



**Dolester Miles**  
**Highlands Bar and Grill**  
**Birmingham, Alabama**  
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[This interview was conducted on the mezzanine at Frank Stitt’s Bottega restaurants, which overlooks the main dining room. Although the dining room is closed, the café is open for lunch. People talking often can be heard in the background.]

**Eric Velasco:** This is Eric Velasco for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I am sitting with Dolester Miles for an oral history interview about Highlands Bar & Grill. In 2018, Ms. Miles was named Outstanding Pastry Chef in the nation by the James Beard Foundation in her fourth year as a finalist. She and her crew make all the desserts for Highlands and sister restaurant Chez Fonfon, Bottega’s dining room and Café. Ms. Miles started working with chef/owner Frank Stitt more than thirty-six years ago, starting in the kitchen at Highlands. She became the pastry chef in 1988. We’re in the mezzanine at Bottega, where Ms. Miles is based. It’s March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

Ms. Miles, please introduce yourself, spell your name, and give us your date of birth.

[0:00:45.4]

**Dolester Miles:** Hi. I’m Dolester Miles, D-o-l-e-s-t-e-r Miles M-i-l-e-s. My date of birth is November 5<sup>th</sup>, 1956.

[0:01:00.4]

**Eric Velasco:** Tell us what your original job was at Highlands.

[0:01:03.3]

**Dolester Miles:** When I got hired, I was like a *garde manger*, which is a person that makes salads and do desserts and [Laughter] a lot of other different things, but basically that's what I did, made salads and some sandwiches and helped out with everybody else that needed help.

[0:01:24.7]

**Eric Velasco:** Was there a hot and cold *garde manger*?

[0:01:26.3]

**Dolester Miles:** No, not at that time. It was basically just a cold.

[0:01:30.9]

**Eric Velasco:** So if an appetizer got ordered or a salad—

[0:01:33.9]

**Dolester Miles:** It came from me. [Laughter] Yes.

[0:01:37.5]

**Eric Velasco:** Highlands was open for lunch and dinner at the beginning?

[0:01:38.4]

**Dolester Miles:** It was lunch and dinner at the beginning.

[0:01:41.4]

**Eric Velasco:** That must have made for a long day.

[0:01:42.8]

**Dolester Miles:** Well, basically I did just lunch most of the time, you know, like I used to work—I think we used to get off like 4:00 or 5:00 in the evening, because we would help them set up some for dinner and make a dessert or something like that, but basically I did lunch.

[0:01:59.3]

**Dolester Miles:** What kind of stuff was on the lunch menu?

[0:02:00.4]

**Dolester Miles:** Like, they had like, you know, cheese—I mean hamburgers, fish sandwiches. We did specials. We had like smoked salmon on pumpernickel. I remember that. And we had like a seafood stew. We did seafood salads too. And, you know, different kinds of salads and oysters on the half shell and tomatoes and mozzarella and basil salads, stuff like that.

[0:02:42.6]

**Eric Velasco:** Sounds like a lot of what you might find on the menu at Fonfon.

[Interviewer's Note: Frank and Pardis Stitt opened Chez Fonfon in 2000. The all-day bistro is next to Highlands.]

[0:02:46.0]

**Dolester Miles:** Yes, yes. I mean, when I look over these menus, some of this stuff we still do, not here, but between all the restaurants. I mean, why stop doing something that is so fantastic and good? I mean, those are some of the best items on the menu. We might updated it a little bit, but basically we still do some of this stuff today. [Interviewer's note: Ms. Miles brought two menus, one from summer 1985 and the other spring 1986.]

[0:03:11.9]

**Eric Velasco:** Tell us how you got to the job.

[0:03:12.9]

**Dolester Miles:** Well, really, my sister was the one that seen the ad that he was running, and she went to put in for it, and I said, well, at the time I was looking for a job, too, so we both came and he hired both of us. [Laughter]

[0:03:32.6]

**Eric Velasco:** What is your sister's name?

[0:03:33.1]

**Dolester Miles:** Diane Miles.

[0:03:35.9]

**Eric Velasco:** D-i-a-n-e?

[0:03:37.3]

**Dolester Miles:** Yeah, D-i-a-n-e. And he hired both of us, and we started like from the beginning, and then like when he opened like maybe a day or two later, he hired my cousin Verba [Ford].

[0:03:50.5]

**Eric Velasco:** And how long did you work before the restaurant actually opened?

[0:04:00.2]

**Dolester Miles:** It might've been like two weeks, two or three weeks before we opened.

[0:04:04.1]

**Eric Velasco:** What did you do?

[0:04:04.7]

**Dolester Miles:** We came in and, you know, like stocked the stockrooms and put up the stuff in the walk-in, and I even made some curtains to go out front, and I really don't even sew. [Laughter] You know, just whatever needed to be done, you know, cleaned up the kitchen and out front, and I had the opportunity to make a pair of curtains, and they stayed in the dining room a good little while. [Laughter] I was impressed. I'm not even a

seamstress. [Laughter] So that goes to show you anybody can make a pair of curtains.

[Laughter]

[0:04:39.1]

**Eric Velasco:** Did you have any restaurant experience before you started at Highlands?

[0:04:41.2]

**Dolester Miles:** Well, nothing like this. Like, I worked like at a Mexican restaurant, just making tacos and enchiladas and stuff like that, but nothing on this level.

[0:04:53.5]

**Eric Velasco:** What did your sister do when she started working here?

[0:04:56.6]

**Dolester Miles:** She used to sauté. She did the sauté and Verba did the grill, and I did the salads and stuff.

[0:05:06.7]

**Eric Velasco:** When you interviewed, who did you interview with?

[0:05:08.7]

**Dolester Miles:** Oh, my goodness. I think she interviewed with—I guess she interviewed with Frank. I'm not exactly sure.

[0:05:20.8]

**Eric Velasco:** This is Diane?

[0:05:20.8]

**Dolester Miles:** Yes, Diane. Then that's when she had told me about, you know, he needed somebody else, and he just told her to bring me along. I think that's how it went, but we're talking thirty-six years ago. [Laughter]

[0:05:36.2]

**Eric Velasco:** He kind of took it on faith from your sister that you knew what you were doing.

[0:05:39.3]

**Dolester Miles:** Right, that we knew what we were doing, but, you know, really some of the stuff I had never heard of before. [Laughter] But we played along. [Laughter]

[0:05:39.3]

**Eric Velasco:** What did your sister say he was looking for in an employee?

[0:05:54.5]

**Dolester Miles:** I guess somebody eager to learn, that worked, that wanted to work long hours, and that was me. [Laughter]

[0:06:04.0]

**Eric Velasco:** Because it's interesting. I guess there really wasn't a whole lot of fine dining going on in the city of Birmingham back in 1982.

[0:06:10.6]

**Dolester Miles:** There was not, especially on the south side. Really, basically, I don't think anywhere, not like it is today, so, you know, as I recall, Frank had the only type of fine dining really on the south side, and then a number of other people started doing it, you know, like a spinoff of what he was doing. So I would say he started this thing on the south side.

[0:06:35.3]

**Eric Velasco:** Who came up with the recipes? Were they all—

[0:06:37.0]

**Dolester Miles:** They were all his. I mean, he came in and he told us what he wanted, and, you know, like I would say about a week before we opened, he was in the kitchen and showed us, gave us recipes and showed us how he wanted them done and stuff like that, and we did it. Well, so at least I'm still here. [Laughter]

[0:07:03.5]

**Eric Velasco:** Now, you were saying that a lot of what was being served at Highlands was new to you.

[0:07:08.2]

**Dolester Miles:** I mean, yeah, you know, like I said, I worked at a Mexican restaurant, and, you know, hamburgers and that kind of stuff. I didn't know anything about oysters on the half shell, you know. They told me, "You can eat these raw." And I'm like, "Nah, y'all are kidding." And then I actually thought they were kidding, and then I actually seen somebody just swallow one down, and I'm like, "Oh, my god!" [Laughter] I mean, you know, if you ever seen a oyster, they don't look all that appetizing, not to me anyway. But I was just shocked that you could eat something like that.

