear jeans and a t-shirt somewhere else, I mean, because there's a lot of expectations of us as far as like how we're dressed and how we look, you know, how we carry ourselves, and some people, you know, I'm not going to say it's a generational thing, but I think it is, I mean, you've got twenty-some-year-olds that do not understand how things work in this restaurant. They think it should all be very easy and they just kind of show up and go through the motions and then go home, but it's not that kind of job.

[0:52:10.8]

Eric Velasco: And it goes into things you wouldn't necessarily think of. No cologne, no jangly jewelry.

[0:52:17.9]

Patrick Noling: No. Which is easy for me because I don't wear cologne, I don't wear jewelry, but, I mean, all these things, you know, affect the guest, and, you know, you don't want—I mean, I think that's the transition I've seen happen here, because it used to be like, you know, well, you've got a tattoo or you've got an earring or you've got this, and I'm like, well, now so many of these things are just common, but, you know, you have to accept that, you know, maybe you are going to get a glimpse of someone's tattoo on their wrist or, you know, they've got a double piercing in their ear. But, I mean, by nature, we're a very conservative business. I mean, we wear, you know, black vests and white aprons and black pants and white shirts. I mean, we're supposed to be, you know, not the focus. We're just there. But, you know, we're not supposed to call that much attention to ourselves other than we're clean and pressed, you know, treating this like a profession.

[0:53:12.6]

Eric Velasco: How much do all those details that everyone's supposed to have ingrained, what role does that play in sustaining excellence over decades?

[0:53:25.9]

Patrick Noling: Well, I mean, I think it's that consistency that people really enjoy about Highlands. It's the most consistent restaurant I've ever worked at. I mean, there is no ebb and flow in quality that I think a lot of restaurants do. Like a lot of restaurants will start out very strong when they first open, and then they'll start taking little shortcuts and more little shortcuts and more little shortcuts, and people can tell. You know, they're open till 10:00. "Well, we're not very busy tonight, so we're going to close at 9:30." Things like that. That would never happen here. I mean, it's not part of our makeup.

And, you know, they have to remind us all the time—and I'm guilty of this, where I'll kind of get complacent and I'm like not, you know, learning like I should. It's a pretty stressful job and sometimes, you know, I have to like, you know, step away from it a little bit. It takes a lot of energy to like train new people and things like that, and so I kind of—I push against it, like, "I don't want to have a trainee tonight," you know, that kind of thing. But usually I'll do it. But you have to. I mean, you know, people will notice if something's not the way it always is.

[0:54:39.7]

Eric Velasco: I would imagine as one of the more experienced ones here, you get more trainees too.

[0:54:43.4]

Patrick Noling: Maybe. They would probably disagree with that, but invariably, like especially on a *stage*, like nine times out of ten, at least in my mind, nine times out of ten,

"You know, just go with Patrick over there." I'm just like, "Oh, really? Again?" [Laughter] So that kind of thing.

[0:54:58.8]

Eric Velasco: But I would imagine they put value on your assessment of that person, too, because that's the initial—you're almost the gatekeeper.

[0:55:07.9]

Patrick Noling: Yeah. I can see that, but it's hard. Sometimes people, to me, seem like they have really good potential, but maybe they don't. I see potential. I hate to like say anything bad about anybody, though, so sometimes that will work against me because I know they need a job and things like that.

[0:55:29.8]

Eric Velasco: It's not just *a* job. This is *the* job.

[0:55:31.1]

Patrick Noling: It is.

[0:55:31.4]

Eric Velasco: If you're in this business, this is *the* job.

[0:55:33.0]

Patrick Noling: Yeah, I wish more people felt about it that way, like out in the community, because this should really be the ultimate destination for you if you're going to do this, but, I mean, I think in a lot of people's minds, wait staff is, you know, just a temporary job. I don't get it as much anymore because I'm getting so old, but, you know, it's just like, "What's your real job?" or, "What do you do during the day?" I'm like, "No, this is my real job." [Laughter] It has been.

[0:55:56.3]

Eric Velasco: We started to get into this earlier. When and how did you make the conscious decision that "This is my career"?

[0:56:02.1]

Patrick Noling: I think just because it felt right, I felt validated with working at Highlands. I mean, it is the pinnacle of where you could work, and that would be anywhere in the country. I have certain guests that are very, you know, like, "You know, you really need to value what you do and what you bring to people. You're important in what you do. It's not just a job. You're a professional about this."

And so it's hard, I mean, going to like Birmingham Southern here in town, I mean, I see people I go to school with all the time. I mean, it's just like, "Oh, great." You know, in my mind, I'm thinking like, "Oh, good. I'm a waiter and you're a surgeon," and things like that. I don't feel that way as much anymore, but that was a hard transition for me to make, because I could see them kind of looking at me like, "Oh, what's happened to you?"

[0:56:52.9]

Eric Velasco: But that's the distinction I'm trying to make with these questions too. It's not a job.

[0:56:56.5]

Patrick Noling: It is not a job.

[0:56:57.4]

Eric Velasco: It's a career. It's a profession. There's a big difference between the two.

[0:57:00.4]

Patrick Noling: It's just part of me, I think, is the way I look at it. I mean, I get a lot of satisfaction out of, you know, making people happy. It's kind of my personality. I'm definitely like a caretaker. I want to take care of people. I felt the business world was so sterile for me, it just was not a good fit at all. Also, in my mind, I'm a little bit like Adult ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder]. It's very easy for me to get distracted, but you can't do that here in the restaurant, because you've got people right in front of you and you have to keep moving from task to task to task to task, because I can't just wander off and start daydreaming or kind of like move on to a different task, because it's right here in front of me. So there is that immediacy that I like about it.

[0:57:48.2]

Eric Velasco: You can't just work hard here; you have to work smart too.

[0:57:50.2]

Patrick Noling: You have to work very smart. Like one thing about me, like when I was working at the accounting firm, my nature to work is like I will do like fifty minutes of like goof-off, and then I can turn out in ten minutes what other people can do in an hour, but it doesn't work that way in the business world. You have to be more—but here, you kind of hit the floor at 5:30 when we seat people, and then you go till midnight, and you don't have a choice, I mean, because the people aren't just going to go away. I mean, I have to go to table to table to table to table, and I enjoy it, I really do.

[0:58:28.3]

Eric Velasco: Walk me through your day here. Let's start before the curtain comes up. When do you normally get in and what do you do?

[0:58:33.5]

Patrick Noling: Well, we're supposed to get here at 3:45 every day. Almost without exception, the entire staff gets here at about at least 3:30 or something like that. Not me. I roll in at 3:45, 3:46, 3:47 every day. Part of it is just my, you know, AADD nature. It's like, "Where's the day gone? I'm running late once again." Like I only had three hours to get ready for work. So that's kind of a uniqueness about me.

So you'll show up, you'll find where your section is. Typically they'll be in the main dining room, there'll be six sections, three or four tables each. You'll look at the

map. They'll draw a map for the evening of each table, it's on the map and who's sitting there and how many people and where they're coming in. So then you'll have to come in and set up your table, so you have to check your linens and make sure they're straight and they're clean and everything's where they need to be. Then some tables are expandable to round tables to square tables, so you either have to pop a table up or pop a table down, make sure they're ready.

[0:59:37.2]

Eric Velasco: Depending upon that first seating?

[0:59:38.2]

Patrick Noling: Depending on the first seating. Then you have to gather your silverware to set the tables, because we clean the dining room down to tablecloths every night. A lot of restaurants leave setup. We don't like that here. So we clear every table off at the end of the night, and then reset them again when we open. So then you have to get silverware, glassware, plates, salt, pepper, things like that. And, you know, me being, you know, just thickheaded, it's like because I'm always the last one in, so it's always harder for me to find everything. I mean, I'll find it, but like all the easy stuff to get is already gone, and it's just the way it is. Everybody kind of understands that, and so, you know, I kind of—I'm always like a step behind, it seems like, setting up. [Laughter]

[1:00:28.6]

Eric Velasco: So the silverware and the glassware, you just grab it out of the dishwasher bin and slap it down?

[1:00:33.2]

Patrick Noling: No. [Laughter] Yeah, that's exactly what we do. No! [Laughter] Silverware will be in the racks from being washed the night before. Glassware is taken out of the racks the night before and put on the shelves. Of course, none of it's been polished. Same with plates and things like that. I mean, it's all about cleanliness and attention to detail, so you have to, you know, wipe down the silverware, make sure it's spotlessly clean. Same with glassware. You have to know how to polish your glassware. You don't want to leave any fingerprints on it. You want to make sure that there's no like odor from the dishwasher, like maybe they had one load at the end of the night where they didn't change the water. You know, anything that's perceptible to the guests, you want to clean out.

So you'll polish all your glassware, you'll polish all your silverware, you'll polish your plates. The way the tables are set up are very specific where things have to go. I mean, it's not to the point where we have a template where we'll put down, but, I mean, silverware has to be in a certain spot and right at a certain point next to the edge of the table. Your wine glass has to be a certain spot above the knife. Your water glass has to be a certain spot just to the right of the knife. It's a lot of attention to detail, and so that's one thing you have to kind of train people. It's about symmetry on your table. Like, you know, sitting at a table for four, the person across from you, everything should be exactly in the same spot for them as it is with you. You should be able to draw a line across and

hit where they are. Your glassware should make a perfect "X" because they're kind of at 45-degree angles to themselves. So all that stuff adds peace to people when they sit down, because everything is orderly. Nothing's out of order. Everything is the same on the table.

[1:02:11.7]

Eric Velasco: You may not notice it, but—

[1:02:14.5]

Patrick Noling: Subconsciously, you notice it. If things are out of whack, it'll throw you a little bit. But when things are not, everything looks really, you know—and so I'm a little bit anal retentive about that, so that kind of works in my favor.

So that's how we'll set up the tables. I mean, the salt and pepper have to be in a certain place. Your candle has to be in a certain place. The tables, you know, a lot of them are on angles here, so they have to be angled just properly and like all line up in a straight line, the points from the tables that are at angles to each other, just things like that.

Then you have to look at the room and make sure the spacing is right, because cleaning crew will come in and move tables around at night to clean, and, you know, if a table's off even by six inches, it might make, you know, it too close to the other table, and like you won't have passageway to get through, or it might be hard for people to get through, so you have to always keep an eye on that.

[1:03:04.8]

Eric Velasco: And if you don't notice, Pardis will.

[1:03:05.4]

Patrick Noling: Well, yeah, and rightly so. But also really big on keeping things clean here, like as far as dusting and cleaning and things like that, because Pardis will remind us quite often that, you know, people are sitting at a much lower level when they're at the table. They can see things that you don't necessarily see when you're standing up, so you have to check for dust, check for this, you know. Everything needs attention. We've got all this white linen in here, so there's a lot of linen dust that'll settle just after half a day, so you want to make things clean, because that's what people notice. Whether they know it or not, they notice if things are clean and if they're dusty. And if they're dusty, that's not a good thing you want somebody's mind to have, because—

[1:03:50.9]

Eric Velasco: At what point do you pull out the Q-tip?

[1:03:52.2]

Patrick Noling: That's funny that you would mention that. We actually do occasionally Q-tip seams and things like that on some of the wood furniture, and I'm not making that up, so we do, not as much as we should. I think that's something like any parent with their children, you know, has to get after them to clean up their room, because we kind of get wrapped up in our own thing. So she's good about keeping up with us and making

sure we are cleaning. I think it probably never can be clean enough, so you just have to clean. But, I mean, the fans need dusting or there's a leaf on the ledge outside the window. I mean things like that, it has to be clean.

[1:04:31.6]

Eric Velasco: Now, these protocols, have they gotten more stringent since you started or is this pretty much the way it was when you started back in the early 2000s?

[1:04:31.6]

Patrick Noling: It's always been this way. It's always been this way.

[1:04:43.5]

Eric Velasco: And who's behind that?

[1:04:45.1]

Patrick Noling: I mean, Pardis is definitely the front of the house driving force. I mean, she's very detailed oriented. You know, the maître d's will drive it as well. It's become second nature for a lot of the longtime waiters, and we know what we're supposed to go and we do it, then hopefully let the newer people in on that as well. Each section of the dining room has their own like specific opening side work we have to do, so you have to kind of learn how to do that and make sure you're doing it the right way. Some are better than others, depending on what section you're in.

One of the sections, they're responsible for like sweeping the walk outside and, you know, making sure there's no like random spider web or a leaf or cigarette butt or anything where somebody's going to see it. And then you've got to wipe everything down and make sure the glass is clean and things like that.