You know, there was certain things I never heard of, like watercress and arugula and leeks. I didn't know what a leek was. You know, one day Frank sent me to the store to get a leek, and I'm like, "Uh-oh." I just went, "Okay!" Kind of like I act like I knew what it was. So I went over to the store and I had to ask people in the produce what it was. [Laughter] Then they told me. But, you know, I didn't know. Like that watercress, it was like some weeds or something. I'm like, "What is *this*?" [Laughter] But now it's one of my favorite salads, is watercress and arugula, you know. I like the spiciness of arugula, but I had never heard of it. So I would say I learned a lot from working with him than, you know, I think than he did from me at that time, yeah.

[0:08:36.8]

**Eric Velasco:** That's one of the things I want to talk to you about, Verba and Diane and yourself. You were coming from the more traditional southern cooking background.

[0:08:47.9]

**Dolester Miles:** Mm-hmm.

[0:08:48.2]

**Eric Velasco:** He had that, too, growing up in Cullman [Alabama].

[0:08:51.1]

**Dolester Miles:** Right.

[0:08:51.3]

**Eric Velasco:** Was there some kind of interaction over when Frank would go too far over into this French stuff he liked to do?

[0:09:01.9]

**Dolester Miles:** [Laughter] No, I don't—I remember like after lunch, like a busy day of lunch, we used to have like family meals, and we would fix different things, you know, and then he was seeing how we ate, you know, which was like collard greens and peas and beans and, you know, fried chicken. We would eat that kind of stuff for lunch after we got through working, and I would say I guess he liked what we were doing, but I wouldn't say that we gave him—you know, I think he had his own ideas from the get-go.

You know, like he do things seasonal, so, you know, like when we first started, all the vegetables and stuff wasn't available, you know, till like that summer, you know.

[Interviewer's note: Highlands opened on November 22, 1982.] That's when we would start eating light. But he already had like tomato salad, but we would fix greens and corn and corn and you know, cornbread and stuff. And then I guess he, you know, put some of it on the menu, but it was his way. It wasn't how we cooked it; it was how he would cook it.

[0:10:31.1]

**Eric Velasco:** So, it was inspiration at least.

[0:10:31.1]

**Dolester Miles:** Right. I guess so. [Laughter] I won't take nothing away from him, because he really had all his ideas before we came, but, you know.

[0:10:49.4]

**Eric Velasco:** Tell me about that first lunch shift.

[0:10:52.2]

**Dolester Miles:** Wild. It was wild. Ooh, I think everybody in Birmingham came that day. [Laughter] We were so busy, I still remember. We had to kind of regroup how we were doing things. You know, then that's how Verba got called in and, you know, we had to get some more help, you know, like more dishwashers and more everything, because it

was just wild, you know. The whole while Frank did lunch we were busy every day. You just had to just get prepared, but it was busy. We had to totally—I don't guess he expected that many people to come, but I think people were, you know, hungry for that kind of food at that time, you know, in this area, so everybody came out. It was real busy.

[0:11:41.7]

**Eric Velasco:** Describe this area of Five Points South is where Highlands is. Describe the area when Highlands opened up.

[0:11:47.4]

**Dolester Miles:** Well, really, as I recall, it wasn't no restaurants over here, basically, you know, nothing like this fine dining-type thing. I really don't remember any restaurants over in this area, but, you know, it's close to UAB and all those different places, and I guess people was looking for, you know, like a place where you can go and sit down and have a glass of wine and a nice lunch or something, and they really liked it, because they kept continuing to come back, go back and tell their friends, and more people came. So it kept us busy. [Laughs] [Interviewer's note: UAB is the University of Alabama at Birmingham, which draws a diverse group of students and faculty.]

[0:12:28.4]

**Eric Velasco:** How long did lunch continue here?

[0:12:29.8]

**Dolester Miles:** Ooh, I think it kind of wind down during the time when he opened up here, because he was going to do lunch here, so it would've gave him more time to prepare after dinner, you know. [Bottega's formal dining room opened in 1988. An expansion two years later led to creation of the café, which is open for lunch and dinner.] Used to be so crazy for lunch that it'd be kind of hard to get really set up properly for dinner, so he stopped doing lunches down there, started going them up here.

[0:12:56.8]

**Eric Velasco:** And for listeners, “here” is Bottega. How far apart are Bottega and Highlands?

[0:13:00.9]

**Dolester Miles:** Is it a block? Two blocks? [Laughter] Give or take, a block and a half. Not far. [Laughter]

[0:13:09.8]

**Eric Velasco:** And then Chez Fonfon is right next door to Highlands.

[0:13:11.7]

**Dolester Miles:** Right next door to Highlands.

[0:13:15.0]

**Eric Velasco:** So tell me some of the things that you would prepare as *garde manger*.

[0:13:19.4]

**Dolester Miles:** You know, I would do all the salads. I remember we used to do quail with red cabbage and walnuts. We did like a seafood salad, and I know sometime he would do specials and we would do like a shrimp salad and tomatoes, stuffed peppers. What else did we do? We did, you know, with the crab cakes, they came with a salad, so I would do those, and we'd do like smoked salmon on pumpernickel. I would make those. And then let me see. We did a cheese and fruit plate and a shrimp and tortellini. So it was stuff like that.

[0:14:15.2]

**Eric Velasco:** Were the baked grits on the menu then, or was that a night-only?

[0:14:19.5]

**Dolester Miles:** We didn't do it for lunch. I don't think it was on right away, but I'm not exactly sure when he put it on, but it's been on there a long time. I mean, I guess maybe six months later or something like that, I would say he put that on, and it's been like a staple down there ever since. I don't think they've ever taken it off.

[0:14:46.5]

**Eric Velasco:** What do you think would happen if they did?

[0:14:47.5]

**Dolester Miles:** Oh, people would go crazy, like. You know, you run something that long and people love it, and you take it off, well, you know, people panic. [Laughter] They'll threaten you, like, "I'm not ever coming back if you don't put that back on. That's the reason why I'm coming," you know. We have people do that. So I'm kind of like that myself when I go somewhere and I eat something like that's what I go there for and it's not on the menu, I'm like, "What? I can't believe y'all took that off!" I'd be upset, too, so I understand. [Laughter] I understand why they be like that.

[0:15:19.2]

**Eric Velasco:** It's a signature here.

[0:15:19.2]

**Dolester Miles:** Right. And, you know, you been coming ten years to get that, and now it's not on the menu anymore? Like "What?"

[0:15:28.8]

**Eric Velasco:** Now, you eventually transitioned to nights?

[0:15:31.2]

**Dolester Miles:** I'm what?

[0:15:32.0]

**Eric Velasco:** Did you eventually transition to working nights at Highlands?

[0:15:32.0]

**Dolester Miles:** No, I've never worked nights.

[0:15:35.9]

**Eric Velasco:** So I guess they did lunch the whole time—

[0:15:37.6]

**Dolester Miles:** Right, that I was there.

[0:15:38.8]

**Eric Velasco:** —that you were there. Okay.

[0:15:39.6]

**Dolester Miles:** Right.

[0:15:39.6]

**Eric Velasco:** And when did you move to Bottega?

[0:15:41.2]

**Dolester Miles:** Bottega opened in [19]88? Yeah.

[0:15:45.6]

**Eric Velasco:** And what did you go over there to do?

[0:15:46.7]

**Dolester Miles:** I came up here to do desserts. I mean, like down at Highlands, me and my cousin Verba, we used to make a couple of their desserts, and I got into that, and it was something that I really liked to do better than *garde manger*, and I wanted to do pastries, so when Frank opened up, he had said like he wanted somebody to come up here and do desserts for her and Highlands, because at the time Fonfon wasn't open, and I asked him could I do it, you know, and he gave me that opportunity, so here I am.