Goren, his job is to do—we have like little butter ramekins that we have to make before service every night, and that's always his job, no matter where he is in the dining room. He prepares the butter, so you have to like swap out with him. Whatever section side work should be, that's what you'll do, because he's kind of earned that. So that's what he likes to do, so we let him do his butters every day.

[1:06:04.0]

Eric Velasco: So he's got thirty-six years in, going on thirty-seven.

[1:06:07.5]

Patrick Noling: Yeah.

[1:06:07.5]

Eric Velasco: Tell me about some of the other long-timers here.

[1:06:11.1]

Patrick Noling: Well, we got Chris Conner, bartender. He's been here forever. I mean, I kind of joke with people that I'm only like mid-pack as far as the people that work here. I mean, it's hard to keep up with how long everybody's here. I mean, we've all been here a

long time. I mean, we've got Jonathan Sealy, here probably, I know, twenty years, because he's been here longer than I have. I mean, that's how I look at it. I'll just look at the people that have been here longer than I have, because I've been here almost seventeen now, so Marco's [Butterini – phonetic] been here before I, Tina's [Goodwin – phonetic] been here before I.

[1:06:42.4]

Eric Velasco: Give us full names, please.

[1:06:43.0]

Patrick Noling: So Marco Butterini [phonetic], Tina Goodwin, Chris Conner, Jonathan Sealy. I'm trying to think who else. Of course, Pardis and Frank. I'm sure I'm forgetting somebody, and I'm going to get in trouble for leaving them out. Tina's worked with us a long time. She was at Bottega before we kind of stole her away. But, yeah, and so we have a pretty close group. We're pretty, you know, tight, as far as a waitstaff goes, which is only natural, I think, in any workplace that you would, you know, work this long with the same people day after day after day.

You know, our jobs can be very stressful, and so you have that bonding that goes on, on especially busy nights and things like that. You have that after-work kind of like recap, like, "This night about killed us." And we're like, "Yeah." You know, you kind of go over your highlights, which are usually like the more like disastrous things that you felt like happened during the evening.

[1:07:40.4]

Eric Velasco: Like what might come up?

[1:07:41.3]

Patrick Noling: I don't know. Just like, you know, you had too much to do at one time and, you know, what do you do?

I think that's the oven going off. It's not a fire alarm. I always think it is when I hear it. There, it stopped. [Interviewer's note: Mr. Noling is referring to a timer or something else making a rapid dinging noise in the background for a minute or so before stopping.]

Just those kind of things, those shared things, or if somebody was especially difficult to wait on. We have certain people that nobody wants to wait on. [Laughter] So you'll have to hear their tales about, you know, their latest hijinks that they pulled or what they've sent back or what they haven't done or what they want done, you know. We'll kind of share that kind of thing, you know.

We're busy. We're just very, very busy. It's just the nature of the business. You're going to be stressed during your evening, but you don't really have a choice. You've got to just kind of buckle down and get it done.

[1:08:34.3]

Eric Velasco: You see people at their best, because, of course, this is the finest restaurant in town, one of the finest in the nation. But you sometimes see people at their worst too.

[1:08:44.0]

Patrick Noling: Yeah, and they're probably at their worst wherever they go, but, you know, what are you going to do? You just have to try to make the best of it.

[1:08:51.7]

Eric Velasco: What's one of the strangest things you've seen happen?

[1:08:55.1]

Patrick Noling: [Sighs] It's hard to say. I don't know. I've had some people cry when I wasn't waiting on them, they were that upset. That's kind of awkward. You'll get a little bit—people get a little bit "handsy" while you're at the table sometimes; you'll feel, like, somebody's hands on the back of your leg, and you're like, "Okay." That doesn't happen that much, but it does happen.

[1:09:23.6]

Eric Velasco: Does the wine go slower after that?

[1:09:24.7]

Patrick Noling: No. You just learn now to stand in the same spot that you stood the last time you were at the table. You know, people get drunk. I've had somebody throw up on the table once and then just acted like they were just going to keep going on with dinner. Those kind of things, they're not good things to think, but it's amazing to me like people's level of comfort, like, okay, you should be heading out the door right now, but

yet you're going to stick it out. I don't think so. [Laughter] That's not a good thing. Kind of gross, I guess, but it did happen. [Laughter]

[1:10:05.8]

Eric Velasco: One of the things, with so many experienced waiters and kitchen, too, but we're thinking more front of the house right now, with so many more restaurants opening up, fine dining, certainly you get recruited.

[1:10:29.0]

Patrick Noling: Not as much. I get a lot of this like—because we'll have like, you know, big companies, tech companies, bankers, things like that, like I get that a lot, like especially people that come down from New York. Like I had one night, I guess it was like a Goldman Sachs like executive, he grabbed me by the arm and looked at me. He goes, "I've never had anybody wait on me like this before. Like you really are taking care of us," you know. And they'll always like joke, like, "Oh, you'd be so good in our business." But nothing ever comes of it, of course.

[1:11:03.8]

Eric Velasco: Do you tell them you've got an accounting degree? [Laughter]

[1:11:05.7]

Patrick Noling: I do, but I don't want to go work at Goldman Sachs, especially. But it's a compliment, it really is. I don't get as much anymore. I used to when that first group of

like fine dining restaurants was opening, like Daniel George and—I'm trying to think of what else. Maybe like Azalea or someplace like that. There was a little bit more pull then, but now most of the restaurants that are opening are at lower levels than where we are, so I don't get a lot of like, "Come work for me" kind of thing. I mean, I think they know it would be a hard thing to pull me away. I don't really have any managerial aspirations. It's just not my thing. Or I certainly could, but it just doesn't appeal to me.

[1:11:55.7]

Eric Velasco: That's part of what I was getting at. What keeps you here?

[1:11:57.5]

Patrick Noling: That interaction with guests. It really gives me a lot of satisfaction. Like I said, even sitting down for this interview, I was like, you know, I don't really want to do it, but my ego kind of does, because I want this recognition. I like the recognition that I'm kind of good at what I do, and I think I really am good at what I do. So that makes me feel good, you know, and people will tell me that. So I guess maybe I just like that attention. I don't know. But, I mean, it's a good feeling, I mean, when you can say, "Yes, I'm exceptionally good at what I do, and I work at one of the best restaurants in the country, that's consistently been one of the best restaurants in the country." I mean, that's not a bad place to be, I think. Not many people can say that about what they do.

You know, I don't know. I'm getting to the point, as I get older, it's like I don't know how I'm going to phase my way out of this job. I mean, like how long can I do it? I mean, there's a lot of like physical labor, as far as like moving tables and things like that,

and it's, you know, starting to wear on me a little bit, you know, and I don't move as quick as I used to. One of my things is I always like to just take orders by memory. I don't like to write anything down. It's getting harder, as I get older, to do that, but it's kind of like this bone of contention. I mean, a table of six, I'll write things down, but I usually pride myself on tables of two or four to never write anything down, just to know their order in my head, which we're not supposed to do here, because you've got the potential of making a mistake. But I've got that ego that wants me to do that, because I think people like that when I do that. I think it shows them that I'm really involved in their dinner, that I'm listening to what they say, and, you know, it kind of—

[1:13:48.1]

Eric Velasco: Especially when it comes out right and the person who ordered it gets what they did.

[1:13:51.6]

Patrick Noling: Yes.

[1:13:52.1]

Eric Velasco: Tell people how you know that.

[1:13:52.9]

Patrick Noling: Hmm?

[1:13:54.7]

Eric Velasco: Tell people how you track that.

[1:13:55.2]

Patrick Noling: Well, I mean, people let you know if you're not bringing them what they want, but I picture like what they're eating. I'll do sometimes a little like alliteration in my mind if the letters match. I kind of attach a dinner to a person, so I'm already thinking about what I think they should drink, so it helps me kind of like put them into place in my mind, of like how their evening's going to go. I know I get in trouble sometimes because it's like do I really *want* them to have this or did *they* want to have that? That's the only kind of questions I have, because it's like is it me thinking they want this or did they really want it? Because I can be a little bit, you know, like forceful, because I'll ask people all the time, it's like, you know, especially if they have indecisions, I like indecision questions. If you're having trouble deciding on what you want, I want to help you kind of get to where you want to go.

[1:14:53.0]

Eric Velasco: How often is that successful that you're able to read them and lead them in a direction?

[1:14:55.0]

Patrick Noling: Oh, it's pretty successful, I mean, because I want to get my way. I really do. And so—well, it's really for their benefit, though. I'm like, "You will enjoy this,

whether you know it right now or not. I think you're going to appreciate the fact that. "Should I have a steak or should I have a pork schnitzel?"

I'm like, well, in my mind, you can get a steak anytime, but I kind of have my same thing that I'll tell people. It's like, "Well, I've done this a long time. I know there's certain nights you want steak and I know if you don't order it, that's all you're going to think about all night, but if it's not one of those nights, why don't you try something different." I said, "Certainly the steak's on the menu for a reason. It's really amazing what it is. But if you've never had this before, I think you should consider it if you're not just super set on having a steak tonight."

[1:15:45.8]

Eric Velasco: How do you choose which table to bring a plate by and say, "This is that schnitzel I was telling you about"?

[1:15:51.5]

Patrick Noling: That's funny. I do that quite often. I'll even do it to tables that aren't my own. I can tell like if they're new and they've never been here before, and, of course, you never want to do it after somebody's ordered, but if they're still kind of deciding and it's convenient and it's kind of an interesting dish, I'll just stop by and I'll say, "By the way, this is the snapper we're doing tonight. These are the lamb chops." Because visually that will help a lot of people. They'll be like, "Oh, that's not what I thought it was going to be at *all*." So you can't do it a lot, because people don't want to see their food stopping at

another table. You have to keep a safe distance, and you want to get to their table right away, but I will occasionally run by and show things.

[1:16:34.5]

Eric Velasco: Has it ever backfired on you?

[1:16:36.0]

Patrick Noling: No, not really.

[1:16:39.1]

Eric Velasco: Nobody's ever said, "I don't want something you've shown someone else"?

[1:16:42.6]

Patrick Noling: No. I'm pretty conscious about like you keep it far away from the table. I mean, it's not like they can reach out and grab it or anything like that. Most people kind of take it as like, "Oh, yeah, my food's really good," you know.

[1:16:52.8]

Eric Velasco: Validates the order, doesn't it? [Laughter]

[1:16:54.1]

Patrick Noling: A little bit. So, you know, I keep it a safe distance. I don't want them to feel like it's been in the sphere of somebody else.

[1:17:05.1]

Eric Velasco: So who keeps things running in front of the house over the course of a day?

[1:17:09.0]

Patrick Noling: I mean, Pardis is here, and all restaurants during the day, like I said, their day's much longer than ours. We have the staff upstairs that take reservations during the day and then kind of keep the office flowing. Then maître d's will get here lunchtime-ish and kind of go over what's going on for the rest of the day, kind of plan out the evening.

[1:17:39.6]

Eric Velasco: Who's currently the maître d'?

[1:17:39.7]

Patrick Noling: So Ryan Ford and Joseph Ficken are the two like maître d's on the floor here. Matt Gilpin, who's the bar manager, he will maître d' occasionally as well. He'll be in a suit, so he can do whatever he needs to do, move back and forth. So I think part of their day is taking all the reservations and transferring them into the dining room and make this puzzle fit together, like, "Well, we've got to put these tables in your section.

We have to do this over here. They don't like to sit there." So you've got this big like, you know, Tetris kind of puzzle you're putting together, and so they'll have that set up.

Then they will, you know, start talking to the kitchen about prepping the menu for tonight. The kitchen will give them notes. They'll kind of prep today's menu before the meeting, the rough draft, which is pretty close to what it needs to be. We'll fine-tune it during the meeting, you know, like, "I don't think that's the word we want to use," or, "There's an extra comma," or just, you know, little things like that. It's all about attention to detail. So they do quite a bit during the day before we get here. I mean, food has to come in. I mean, the fish comes in every day, food comes in fresh every day, has to be checked in, it has to be inspected. If it's not up to the quality that we want it to be, then we have to put Plan B into action and find something else or adjust the menu accordingly. Just all that kind of stuff.

[1:19:10.1]

Eric Velasco: Because that's a change. What comes in the back door often drives that night's menu.

[1:19:14.6]

Patrick Noling: It does. I mean, well, no. I mean, I think, you know, the day before, they've kind of put in their orders. We know what's coming in, but sometimes there'll be a last-minute change or maybe they don't like the way this looks, and so they'll have to get something else or adjust the menu accordingly. But it is all about fresh. You want things to come in the door essentially that day that you're serving that night, and, of

course, they have to break down the fish and start prepping it for that evening, you know, all this work that I would not be able to do. [Laughter] So that's why I give them full credit, because they have to work very hard to get things ready.