[Laughter]

[0:16:22.4]

**Eric Velasco:** Now, going back to the beginning, a lot of this was new to you, as you said. How would you keep executing the recipes? How would you keep doing it? Did you keep notes nearby?

[0:16:35.5]

**Dolester Miles:** You talking about the *garde manger*?

[0:16:37.0]

**Eric Velasco:** Yes, ma'am.

[0:16:37.6]

**Dolester Miles:** Oh, yes, we would keep notes and recipes that Frank would have, and every time he would come up with something, he would bring a recipe and we would make it, so, yeah.

[0:16:49.9]

**Eric Velasco:** How long before you got to where you didn't need that recipe and you could just—

[0:16:53.3]

**Dolester Miles:** Well, you know, a week or two, and then it comes to you. [Laughter] But even now sometime I know a recipe I been making for probably ten years and sometime I have to pull it back out, like when I think about it too hard. I think, "Oh, why I forgot what go in this salad?" And have to relook at it. But it all come back. [Laughter]

[0:17:13.2]

**Eric Velasco:** So what time would you guys come in for the Highlands lunch shift?

[0:17:18.7]

**Dolester Miles:** As I recall, it was 7:00 or 8:00.

[0:17:23.4]

**Eric Velasco:** And what would you do before it opened?

[0:17:23.4]

**Dolester Miles:** You would come in and you would get ready, come in and prep up, you know, wash your lettuces and different things, and if you had shrimp salad, you had to cook your shrimp. You know, just prep everything up that you had to do before it opened.

[0:17:40.3]

**Eric Velasco:** And so you had, what, about three hours? What time did they open for lunch?

[0:17:43.6]

**Dolester Miles:** Eleven.

[0:17:44.8]

**Eric Velasco:** So you had about four hours to get everything ready.

[0:17:48.4]

**Dolester Miles:** Mm-hmm.

[0:17:48.4]

**Eric Velasco:** And did you have a station you would set up?

[0:17:51.9]

**Dolester Miles:** Yes, the *garde manger* station. Each one of us, you know, like Verba would set up the grill and my sister would set up sauté.

[0:17:59.6]

**Eric Velasco:** It's a small kitchen now at Highlands, but I understand—

[0:18:04.1]

**Dolester Miles:** It was *smaller* back then. It was much smaller, because you didn't have that back area back there, so, yeah, it was small. [Laughter]

[0:18:11.2]

**Eric Velasco:** That must have been a tight fit for everyone.

[0:18:13.3]

**Dolester Miles:** It was a tight fit.

[0:18:15.7]

**Eric Velasco:** Good thing y'all were family, right?

[0:18:16.4]

**Dolester Miles:** Right. [Laughter] Sometime I go down there and I'm like, "Wow. I can't believe we did that work before he added the back part on to the kitchen." But, yeah, it was small.

[0:18:29.5]

**Eric Velasco:** Where would y'all get your produce?

[0:18:30.9]

**Dolester Miles:** I think, like back then, I think most of it like from the produce company locally around here in Birmingham, but, you know, like now we go to the farmers' market and we have farmers that deliver different stuff. [Interviewer's note: The farmers market Ms. Miles references here is the year-round, daily market off Finley Avenue, operated by the Jefferson County Truck Growers Association since the late 1950s. One-day farmers markets like Pepper Place Saturday Market began popping up in 2000, built in part on the network of farmers Stitt had been assembling over the previous 18 years.]

You know, that's a difference between then and now. You know, you have more farmers and they deliver us produce, and, you know, Cullman County strawberries, we have a guy that's be coming up soon that bring us strawberries and, you know, he have like asparagus and those spring onions, and we just get all kind of vegetables now opposed to what was different back in the day, you know. We just had to depend like on the produce company and we'd go to the farmers' market and stuff like that, but we have more people that's, you know, getting involved in all this farming and stuff, and they bring it to you now.

[0:19:35.0]

**Eric Velasco:** Was he working personally with many farmers before you moved up to Bottega?

[0:19:38.8]

**Dolester Miles:** Well, he had started to, but now, like I say, it's more farmers that's doing it now. They would bring him stuff, like, you know, bring the vegetables and stuff to him. We don't even have to go to the farmers' market anymore.

[0:19:58.4]

**Eric Velasco:** Because he seems to have a network of about fifteen or twenty farmers now.

[0:20:01.5]

**Dolester Miles:** Yes, he does. It's a lot of farmers out there now. You can even get fresh eggs, you know. We don't buy eggs from the produce companies anymore. They're fresh. They're picked like the day before. Even Frank have a farm himself. We get different stuff from out there.

[0:20:20.5]

**Eric Velasco:** Now, you keep those hens busy. How many eggs do you think you go through in a day or a week?

[0:20:24.8]

**Dolester Miles:** Oh, my god. At least four cases, and I think it's thirty dozen in a case, so we go through a lot of eggs, you know, and they make fresh pastas, too, so they use a lot of eggs too. [Interviewer's note: Bottega alone goes through 1,100-1,500 eggs a week, but most are used in the desserts and baked goods that Miles and team make for all four restaurants.]

[0:20:42.9]

**Eric Velasco:** So some of the early desserts you started doing at Highlands, tell me what some of them were.

[0:20:48.7]

**Dolester Miles:** It was like a Bittersweet Chocolate Terrine, it was like a warm cinnamon tart, and we would do like a chocolate mousse, a frozen chocolate mousse pie, and it was some kind of chocolate cake that we used to do down there. We only had like three or four desserts then, so that was basically— you know, and then like we would do like apple crisp and bread puddings and stuff like that.

[0:21:21.4]

**Eric Velasco:** How'd you learn how to bake?

[0:21:22.5]

**Dolester Miles:** Well, really I started from my mom and my aunt when I was smaller. That used to be their time to spend together, and my aunt would come up to our house

and they would cook like on holidays and stuff. And they would make pies and cakes and stuff, and I would get in the kitchen with them, and I cracked the eggs and they would let me measure out some of the stuff, but mostly I was licking the spoon and the spatula [Laughter] till I got a little older, and then they would let me mix up a couple of things. But that was basically how I started.

Then, you know, as I got older, I kind of got away from it, but I still would cook at home. And then, you know, when I got down to Highlands and started, you know, cooking some almost every day, you know, I realized that was what I wanted to do. So Frank gave me that opportunity.

[0:22:16.0]

**Eric Velasco:** And again, no real experience doing that professionally.

[0:22:19.7]

**Dolester Miles:** No.

[0:22:20.3]

**Eric Velasco:** Do you think that was Chef Stitt showing faith in you?

[0:22:25.1]

**Dolester Miles:** Yes. [Laughter]

[0:22:25.1]

**Eric Velasco:** And your cousin and all that?

[0:22:26.6]

**Dolester Miles:** Yes. Yes, it was. You know, I guess, you know, we were making a couple of desserts and we were successful with them. You know, everybody was liking them and stuff, and so I guess he saw that I was capable of doing it.

[0:22:43.0]

**Eric Velasco:** So how'd that make you feel as somebody working there?

[0:22:44.6]

**Dolester Miles:** Oh, fantastic. [Laughter] It was awesome, you know, to have somebody trust you to work in a fine dining restaurant, so it was a great opportunity.

[0:22:59.3]

**Eric Velasco:** What kind of feedback would you get?

[0:23:02.9]

**Dolester Miles:** You know, like I say, I didn't work at night, so the waiters would tell me like the next day when all of us be gone [Laughter] or either the waiters like, "Oh, that's good."

I'm like, "Well, how you know?" [Laughter] They went and got a piece.

[Laughter] "I'm gonna tell Frank on you." [Laughter] But, you know, that used to make

me feel good, you know, that they wanted to taste it, and they would tell me how the customer enjoyed it too.