[1:19:52.3]

Eric Velasco: How often does the menu overall change?

[1:19:57.3]

Patrick Noling: I can say it's a daily menu because it is, but it's a daily evolving menu. Like the food items will be fresh that are every day, but, you know, if we can get snapper on Tuesday, then we get snapper in Wednesday, then we can get it on Thursday, and the way the dishes are set up, the sets, they can't really change every day because people have to know how to do it. So we might run a certain set with an artichoke and olive relish right now with some faro, and, you know, the kitchen kind of gets trained in how to do that, so that set may last the week, but the fish may be different on it or it may be the same. Things that are very popular, like the pork schnitzel or the lamb chops, they might stay on the menu a while, but the schnitzel set won't change because it's, you know, kind of the way it's supposed to be, but the lamb chop set may change, depending on what vegetables came in. Like when we're going to do a gratin au sweet potato today, well, we're going to do it out of turnips and parsnips, because that's what came in. You know, that kind of stuff.

It's always evolving and changing. I mean, we'll always have oysters on the menu, but, of course, they're different every day, but if Wellfleets aren't available one

day, they're probably available the next, and that. So, you know, the oyster list will evolve, but, I mean, they're fresh, but they're the same. We always do blue crab claws as an appetizer, but they have to be—I tell people they have to be blue crab, they have to be from the Gulf coast, they have to be fresh, and sometimes if they're not available, we won't serve them because they're not what we want. We'll always have shrimp cocktail. The baked grits are always on the menu. Those are kind of things that people expect to see. Typically, we'll do two or three fish entrées and then meats for the other. But you have to pay attention.

[1:21:51.5]

Eric Velasco: Do you taste all these?

[1:21:52.5]

Patrick Noling: At one point or another, I have tasted everything that's on here. I mean, there's really no need to taste certain things because we've done it before. You get to understand Frank's style and taste level, so you know how things are going to be. Anytime we do anything brand new, we'll taste it during the meeting that day because you need to know what things taste like to describe it to people. You need to know, you know, is it acidic, is it this. We don't really do anything spicy, so that's not usually a rule. But you need to be able to kind of explain the taste.

[1:22:31.0]

Eric Velasco: As well as pairing.

[1:22:31.0]

Patrick Noling: As well as pairing it. You have to be careful, though, to like not let your personal preferences get in. You have to have kind of like an academic approach to the food and understand it for what it is. It might not be what *you* like, but that doesn't mean that somebody else doesn't enjoy it, so you have to be careful—at least I do—about letting personal preferences kind of get in the way, like because somebody will say, "What do *you* like?" And I'm like, "Well, it shouldn't be about what I like." So I won't like really answer back to that. I'll just say, well, that's when I start kind of digging around in their head and trying to figure out what they like and make sure they end up there.

[1:23:04.8]

Eric Velasco: What kind of questions do you ask?

[1:23:06.2]

Patrick Noling: You just kind of—it's hard to say. It just kind of evolves. I watch body language a lot. Like I'll always do like an initial menu presentation when I go to the table and talk about food. I won't talk about everything. They'll say I talk about too much things because that's kind of one of my things, is that I'm too talkative to the table and I take too long, but I would argue that no one's ever complained about it, so it shouldn't be a problem. But you can watch people's body language. You can watch their eyes. You can watch their face. And certainly things they respond to and certain things they do, and

so I'll kind of use that as a way in. Like something might intrigue them a little bit or they'll look perplexed, like they don't understand what that is, and then I'll kind of follow up, you know, with that kind of thing.

[1:23:53.7]

Eric Velasco: Then once you've done that initial observation, the body language thing, what kind of questions do you ask?

[1:23:57.9]

Patrick Noling: Well, like when it comes to seafood, like if I don't know the people, I'll always kind of find out where they're from, because that's a good indicator of what seafood they're used to, so if you come from the Northeast or you come from the West Coast, you don't have typically a lot of experience with Gulf coast seafood, and to me, Gulf coast seafood is so different than everywhere else, it's got this kind of delicacy and subtlety to it that you don't get from the North Atlantic and Pacific, so I'll kind of use that as a way in, like, "You might not have ever heard of this fish, but this is what we're doing. We've got a snowy grouper tonight," or something like that.

It's funny, over the years I've decided that people from California avoid shrimp like the plague because you get horrible shrimp in California, I think. I think it always comes from somewhere in the Southeast Asia area, so it's always frozen and not very good quality. And I said, "Well, you know, take advantage of being here in the South, because shrimp is our lobster and we excel at shrimp." So it's just little things like that. I try to play up our local kind of regional taste if you're not from this area. You know, like,

"Try something a little bit different." Tuna especially, because we'll do Gulf tuna that's beautiful, but people have such prejudice, They'll think, well, it has to be a bluefin or it has to be an ahi. I said, "No, this yellowfin, I'll hold it up against any tuna you've ever had before."

So I'll kind of challenge them on that. I say, "If you like tuna, then order it if it's on the menu, because if it's on the menu, it's going to be amazing. It's going to be everything you want it to be." And it kind of opens their eyes to like breaking down these barriers. Like, "It's warm in the Gulf, you know. That's not a good place for tuna." I said, "Yeah, but if you know what you're catching, that particular tuna will be set aside and that'll become the sushi tuna." But, see, and Highlands won't let me down because they're so consistent back there. I know they're not going to send out a piece of tuna that they shouldn't be sending out. So it gives me that confidence to be that confident with my guests at the table, so I like to do that.

[1:25:58.9]

Eric Velasco: And since the Beard Award, you're probably dealing with a lot more people like that, who aren't from the city, from the state, from this region.

[1:26:09.1]

Patrick Noling: Maybe. I mean, we've always been a destination restaurant, I mean, whether it's used for recruiting for companies here in town, you know, they're going to bring their guest here to show off Birmingham. I mean, even before—I mean, because James Beard's been going on, the nominations, for ten years, and so there are always

people that, you know, would drive from, you know, Memphis, or come over from Jackson or drive over from Atlanta and, you know, maybe just here for the evening and driving home that night, specifically to have dinner here.