[0:23:29.7]

**Eric Velasco:** Now, was one of the desserts you made back then the Coconut Pecan Cake?

[0:23:35.5]

**Dolester Miles:** No.

[0:23:36.5]

**Eric Velasco:** No?

[0:23:36.5]

**Dolester Miles:** No. I didn't start making that till I got up here.

[0:23:42.1]

**Eric Velasco:** Walk me through what would happen from the time a ticket would hit the kitchen at lunch at Highlands till the final thing went out the door.

[0:23:58.2]

**Dolester Miles:** Well, back then in those days, it was handwritten. [Laughter] You know, I realize that we didn't have all of what we have now.

[0:24:10.0]

**Eric Velasco:** I didn't think about that.

[0:24:10.0]

**Dolester Miles:** It didn't come in on a computer. It was handwritten, and I'm like, "Wow!" So, you know, we would get—like it would have three copies and, you know, each one of us would get a copy of the ticket.

[0:24:24.9]

**Eric Velasco:** *As garde manger*, sauté, and grill.

[0:24:26.4]

**Dolester Miles:** And the grill. Right. And then we would try to get all of it to come up at—you know, especially the hot items and then I would have mine already ready so they'd be easy for them to pick up. But, yeah, we didn't have computers then. [Laughter]

[0:24:42.3]

**Eric Velasco:** And then you would get going first, right?

[0:24:44.8]

**Dolester Miles:** Right.

[0:24:45.8]

**Eric Velasco:** Because you're doing the salads and the appetizers, those kinds of—  
starters.

[0:24:48.3]

**Dolester Miles:** Yeah, but some of the salads went out with the entrée, you know, all  
depending on what it was, yeah. But, yeah, mine would go out first and then they would  
get started.

[0:24:59.9]

**Eric Velasco:** And would you get some kind of warning from the waiter about how the  
food's going? Here now you get: "We're ten minutes out. Go ahead and fire."

[0:25:06.8]

**Dolester Miles:** Right. He would come back and say "Fire table two," or table three or  
whatever it is.

[0:25:15.4]

**Eric Velasco:** And what's the waiter telling you then? What message are you getting?

[0:25:15.4]

**Dolester Miles:** Well, when the ticket first come in, if it's an appetizer, I already know to  
have that made and sent out, but like if I see like something that was going out later, they

would let me know that this is going out with the entrée, so then I would know like when they get the entrées ready over on the other side, to have this ready, and then they would come by and pick all of it up and take it out. And then they would come back to me again for desserts if they have any, so I would plate the desserts too.

[0:25:53.5]

**Eric Velasco:** You made the transition to Bottega in 1988 when they opened up, to do pastries. Did you have a crew then or was it just you?

[0:26:12.0]

**Dolester Miles:** It was just me. Well, really, when I first came up here, I was just making desserts for Bottega, and it was just—we didn't have the Café. It was just this side over here. And when I had left Highlands, it was someone already down there making desserts, so when they quit, then that was when all of it came up here to me, and then that's when I got help making, but at first it was just me making just for the dining room.

[0:26:47.7]

**Eric Velasco:** And when would you show up and start working?

[0:26:49.8]

**Dolester Miles:** At 8:00 o'clock. See, we didn't do no lunch, and I would just work daytime. I didn't work at night, because I don't like night shift. [Laughter] I never liked night shift.

[0:27:04.5]

**Eric Velasco:** And then now that the Café's open at Bottega, you come in a little earlier, don't you?

[0:27:08.0]

**Dolester Miles:** Right. We come in at 5:30 because, you know, it's more people and, you know, all of us use the same ovens, so come in and, you know, get started on the ovens to get out of their way so they won't be opening and closing your ovens, so we just started coming in earlier.

[0:27:23.6]

**Eric Velasco:** Who's the "they" you're talking about?

[0:27:25.7]

**Dolester Miles:** Like the people who work over in the Café, you know, they come in and got to cook their bacon or whatever, and they opening and closing the oven. We fussing over oven like, "It's my turn," so we just started coming in earlier just to kind of get out of their way, starting anyway, yeah.

[0:27:44.1]

**Eric Velasco:** How long was it just you in the pastry end?

[0:27:46.7]

**Dolester Miles:** It was really until he open the Café, and then whoever was working down at Highlands, they quit and then that's when we started doing all the desserts, so that's when I got more help and we started doing all the desserts from up here.

[0:28:11.4]

**Eric Velasco:** How many different desserts were you doing at the time?

[0:28:12.8]

**Dolester Miles:** Here?

[0:28:14.0]

**Eric Velasco:** Yes, ma'am.

[0:28:14.5]

**Dolester Miles:** It was five plus ice creams and sorbets.

[0:28:20.6]

**Eric Velasco:** And where were the recipes for that coming from?

[0:28:23.5]

**Dolester Miles:** Some of them was from Frank and then some of them I were researching, you know, and then we would get together and see if he really wanted to run that or whatever. But some of them was from me.

[0:28:37.2]

**Eric Velasco:** And how would you research?

[0:28:38.9]

**Dolester Miles:** Books, magazines. I think back then the Food Network had started coming on. That wasn't even out. You know, you didn't have excess of stuff like you do now. But just looking in books and magazines and stuff like what I grew up with, like, "Ooh, let's try this." And then Frank would go along with it, and that's how it got on the menu.

[0:29:05.1]

**Eric Velasco:** So how would that work if, say, you're working on your desserts in the morning and you'd say, "Frank, I've got this idea, something to add to it."

[0:29:12.2]

**Dolester Miles:** And I'd tell him about it and then you would make it, and he would taste it, and if he liked it, it would go on the menu.

[0:29:20.0]

**Eric Velasco:** Did he generally like it?

[0:29:20.5]

**Dolester Miles:** Yeah, but there was some he tossed out. [Laughter]

[0:29:27.6]

**Eric Velasco:** What would you be thinking then?

[0:29:27.7]

**Dolester Miles:** Like, “What? I liked that.” But, you know, it wasn’t the right thing. He didn’t like it, so it was okay. [Laughter] Nobody likes everything you make. [Laughter]

[0:29:39.8]

**Eric Velasco:** So tell me some of the desserts that you developed yourself.

[0:29:52.6]

**Dolester Miles:** Well, we do the Coconut Cake, for one, was something that I had started making and that they liked it. Let me see what else. Like the chocolate cakes that we do here, the Chocolate and Caramel Cake. We do like an Aurora Tart, which is like a caramel tart with the praline cream topping. We do like a Pear and Almond Tart, like Strawberry Shortcake and cobblers, you know, strawberry, blackberry, blueberry. They’re my favorite, the cobblers. Then like the Lemon Meringue Tart, that’s my favorite.

[0:30:52.1]

**Eric Velasco:** What do you like about it?

[0:30:53.1]

**Dolester Miles:** I like it because it's not really that sweet. It's a sweet and sour taste, and I just like fruit desserts better.

[0:31:05.9]

**Eric Velasco:** That's a rather involved process. Tell us what's involved in making a Lemon Meringue Tart.

[0:31:09.9]

**Dolester Miles:** First you have to make the curd, which is you have to juice out. You have to have fresh lemons, juice, and then we zest the lemons, and you get the juice. Then you have to get the eggs, which is three flats of eggs. We make a big batch, so we have to separate like three flats of eggs. Then you have five pounds of sugar, five pounds of egg yolk, and what else go in there? We put some white chocolate in there. Then you have to cook all this together. It's a process that you can't just put it on the stove. You've got to stand there and stir it until it cooks, or it will stick and burn.

[0:31:55.4]

**Eric Velasco:** Constant attention.

[0:31:56.6]

**Dolester Miles:** Constant attention, because if not, all your work that went in vain, squeezing all these lemons and zesting them and stuff like that.