I mean, certainly a little bit more after James Beard, we've just been so busy since the James Beard Award. I mean, because we can only seat so many people a night, you know, there are some people that feel like they can't get a reservation and that's frustrating to them, and so we try to put everybody in. But people are willing now to eat much later than they've ever done before. I mean, they'll take a 9:30 or 10:00 o'clock reservation. They might not be happy about it, but they'll take it. So we've got to make sure that we kind of like deliver on this like implied promise that you're going to be having a great dinner, you know, because people are looking sometimes for like the little faults, because they like to point that out, that like, "Oh, you think you're so this, but I don't think you're that much." So you don't want them to be able to say that. You want them to really enjoy themselves.

[1:27:36.2]

Eric Velasco: The pressure's on even more now than it was in the ten years leading up to winning.

[1:27:40.3]

Patrick Noling: Well, yeah, you don't want to the whole resting on your laurels kind of thing, but, I mean, we just keep doing what we're doing. I mean, you know, it's just—I mean, we're still Highlands, we're still trying to do what we do best, which I think sets us

apart from so many other restaurants. We really—I mean, I kind of—like my theory is like a lot of restaurants have forgotten why they even exist anymore, it's so their guests will have a good time and enjoy their dinner, instead of just going through the motions, and I think that's something that we really try to do here that a lot of restaurants have forgotten about. I mean, there's still a lot that really put a lot of effort into it, but there's so many that you see are just going through the motions, and I'm like that's not how you should be.

[1:28:24.6]

Eric Velasco: And as I said, to sustain it over such a long period of time, and if nothing else, improving over that long period of time.

[1:28:30.7]

Patrick Noling: Yeah, I thought it was—I mean, I was really surprised when we won, because I don't know, I just didn't think there was enough weight in the South that would ever, you know, make the James Beard, which to me is pretty Northeast-centric in a way, do it. But I thought, you know—and I'll tell guests this, I said, you know, there's people around the country just scratching their heads, because like for ten years, Birmingham, Alabama, Highlands was like a finalist for Outstanding Restaurant, and it wasn't a restaurant from Charleston, it wasn't from Atlanta, it wasn't from Houston, it wasn't from New Orleans. It was always Birmingham, Alabama, and people were probably like going, "What the hell is going on there? How does this restaurant do this ten years in a row?" And how does any restaurant do it ten years in a row? It's because we're consistent

in what we do. We really, you know, believe in what we do, and there's that kind of, you know, purity of what we do that at least was being recognized.

And, to me, that was enough, because when you would go and Frank and Pardis were so nice to take me along more than several times to the James Beard Award, and you see the competition, it's like it's not really competition, but you're like, "How are we even in this group?" I mean, you know, it was really humbling to me, and it's just like, oh, I'm glad we're just nominated. I mean, somebody's thinking about us. We've kind of penetrated that deep. Because everybody has their own idea of what, you know, the best restaurant would be. I mean, by far we're not the most formal restaurant, we're not the most this, but I think consistently people have a better time here than they have at most places they do, and they pick up on that. I think people from out of town—and I use this a lot with our guests, our locals that kind of congratulate us, and I said, "Well, you should be congratulating yourself as well, because I think part of our success is people that come from out of town and they see how I'm interacting with you. They see this connection in the dining room that you don't see in other restaurants." And I said it's because we've built these relationships, and I think people that are here for the first time, they notice that when they're sitting down. They don't see that in other restaurants.

[1:30:35.2]

Eric Velasco: For fine dining, this is a decidedly unstuffy place.

[1:30:38.4]

Patrick Noling: And purposely so. I mean, they do not want us to be stuffy and offputting. I mean, we need to be proper in what we do, but not in a stuffy sort of way. I mean, as they describe it, you know, "You need to bring your own personality to the table. You have to stay within the guidelines of Highlands, but we expect you to kind of be you." And I think that's a good way to run it, because I certainly have my own unique personality at the table. [Laughter]

[1:31:09.4]

Eric Velasco: On the bar side, for people not familiar with this restaurant, the front of the house is divided into two parts. You've got about equal size, you've got the more formal dining room, you've got the bar area with seating, tables and all that. That could get pretty casual at times, even.

[1:31:27.6]

Patrick Noling: It can. When I started at Highlands, the restaurant was divided in half. You've got the bar side and the main dining room side, because the bar side was the smoking half. The dining room was the non-smoking half. So there was a pretty definite barrier between the two. [Interviewer's note: Birmingham City Council restricted smoking in restaurants to certain areas in 2005. In 2012 it passed an outright ban on smoking inside and near entrances.]

The bar, by its nature, you know, it's just more lively because you've got the bar, but you have to kind of remind people you get the exact same service over there, you get the same white tablecloth service. It's just a little bit different feel because you've got the

bar right in the middle of the room that's generating all this energy, and it can be pretty lively over there.

I mean, we've got people that will only eat in the bar. We've got people that'll only eat in the dining room. That's just where they want to be. But over the years, what's happened is that people that would only eat in the main dining room, you know, one night they came in with somebody else, had a reservation, sat in the bar, and they're like, "Oh, this is kind of fun over here. I didn't know." Or they move from the bar to the dining room and they're like, "Oh, it's not like I thought it was going to be over here. I kind of like it over here." So we've had people kind of change their allegiance over the years.

When I started, I only worked in the bar for a long time here. It was a tough gig. I mean, I really felt like, you know, I was trying to earn the bartender's like acceptance because I was new, and then I finally got that. For a long time, that was like the only place I worked was over there, and it was a very different time. I mean, you had to cap and exchange ashtrays, and people were smoking, and you'd have somebody light up a cigar, and it was like—because I'm not a smoker, so I was just like, "Uh." But then over the years, I think as I got more and more kind of request tables, they tend to be more over here, so I got slowly pulled over.

So now I rarely work on the bar side, one, because I think I'm old and I can't keep up with the pace like people do over there anymore. I'm a little bit out of practice. I think I could get back in practice, but it's definitely a little bit more measured on the main dining room side than it is the bar side. The bar side, you've got to push your way—well, not push your way through, but you have to make your way through crowds, I mean, because you'll have these days, I mean, three-deep at the bar, people waiting to eat and

waiting to get something to drink, and, you know, it causes its own little stressors as a waiter when you're trying to do your job, but you've got to maneuver around people.

[1:33:46.0]

Eric Velasco: Well, there are times when they had to go out the front door and in through the bar door just to be able to wade through the thicket.

[1:33:52.3]

Patrick Noling: I've done that a couple times at parties. Usually I'll try to go through the back of the house so I don't look so obvious going through the front. But, yeah, you definitely have to figure out your way around, but, I mean, you know, it's not a bad thing to have that we're so busy.

But, you know, the bar has changed so much because now with us being so busy, people that can't get reservations, because you can have full dinner at the bar, so now the bar has turned into another part of the dining room, which is a hard transition for the bartenders, because, you know, it's a very different thing feeding people than it is giving them drinks.

[1:34:28.0]

Eric Velasco: Especially doing drinks for everybody, including over in here [dining room].

[1:34:29.5]

Patrick Noling: That's right. And they're expected, you know, to have the same level of service at the bar that we are here, and so I don't, you know, envy them at all for what they're doing. I mean, it's so busy.

[1:34:49.2]

Eric Velasco: What's the ongoing—we've talked about that, the ongoing wine training. You have a lot of the wine reps come in and vendors themselves. What makes Highlands a great or a special workplace? I mean, what is it that keeps you here?

[1:35:11.7]

Patrick Noling: Well, one, I think—and this is just my perspective—is that Frank and Pardis really value what we do, what our contribution is. I think that is different from a lot of restaurants. I mean, they appreciate what we do. They understand, I think, some chefs, it's all about their food, but for Frank, it's the combination of the food and the service, and, you know, the type of service that you get, you know, the sincerity about what you do. And it's very noticeable to us, the staff. I mean, they really like what they do. I mean, we have, you know, medical insurance, we have vacation pay. You know, they take care of us. They understand, you know, that we're kind of this family.

I mean, Frank and Pardis, when they travel, when they come back, they rarely will talk about the food they ate. I mean, they'll always talk about the service and the ambiance and the feeling they had. You know, that's what stands out in their mind. So I think that's sometimes unique in a restaurant that, you know, we're valued like we are and we feel like we are a very important part of what goes on here.

[1:36:26.0]

Eric Velasco: That's one of the things that struck me about when the Beard Award is handed out, it's not just Frank and Pardis up on that stage accepting it; it's the people who are making things happen day in and day out, too.

[1:36:39.5]

Patrick Noling: I mean, certainly I think, you know, they are the driving force behind it, but, you know, we're a part of it as well. I mean, that's why I think, you know, they would bring, you know, eight to ten of us sometimes up there for the award ceremony so we could share in that. I mean, you know, nine times we just went and did not win, which was fine, and then finally we won.

[1:37:03.3]

Eric Velasco: And how does that make you feel as an employee, as a worker?

[1:37:05.4]

Patrick Noling: It makes me feel good, it really does. I mean, they value—they don't have to take any of us along to go up there. I mean, that's, you know, no cheap undertaking on their part. And they treat us very well when we're in town. We eat and eat and, you know, they take exceptionally good care of us when we go up there, which is good.

The award ceremony was good because, I don't know, just like there was so much like happiness in the audience that we had won, it was palpable. You could really tell that people were very glad that we finally got the recognition that we needed, so that was a good feeling. I was glad to be there to share in it, because I always thought I was like the bad luck charm. It's like, "Why do you bring me? We'll never win. I never win anything."

[1:37:51.0]

Eric Velasco: Tell me about the first time you went to Highlands as a customer.

[1:37:51.0]

Patrick Noling: I had never come here as a customer before I started working here. I'm one of those people like if I work in fine dining, I don't eat in fine dining. I will occasionally, but I eat at a much lower level. I mean, one, I can enjoy myself, but I watch too much, and it wasn't something I needed to do. I mean, I'd been here. I'd been to the bar before, but I'd never had dinner here before, and so it was just—I just knew this was like where I needed to be, which kind of speaks to Highlands's reputation, the fact that I would want to work here without have ever even had dinner here before.

[1:38:34.8]

Eric Velasco: What had you heard?

[1:38:35.7]

Patrick Noling: Oh, just that, you know, consistently things were good at Highlands. That was kind of the one thing that I needed at that time, was some consistency, and, you know, Highlands really offered it to me, which is why I took it. I was probably a little bit like anxious about working here, like I didn't think maybe I could cut it or something like that. I knew the wait staff and I thought they were very, you know, proficient and professional, and I thought, "I don't know if I can match up to that." So I had that little bit of hesitation about coming in.

[1:39:12.3]

Eric Velasco: Have you reached that point where you feel you have?

[1:39:15.0]

Patrick Noling: Oh, yeah, of course.

[1:39:17.2]

Eric Velasco: How long did it take you?

[1:39:18.1]

Patrick Noling: I don't know. I mean, it probably took me—it takes me a while to kind of settle in. It probably took me three months before I even started to feel comfortable working here, but then, you know, it moved along pretty quickly from there. I mean, I don't think I'm like the greatest thing that's ever waited tables before or anything, and I certainly could do so much better about things all the time, but I feel pretty good about

what I contribute here. I enjoy it, you know. It's kind of an odd thing that I enjoy it as much as I do.

[1:39:54.2]

Eric Velasco: Now, how does what you do for a living affect you as a diner?

[1:39:59.4]

Patrick Noling: I find that I'm very forgiving of restaurants when I go out. [Laughter] I really am, because I just—I know how hard it is to make it all happen. I don't like, you know, inattention, but I'm never going to hold it against the waiter if my food's a little bit off. I understand, you know. I just kind of go with the flow. I'll never like cause a stink when I go out. I can kind of see things when they're happening, and I just don't ever want to be one of those people. Like I just rarely complain about anything. I'll complain about it after, but during, you know—

[1:40:41.6]

Eric Velasco: You're taking mental notes.

[1:40:43.4]

Patrick Noling: A little bit.

[1:40:42.9]

Eric Velasco: and observing it from a professional standpoint.

[1:40:44.6]

Patrick Noling: Well, like I was in Paris and I was eating in Paris, and I was just at this little like bistro that was down the street from where I was staying, and I ate there several times because it was so good, but I was like watching their level of professionalism as waiters, and they were like light years beyond where I would be. I mean, it was just like—it was really kind of an eye-opener, and I really appreciated like the level that I was seeing there, and this was in a casual restaurant.

I mean, I saw one of the waiters, because they would always have a tray in their hand, and I'm, you know, not a tray person at all, but they would have a small tray in their hand, it would *never* leave their hand. So they would do everything else one-handed. I saw a waiter open a bottle of Coke one-handed by kind of flipping it off the tray and pitching it under his shoulder and his head, and popping the bottle top off and flipping it over, all while holding the tray on the other hand. And I was just like, "Okay, I don't understand this thing."