[0:32:04.0]

**Eric Velasco:** And how much lemon? How much juice would you make?

[0:32:05.4]

**Dolester Miles:** It's five pounds of lemon juice, so it's a lot of lemons. [Laughter] And, you know, then after you get that, then you have to make the tart shells and then do the meringue. So it's some pretty good—you know, you could start a day in advance, you know. We make the tart shells and freeze them, pull them out when we need them, and then you make a nice size of the lemon curd so when we need it, we just—but it don't last long because that's a big seller down there at Fonfon.

[0:32:44.7]

**Eric Velasco:** Now, you're probably best known for the Coconut Pecan Cake, Coconut Cake.

[0:32:48.2]

**Dolester Miles:** Mm-hmm. Yes.

[0:32:48.2]

**Eric Velasco:** How long have you been making it?

[0:32:50.4]

**Dolester Miles:** Oh, seems like forever, but it wasn't when I first came up here. I would say about fifteen years, something like that.

[0:33:07.8]

**Eric Velasco:** Tell us how it came about.

[0:33:08.5]

**Dolester Miles:** Like one day I was—you know, I grew up with German Chocolate Cake, is one of my brother's favorite, and I wanted to do something like that, so instead of doing the chocolate, I decided to do just a coconut cake, you know, like a regular coconut cake, and then we fill it like, you know—you ever had a German Chocolate Cake?

[0:33:34.5]

**Eric Velasco:** Yes.

[0:33:35.2]

**Dolester Miles:** Your filling is something like that, almost just like that, but we just don't put the nuts in the filling. And then instead of putting that all over the cake, we do like a Chantilly Cream frosting that we put on the outside of it, and then we put toasted coconut

on it. When I made it, I had no idea it would take off the way that it did. At first, when we first start making it, we used to just sell it here. We would just make it here. Then Frank liked it so well, we started doing it at Fonfon, and it *really* took off down there. So these was only two places we were selling it at, was Bottega and Chez Fonfon, but then after I got nominated for James Beard Award, *everybody* wanted it. So, you know, Fonfon couldn't keep all their cake because Highlands people were buying it from them, so then we had to start selling them to Highlands. So now they're on all the menus. [Laughter] And they still sell a lot. [Laughter]

[0:34:56.5]

**Eric Velasco:** In fact, they sell even more now than they did this time last year.

[0:34:58.8]

**Dolester Miles:** Yes, they are. Yes, they do.

[0:35:01.6]

**Eric Velasco:** Tell us a little bit about the effects that the Beard Award has had on those things.

[0:35:06.6]

**Dolester Miles:** Oh, a *lot*. I mean, now we make close to sixty, when we were probably making thirty-five or something like that. So they almost doubled how many I make a week.

[0:35:21.6]

**Eric Velasco:** And that's for the restaurant.

[0:35:22.4]

**Dolester Miles:** That's for the restaurant.

[0:35:23.8]

**Eric Velasco:** Restaurants, yes.

[0:35:24.6]

**Dolester Miles:** Mm-hmm, all the restaurants.

[0:35:25.4]

**Eric Velasco:** You get a bunch of special orders, too, don't you?

[0:35:26.0]

**Dolester Miles:** Yes, to-go orders. We do almost some every day to go, so, yeah, it really took off and I just couldn't believe it. [Laughter]

[0:35:38.8]

**Eric Velasco:** There was some talk about mail order for the cake. Has that come about?

[0:35:41.4]

**Dolester Miles:** No, not yet. I mean, I don't think we really figured out how to— especially we really don't have the place to make them in the store, you know? That's a lot, you know, to try to make up those.

[0:35:58.1]

**Eric Velasco:** You stay fairly busy.

[0:35:59.6]

**Dolester Miles:** Yeah, we stay pretty busy.

[0:36:00.7]

**Dolester Miles:** How many people are working now in the pastry?

[0:36:08.4]

**Dolester Miles:** It's four more besides me. [Ms. Miles' cell phone rings.]

[0:36:15.0]

**Eric Velasco:** And you're going full guns the whole time you're there, too, just trying to keep up with the restaurants.

[0:36:20.6]

**Dolester Miles:** Right. And we haven't got to the point where we could do them nowhere else. You know, the walk-in space, the mixers, I mean, we're not equipped for it yet.

[laughs]

[0:36:35.9]

**Eric Velasco:** And things like the cake, too, are a multi-day process as well.

[0:36:40.5]

**Dolester Miles:** Yes. We make the filling then maybe one day, then the next day we'll do the cake part, put it together. Then, you know, we're icing them as we need them. But I make them like three days a week.

[0:36:58.5]

**Eric Velasco:** You have an interesting method. If you're making, say, ten cakes, how do you go about making those ten cakes?

[0:37:05.0]

**Dolester Miles:** Which—

[0:37:07.0]

**Eric Velasco:** I've seen you go one at a time, like when you're making cornbread or something like that. You do what you need for this pan, for this pan, for this—

[0:37:11.8]

**Dolester Miles:** Yeah, I do that for the cornbread because I really could measure it out, but to me it's simpler to make it—like if I make three batches, I'm going to have three separate bowls. [Laughter] Just how I do it. So it's enough of everything in each bowl, you know. Like I put—we have scallions and corn and jalapeño peppers, and I make sure like each bowl got, you know, enough of each. When you mix them all together, sometime it be more of something in this than that, but—

[0:37:49.8]

**Eric Velasco:** So that's your quality control.

[0:37:51.0]

**Dolester Miles:** That's my quality control. I really just do that for cornbread, but, you know, making cakes and stuff, we'll make a big batch, all of it at once.

[0:38:01.3]

**Eric Velasco:** One of the other things I've noticed watching you work is you clean your own tools.

[0:38:05.8]

**Dolester Miles:** Oh, yeah, because they're mine. If you put them out that dishwasher, you could just kiss them goodbye. [Laughter] I'm like I don't know where they go, so it's best if you just keep up with your tools, because that dishwasher ain't— [Laughter]

[0:38:22.9]

**Eric Velasco:** I guess it's kind of like a chef and their knives—

[0:38:25.9]

**Dolester Miles:** Right.

[0:38:27.1]

**Eric Velasco:** —that, “This is mine and I want to make sure it's done—.”

[0:38:28.4]

**Dolester Miles:** Right. And you keep up with it. Right. That's the only way you can keep it, if you keep up with it yourself, wash them and put them up yourself.

[0:38:36.9]

**Eric Velasco:** So tell me what all y'all are making back there in the mornings at Bottega.

[0:38:44.8]

**Dolester Miles:** We make hamburger buns, we make Pullman loaves, we make focaccia, and then, you know, we start with the cakes, like Coconut Cake, then we do tarts, like Chocolate Nut Tarts and Pear Tarts. We come in and we do Chez Fonfon first because, you know, they do lunch and they have to be delivered. [Interviewer's note: The restaurants don't all serve the same desserts on the same day. Some will be exclusive to,

say, Highlands.] We do lunch in the [Bottega] Café, so we really start with both of them first, and then we do the other two later, because, you know, they just do dinner at Highlands and on the restaurant side, so we start with the other two restaurants first. And we make ice creams and sorbets. What else do we do? And they we icing cakes, putting them together, and that's all I can think of. [Laughter]

[0:39:54.3]

**Eric Velasco:** Bottega Café serves pizza. Do y'all make the dough?

[0:39:56.7]

**Dolester Miles:** Yes, we make the dough for that too.

[0:40:01.7]

**Eric Velasco:** And then do you bake for the bread service at Highlands as well?

[0:40:05.4]

**Dolester Miles:** No. They do like cornbread, and somebody down there makes that.

[0:40:13.2]

**Eric Velasco:** So walk me through a typical day here. We've kind of talked about it a little bit. You come in at 5:30. First of all, when do you get up in the morning?