And then I remember like I was sitting there one time, I was trying to connect to the wifi, so I had my phone out, which I don't really like to have my phone out in a restaurant, but I did, and the waiter just came by and grabbed my phone. And I watched him. He walked to the end of the restaurant. He was just [demonstrates], came back and handed me the phone, and he had connected it to the wifi for me.

[1:42:00.1]

Eric Velasco: All while on his way to do something else?

[1:42:02.0]

Patrick Noling: Yeah. I mean, just like without asking or anything, and I loved it. I thought, yeah, this is how it should be.

[1:42:08.7]

Eric Velasco: So from those experiences, what did you take back home?

[1:42:11.9]

Patrick Noling: One, that I'm not very graceful, I think. And I accept that about myself. You know, I am not going to be twirling bottles of Coke and opening them one-handed, you know, pinned between my head and my shoulder. But, you know, it's just—it was kind of good to see, you know, because it was definitely treated as a profession, you know. These people were very serious about what they were doing, and so it kind of gave me a good perspective of what I do here. And, you know, with them it was all about taking care of the guests, and so I'll do the same, just maybe not as gracefully as they do.

[1:42:11.9]

Eric Velasco: What am I missing here? What else do people need to know about working at Highlands, working front of the house?

[1:42:56.3]

Patrick Noling: You have to really want to be here to work here. You cannot treat this as a job. It has to be important to you. You cannot just go through the motions and expect to succeed. You have to really kind of care about what you're doing. To me, you have to care about your guests, though, and that's one thing I see missing in a lot of people. Like, I really do care if they have a good time or not. It's not about the money. That's incidental. I mean, it happens and, of course, I like it when it happens in a nice, generous way, but it's never the way I approach a table. I just, you know, I don't pre-judge. You have to want to be here. You have to want to learn. You have to want to work hard and put the work in and do the research and just not expect it to just, you know, happen, you know, like it fall in your lap. You have to really get in and, you know, be a part of it and live it.

You know, I don't know. It's just something—it's become such a part of me now, it's kind of hard to even talk about like, you know, where I stop and Highlands begins, that kind of thing. I do like it. It's funny how it's kind of colored my life, though, because I put so much into it here, as far as like talking and interacting with people, like outside of work, I don't want to talk to anybody. Like I *don't* want to socialize. You know, that's kind of been to my detriment, but I feel like I give a lot here, and at the end of the night sometimes, I'm pretty emotionally drained from, you know, being this way, because I'm naturally, I think, kind of a shy person, and it's funny how I act around tables in here, you know, how my comfort level, my confidence level is very different than I would be out in the real world, even though this is the real world.

[1:45:01.8]

Eric Velasco: It's kind of like actors in that sense.

[1:45:03.8]

Patrick Noling: A little bit, a little bit. But like I say, you know, I'm somewhat of a control freak. I like to take control of the situation. I think it makes me feel better when things are controlled, and so I like that people will respond to that when I do try to kind of assert myself at the table, like not in a pushy way, but that gives me a lot of pleasure, I think.

[1:45:27.2]

Eric Velasco: So what do you do to decompress in the evening when you're not working, days off?

[1:45:30.9]

Patrick Noling: Well, these days it's hard because, you know, I end up watching the news when I go home, and that's not much of a decompression. [Laughter] But, you know, I tend to go into more solitude mode and things like that. You know, it's nice in the restaurant because I'm not a big drinker, I've never been a big partier or anything, so I like having my daytimes free to do what I need to do, because I am kind of like—I just like to kind of meander through the day and, you know, run errands and kind of just, you know, live my own thing, but it's pretty solitary what I do. I don't really—like I may go to a movie with some of my coworkers today, but I'm not sure if that's going to happen. So we shall see.

[1:46:13.3]

Eric Velasco: How many days a week do you work?

[1:46:14.4]

Patrick Noling: I work five days.

[1:46:15.8]

Eric Velasco: All days it's open, you're here.

[1:46:17.2]

Patrick Noling: Yes, all days open, I am here. I don't know if that'll change as I get even older, if I'll need an extra day off, But I don't know, I just never really thought about not working. I think, you know, it's good for me. I like the structure that it gives my life.

[1:46:34.1]

Eric Velasco: Well, how are you going to know when it's time to kind of ease off?

[1:46:36.0]

Patrick Noling: That I don't know. That's going to be a hard call to make, because, I mean, I think as all of us get older, like you'll have certain days where you're just like, "Oh, my god, I'm getting old. I'm feeling old," you know, and I'm starting to have those days and I've never had them before, so that's giving me a little bit of pause. But I guess

I'll just keep on going. I mean, we kind of make jokes, like, you know, I'll be in one of those little Hoveround things or something like that, just, you know, riding through the restaurant, you know, on four wheels, but, I mean, that won't work.

[1:47:10.5]

Eric Velasco: Goren's got to put you to shame on that one too. You can't go too early.

[1:47:13.7]

Patrick Noling: No, and he's always getting ready to retire, but he's not going to retire. I mean, nobody *needs* to retire. I think it'd be much better for everybody if we just keep on working.

[1:47:24.0]

Eric Velasco: In some ways, it's something you can continue doing past traditional retirement age. But on some levels, like you were talking about some of the physical aspects of it get harder to do.

[1:47:33.6]

Patrick Noling: Yeah, but you don't want to like be separate from the staff. You want to kind of be able to do what you have to do. But, I mean, there are times sometimes, it's just like, "I'm sorry, my knees are too important to me," or my back's too important to me. "I cannot do that right now. I just don't want to do that right now." And they're pretty good about that. They kind of understand. But I get a lot of ribbing about that,

about my age and that kind of thing, so, you know, what are you going to do? You're as old as you are. I can't help it.

[1:48:02.5]

Eric Velasco: I'm not old; I'm mature. [Laughter]

[1:48:04.2]

Patrick Noling: Well, I don't know how mature I am, but, yeah, I'm on this continuum, and we'll see where it goes. But I haven't really thought about it. I've never really thought about not working, so we'll see.

[1:48:17.1]

Eric Velasco: Well, listen. I appreciate it. This has been a fun chat, and I've learned a lot. Thank you very much.

[1:48:21.9]

Patrick Noling: Oh, you're welcome.

[End of interview]