[0:40:22.9]

**Dolester Miles:** Most mornings I wake up about 3:00 or 3:30. [Laughter] But, yeah, I don't get here till 5:30.

[0:40:31.1]

**Eric Velasco:** Is it just you at the beginning or all five of you?

[0:40:32.8]

**Dolester Miles:** No, it be all four of us, and then we have another person come in at 7:00. So like I said, we come in and we see what we have to make for the next day. We would start with making the buns, make the dough for the buns and Pullman. Whatever kind of bread we got to do, we would do that. Then we would start with what Fonfon, like their tarts, we cook their tarts off. We're icing the cakes like for Highlands and for Fonfon because we really don't have much walk-in space, so we send all that down in the morning time. So we do that.

Then we would start with what we going to do here. Then we start with the ice creams and sorbets and whatever kind of cakes we got going on and the tarts. And make sauces, like, you know, coulis and anglaises, stuff like that.

[0:41:45.7]

**Eric Velasco:** So it would be in the order that the restaurants are opening, that's how you would stage what you would do. How do you know how much to make?

[0:41:53.4]

**Dolester Miles:** Well, we really don't. It's like one day if we send twenty-five of something and it sells out, then we might make thirty the next day or twenty-five, you know, make some extra ones so they don't run out. That's basically how we do it. And like on the coconut cakes, we sell almost four of those every day, and, you know, you get sixteen orders out of a cake. So that's really how we do it. And then like they will have reservation. We would know how many people that they got coming for that night, and we would base it on that too.

[0:42:36.8]

**Eric Velasco:** And are you making this decision, how much to make of each, or you just have a feel for how much you need on a given night?

[0:42:43.0]

**Dolester Miles:** We just have a feel for, like, how many they sold this night, you know, of each dessert that we do, and then by the numbers of people that's coming in for that night, then you can kind of tell what you need.

[0:42:57.5]

**Eric Velasco:** What days are you working?

[0:42:59.2]

**Dolester Miles:** Oh, I work Monday through Friday.

[0:43:00.9]

**Eric Velasco:** Anybody preparing pastries or baked goods on the weekends, on Saturday?

[0:43:05.4]

**Dolester Miles:** Oh, yeah. [laughs] Well, yeah, Mark [Christie] and the other girls, they do desserts on the weekend.

[0:43:13.6]

**Eric Velasco:** Tell me who's all in your group.

[0:43:16.3]

**Dolester Miles:** We have Mark.

[0:43:19.5]

**Eric Velasco:** What's his last name?

[0:43:19.5]

**Dolester Miles:** I knew you was going to ask me that. Christie. Mark Christie. And then we have Catherine Chu, and we have Cari Jolley, and—oh, my goodness, she's going to kill me. What her name? [Laughter] I don't know her last name, no way. [Laughter] We have another girl. She going to kill me. Her name won't come to me right now.

[0:43:52.2]

**Eric Velasco:** We can add it in a little bit later.

[0:43:53.2]

**Dolester Miles:** Okay. [Laughter] Oh, my goodness. It's coming. It won't come to me. What's her name? Let me tell you later. [Laughter]

[0:44:15.5]

**Eric Velasco:** And they're all fairly young, aren't they?

[0:44:16.5]

**Dolester Miles:** Yes. I'm the oldest person in the kitchen, I believe. [Laughter] Yes, they're all fairly young and eager to learn, and everybody come in know what they have to do.

[0:44:32.0]

**Eric Velasco:** How do they get hired?

[0:44:32.8]

**Dolester Miles:** They fill out application and we look at it, and most of them been to culinary school and different stuff. Then they come in and do a *stage* shift, you know, come in and work, you know, for free a couple of days. Then you can see what they can

do and if they can make a cake or make a tart shell or whatever. Then if they can, we'll hire them.

[0:45:03.8]

**Eric Velasco:** And that's generally what you start them out on, is something like a tart shell or a cake?

[0:45:06.7]

**Dolester Miles:** Mm-hmm. But most people that come in, they worked for a long period of time, so we don't really have to do it too often.

[0:45:15.8]

**Eric Velasco:** Well, like you're confirming how good they are, rather than what you have to teach them.

[0:45:15.8]

**Dolester Miles:** Right, right. So they stay. So that's good.

[0:45:25.0]

**Eric Velasco:** So you're part of the evaluation process? Are you looking at them on the front end?

[0:45:30.8]

**Dolester Miles:** Yeah. Like when they come in, you know, you watch them and see exactly what they can do. Then they ask me, you know, what do I think, and I think if they can do it, we'll hire them. If not, you know, they're not the one.

[0:45:45.1]

**Eric Velasco:** And this is Pardis [Stitt] and Frank who are asking you you think they can do it?

[0:45:49.1]

**Dolester Miles:** Well, they'll ask, too, but, you know, we have a chef named Johnny Rolan, so, you know, we're all talking and we decide if that person's going to work out, yeah. [Interviewer's note: Longtime employee John "Johnny" Rolan is the chef de cuisine at Bottega.]

[0:46:01.4]

**Eric Velasco:** Do you have any that you can tell right off they're not going to be able to cut it?

[0:46:06.2]

**Dolester Miles:** Yeah, you do. [Laughter]

[0:46:08.8]

**Eric Velasco:** What tips that off to you? How do you figure that?

[0:46:11.7]

**Dolester Miles:** Well, they come in and—well, you really don't have to know everything, but when they come in and just stand around and don't do nothing, you know, they're not eager, not like, "What can I do?" You know, when they're waiting on another job, you know, they're standing around, just looking, go out back and start smoking and all this kind of stuff, you know, you don't start a job off like that, I don't think. And then, you know, they don't keep their area clean, and some of them don't even know what a crème anglaise is, so, you know, they just don't know much about the pastries department, so, you know, we kind of want somebody to know something about it.

[0:46:58.7]

**Eric Velasco:** Because it seems like in the pastry department now, people pick up for each other, and it seems like everybody knows how to do everything—

[0:47:07.5]

**Dolester Miles:** Yes, they do.

[0:47:08.1]

**Eric Velasco:** —so if something's going undone—

[0:47:10.9]

**Dolester Miles:** That person just pick it up, like, “Okay.” We start with a list, first of all. We write down a list, and then as the day go on, we check off what haven’t been done, and, you know, that person go read the list and see what we need, you know, what’s left to do, and they’ll start doing that. You know, you really don’t have to tell everybody, “Okay, you go do this.” You know, they already know, because we got a list, and that’s how we work.

[0:47:35.3]

**Dolester Miles:** And then if they’re done with that, they come ask, “What can I do?”

[0:47:39.5]

**Dolester Miles:** Right. But most of the time, by the time you get to the end of the list, it’s time to go home anyway, so, yeah.

[0:47:47.2]

**Eric Velasco:** Now, what is the day winding down?

[0:47:52.7]

**Dolester Miles:** What is the day winding down?

[0:47:53.7]

**Dolester Miles:** What time is the shift kind of over?

[0:47:56.3]

**Dolester Miles:** About 1:30, 2:00 o'clock we be winding down.

[0:48:04.5]

**Eric Velasco:** What do you do after that?

[0:48:04.9]

**Dolester Miles:** When I get off?

[0:48:07.3]

**Eric Velasco:** Yes, ma'am.

[0:48:07.3]

**Dolester Miles:** [Laughter] Well, most the time I go home, take a nap. [Laughter] But no, I mean, by then I go out and get something to eat or something like that, go home and sometimes read books and magazines and sometimes just chill. [Laughter] Watch TV.

[0:48:26.2]

**Eric Velasco:** How much time do you have to spend shooping people out of the pastry department? Because it's got to be the most favorite station of them all. [Laughter]

[0:48:35.4]

**Dolester Miles:** Well, yeah, it is, but we used to have a problem with it, you know. We got with Pardis, and now Pardis threatened everybody. “If I catch you eating any desserts, you’re going to be laid off for a week,” and that kind of stopped them. But they still, but they’re not as nearly as bad as they used to be. So that kind of calmed down. They be scared to touch anything. [Laughter]

[0:49:00.3]

**Eric Velasco:** Now, one of the things about Highlands is it’s had a lot of people who have been around for a *long* time working there.

[0:49:10.3]

**Dolester Miles:** Mm-hmm.

[0:49:10.3]

**Eric Velasco:** Why do you think that is, as one of those people?

[0:49:14.4]

**Dolester Miles:** Yeah, I’m one of them.

[0:49:18.6]

**Eric Velasco:** What’s kept you around?

[0:49:18.7]

**Dolester Miles:** I don't know. I mean, I don't know. I just feel like I'm at home and I enjoy the people that works here, and I enjoy what I do here, and I just never came up with a reason to leave or go anywhere else.

[0:49:38.3]

**Eric Velasco:** How do you feel you're treated as a worker?

[0:49:40.0]

**Dolester Miles:** I mean, excellent, I mean, because if I felt any other way, I don't think I would still be here. I'd been left and went and looked for something else somewhere else. But I just feel—I like Frank and Pardis, and I think they treat me fairly, and I just enjoy working here.

[0:50:01.8]

**Eric Velasco:** Now, with all these restaurants that have opened up since you started working for Highlands, has anybody approached you about trying to poach you for their restaurant?

[0:50:09.4]

**Dolester Miles:** Well, you know, it's a lot of people got these restaurants out here that used to work here, and then they went out and got their own restaurants. A couple people have. They know I'm not going anywhere. [Laughter] I can't see me leaving Frank. Nah. [Laughter]

[0:50:28.7]

**Eric Velasco:** Why is that?

[0:50:29.3]

**Dolester Miles:** I mean, he treats me fairly, and I just think I'll just work the rest of my years out right here. [Laughter]

[0:50:38.4]

**Eric Velasco:** How much independence do you have as an employee and really as a supervisor? How much independence do you have to make up your own decisions on things?

[0:50:47.2]

**Dolester Miles:** Oh, I think I have a lot. What you mean, like what I do?

[0:50:56.5]

**Eric Velasco:** Right. Just how you approach things and things you make.

[0:51:01.1]

**Dolester Miles:** Well, yeah, they really let me—they value my opinion, and I, you know, basically get away with whatever I want to get away with. [Laughter] I guess that might be one reason. [Laughter]

[0:51:16.5]

**Eric Velasco:** Well, that's got to be fun too. [Laughter]

[0:51:17.7]

**Dolester Miles:** Yeah, that's fun. They basically let me do like I want to do, so, I mean, that helps too. [Laughter] So, yeah, they trust me like that, so I like it.

[0:51:31.3]

**Eric Velasco:** Now, one of the, I think, greatest things for a worker is to get some kind of validation in what he or she does.

[0:51:39.7]

**Dolester Miles:** Mm-hmm.

[0:51:39.9]

**Eric Velasco:** The Beard Award is obviously one of them, but what kind of feedback do you get from customers and from people you may run into?

[0:51:53.2]

**Dolester Miles:** Oh, yeah, the customers. Like I say, I don't work nights, but like for lunch sometime I might walk over and I see people, you know, they'll tell the waiter like, "I been all over the world and I've tried their tiramisu, but I think this is the best," or

something like that. You know, they'll tell the waiter that, or they had something else, like, "I had this in New York, but this is the best I've ever had," you know, and the waiters and different people would tell me how it is. Like when I won the James Beard Award, they had started writing me letters and letting me know how things were. I mean, it was amazing.

[0:52:37.0]

**Eric Velasco:** Who was writing you letters?

[0:52:38.0]

**Dolester Miles:** The customers, telling me, you know, congratulating me and what they liked and how they liked different desserts and different things. So, oh, I had—Pardis said she was going to give me my own mailbox, I got so many letters. I mean, it was amazing. I mean, you know, they just let me know how it was and, you know, how they appreciated me. They sent me flowers. Ooh, I got flowers almost every day. [Laughter] I never got so many flowers before. I mean, it was just amazing. I still—it was amazing. You know, they let me know, you know, how much they appreciate what I was doing and everything.

[0:53:20.4]

**Eric Velasco:** That's got to feel good.

[0:53:21.3]

**Dolester Miles:** It felt great. It was awesome. It was amazing.

[0:53:27.3]

**Eric Velasco:** So let's go back to May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018, in Chicago. [Miles laughter.] You were there. Who all was there?

[0:53:36.1]

**Dolester Miles:** Well, my daughter got a chance to go.

[0:53:40.1]

**Eric Velasco:** What's her name?

[0:53:40.1]

**Dolester Miles:** LaToya Phillips. And, you know, Frank, Pardis, and almost all the people down at Highlands. We were sitting there, waiting. My category was, I think, like the second category to be called, and I'm sitting there. I didn't even have a speech or anything, you know. My daughter kept saying, "This is your year." I'm like, "Nah, I don't think so." I really don't know how the James Beard thing go, but I knew Frank had been there how many years? Nine? And I hadn't been going but two or three.

[0:54:15.9]

**Dolester Miles:** And this is as a finalist.

[0:54:17.0]

**Dolester Miles:** Right. And I'm like, "It ain't my time. I don't believe it's my time."

Just sitting up there, and when they called the names out, and then all of a sudden, they said, "The winner is—."

And I heard my name, and I'm like [gasps]. [Laughter] "Did I hear that right?" [Laughter] Oh, man, I still don't believe it.

And Frank like, "Dol, get up! Get up! You won!"

And I'm like—I mean, I was just so surprised. [Laughter] I stumbled up on stage, and on my way up there, I'm like, "Oh, my god, what I'm going to say?" [Laughter] I mean, because I hadn't prepared or even thought about winning. And something came out. [Laughter]

[0:55:10.9]

**Eric Velasco:** Do you remember what you said?

[0:55:12.0]

**Dolester Miles:** I think I thanked the James Beard Award and I thanked Frank and Pardis for putting up with me, and I thanked my crew, Mark, Cari, Jenae—that's her name. I thanked all of them and, ooh, I was the one—you know, for the opportunity to let me come up here, and, you know, I told them that they were part of this, and that was it. [Laughter] Couldn't nothing else come out. But, yeah, that was amazing. I still pinch myself sometime. Did that really happen?

[0:55:46.6]

**Eric Velasco:** So how long before the Outstanding Restaurant was announced after your award?

[0:55:50.9]

**Dolester Miles:** I think Frank's thing was—was it next to the last or last? It might have been the last, so we had to sit there and wait a while on him, but I kind of knew he was going to win, and when they called his name, *all* of us just jumped up. I had no problem getting up with him. [Laughter] But, yeah, it was just amazing. We just couldn't believe it.

[0:56:15.5]

**Eric Velasco:** In a way, that was kind of a double award for you because—

[0:56:16.9]

**Dolester Miles:** Right.

[0:56:17.7]

**Eric Velasco:** —most meals end with your product.

[0:56:20.9]

**Dolester Miles:** Right. It was. It was awesome.

[0:56:24.2]

**Eric Velasco:** What do you like about making pastries?

[0:56:26.1]

**Dolester Miles:** It's just something, like you say, how people enjoy it, and it's like a artform, you know, how you get to get in and create and make things look good and stuff. It's just rewarding. It reminds me of my mom—she's no longer with us—and my aunt, and it's just something that I really enjoy doing.

[0:56:53.5]

**Eric Velasco:** What are their names?

[0:56:53.6]

**Dolester Miles:** Cora Mae Miles and Queen Esther Taylor. It's just something that—I mean, it's just fulfilling. I just enjoy doing it.

[0:57:06.8]

**Eric Velasco:** What's your favorite thing to make?

[0:57:08.4]

**Dolester Miles:** I would say that Lemon Meringue Tart, because I guess that's my favorite dessert. [Laughter] But right now it's not on the menu, but, yeah, I like to make that. And I guess I like to make Coconut Cake, but I make so many now to [Laughter] I

might've had my share of those. [Laughter] When you make sixty a week, that's a lot.

[Laughter]

[0:57:46.4]

**Eric Velasco:** What's your favorite thing to eat here?

[0:57:47.9]

**Dolester Miles:** Eat? You talking about food or dessert?

[0:57:54.6]

**Eric Velasco:** Well, either way.

[0:57:56.2]

**Dolester Miles:** I like the Chicken Scaloppini that they have over there on the menu with polenta and with beurre blanc and capers and tomatoes. Ooh! I like that over there.

[0:58:11.5]

**Eric Velasco:** Now, thirty-six years ago, did you think you were going to recite a dish like that? [Laughter]

[0:58:16.9]

**Dolester Miles:** No. No, not beurre blanc. "What is that?" [Laughter] "A butter sauce." "Why do y'all call it that?" [Laughter] All these fancy names and stuff. And capers, oh,

no, I didn't know what that was. But, you know, I've learned a lot since working here, you know, different ingredients and stuff, you know, working with Frank.

He used to be a jokester back in the day, you know. He used to, "Come and taste this," like an anchovy.

And I'm like, "Okay!" I've always heard of anchovy but never had one. And, ooh, I tasted it, and I'm like, "Oh, my god!" It was so salty and fishy. It was terrible to me.

[Laughter] He knew I wouldn't like it, but he going to coach me into tasting it anyway.

[Laughter]

[0:59:06.9]

**Eric Velasco:** How else would he prank you?

[0:59:07.8]

**Dolester Miles:** [Laughter] There's something else he used to get—what else he had me tasting and I thought was just terrible? It stuck with me. Caviar. I'm like, "I've heard of caviar, champagne and caviar."

"Dol, come and try this! Try this!"

And, oh, my god. I put that in my mouth. I don't like fishy tastes, and I thought that was so fishy. It stuck with me like for days. I'm like, "Oh, my god. Frank, I ain't tasting nothing else you said good." [Laughter]

[0:59:45.5]

**Eric Velasco:** So did you spit it out? Did you swallow it?

[0:59:46.9]

**Dolester Miles:** No, it was terrible! [Laughter]

[0:59:51.7]

**Eric Velasco:** And what's he doing while you're going through all that?

[0:59:52.4]

**Dolester Miles:** Laughing. [Laughter] "I'm not tasting nothing else you say taste good."

He used to do that.

[1:00:02.0]

**Eric Velasco:** Seems like you have a lot of fun in this workplace.

[1:00:03.4]

**Dolester Miles:** We do, we do, we do, a lot of fun.

[1:00:11.7]

**Eric Velasco:** So you're making desserts every day and baking every day pretty much everything that's on the menu.

[1:00:20.6]

**Dolester Miles:** Mm-hmm.

[1:00:20.6]

**Eric Velasco:** Some things may carry over for early in the next shift.

[1:00:25.1]

**Dolester Miles:** Yeah, basically every day.

[1:00:29.3]

**Eric Velasco:** At night when you're sleeping, do you dream about, say, making Coconut Cake?

[1:00:33.2]

**Dolester Miles:** Yeah, sometime I do. [Laughter] Or like sometime—like we got a party coming up, and we have to make like—like yesterday we did a party with ninety-seven Lemon Tarts, Lemon Meringue Tarts, and I'm like—like the day before, I'm like, "Oh, my god," because, you know, we had to put all the pastry—I mean make the dough for the tart shells and cook the meringue, I mean make the lemon curd. And then yesterday we came in and filled them and put the meringue on them. So, yeah, you be thinking about it, like, "Oh, my goodness. Do I have enough curd to go in all of them?" And different stuff. We had way too much, but you're always wondering.

[1:01:16.1]

**Eric Velasco:** This was a Sunday when Highlands and all the restaurants are closed, right?

[1:01:18.9]

**Dolester Miles:** Right. They had a party yesterday at Hattie B's. Highlands took over Hattie B's. That was the name of it. So people at Highlands went and cooked at Hattie B's. [Laughter] So, yeah. [Interviewer's note: The staff of Highlands and the Birmingham location of Nashville-based Hattie B's Hot Chicken combined at the latter's store in the Lakeview district for a one-night charity dinner in March 2019.]

[1:01:35.9]

**Eric Velasco:** Were you there?

[1:01:35.9]

**Dolester Miles:** No, I just came in and did the desserts and went back home. I still ain't recovered from last week when I went to Miami. [Laughter]

[1:01:46.3]

**Eric Velasco:** Tell me about how your travel schedule has changed a little bit since—

[1:01:52.0]

**Dolester Miles:** A little bit, but like they had the Food & Wine thing going on down in Miami, and I got a opportunity to do that, you know.

[1:02:01.6]

**Eric Velasco:** What did you do there?

[1:02:02.5]

**Dolester Miles:** We did the Coconut Cake at one function, and then at another one we did Chocolate Nut Tart. We did two things down there. But it was awesome to be in Miami at the beach. [Laughter] It was quite nice.

[1:02:18.9]

**Eric Velasco:** Since it's around freezing today, I bet you wish you were there today.

[1:02:21.4]

**Dolester Miles:** Right, because when we left here, it was cold. When we got there, we went to peeling off clothes. It was 80 degrees. I'm like, "Wow!" you know. It's amazing how you go from one temperature to the other. And coming back, we had to put them clothes back on because it had got cold here. [Laughter] So, yeah, it was nice to be there in the sunshine.

[1:02:44.2]

**Eric Velasco:** How many interviews do you think you've given since the Beard Award?

[1:02:46.3]

**Dolester Miles:** Oh, my god. A lot. Like I say, it's not my good quality. Ooh, I would say at least twelve or fifteen. It might be more, might be less, but it's been a lot.

[1:03:04.5]

**Eric Velasco:** Tell me some of the publications.

[1:03:05.6]

**Dolester Miles:** When we first got back, we did it on TV. I did all the networks, 6Fox and 13. Then we did *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Baked*, that magazine *Bait*. We did *Southern Living*. I did *Baked* twice. The *Travel* magazine. There was some travel magazine. Then—oh, my god. What's the other two I did for—did one for the holidays. *Time & Leisure*. There's another magazine I can't think of. I think I did two in *Southern Living*. That's all I can think of right now, but it's probably more than that. Like every time I turned around, it was something. We did like the *Birmingham Magazine*, that magazine. Somebody else. It's been quite a few.

[1:04:25.9]

**Eric Velasco:** Now, I know you don't like giving interviews, it makes you feel uncomfortable—

[1:04:30.2]

**Dolester Miles:** Yeah, it does.

[1:04:30.2]

**Eric Velasco:** —but how does that make you feel as somebody who’s been working for thirty-six years, toiling in the back reaches of a restaurant?

[1:04:41.3]

**Dolester Miles:** [Laughter] Yeah. I mean, it’s good after the fact, after I do it, but when it’s coming up to time, I be on pins and needles, my stomach hurts, and I can’t sleep at night. But it is good afterwards, you know. The after-product, when it comes out and everything. It’s great that somebody want to know my opinion. [Laughter]

[1:05:07.2]

**Eric Velasco:** You’ve had a long career, not just here, but overall in general. How long do you think you’re going to keep going? What’s going to make you decide when to stop?

[1:05:16.2]

**Dolester Miles:** Oh, I don’t know. I guess when I can’t come no more, I guess.

[Laughter] Oh, I just love being here. I mean, I don’t see no reason stopping now, you know. I think I’m on the top of my game now, so I got to try to keep it going. [Laughter]

[1:05:40.9]

**Eric Velasco:** I appreciate you taking the time with us today. Congratulations on your award.

[1:05:45.7]

**Dolester Miles:** Thank you. Thank you.

[1:05:45.7]

**Eric Velasco:** We're going to pause now.

[End of interview]