



Nelson Gonzales
New Orleans, Louisiana

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Interviewer: Justin Nystrom
Length: One hour and twenty minutes
Project: Career Servers

Justin Nystrom: Today is June 21st, 2019. I'm with Nelson Gonzales at his apartment here on South Hennessey Street in Mid-City, New Orleans. We're going to do an interview as part of the Southern Foodways Alliance's Longterm Servers Project. Nelson, thank you so much for being here.

[0:00:55.7]

Nelson Gonzales: You're welcome.

[0:00:56.9]

Justin Nystrom: Great. My name is Justin Nystrom. I am faculty at Loyola University New Orleans, and I'll be conducting this interview.

So, Nelson, we spoke a little bit on the phone, but I like to start, when I do an interview, talking a little bit about your kind of, like, who you are and growing up and stuff like that. So I know that you're from Mexico, so—

[0:01:21.7]

Nelson Gonzales: Originally, yeah. My mom married somebody from Lafayette, so we moved to Lafayette when I was probably around nine, and then I spent maybe another seven or eight years there. And then I do remember coming to New Orleans, though, for holidays and obviously when I had family from Mexico coming to visit us as well, so I have, like, very specific memories to Mardi Gras [Laughter], driving through the French Quarter, and then, you know, when I was exploring school options, you know, coming

here specifically, going Uptown, having meals at Camellia Grill, and Audubon Park, and streetcar, you know, and I knew that I was always fascinated with the city.

[0:02:07.2]

Justin Nystrom: So you had these strong childhood memories?

[0:02:09.6]

Nelson Gonzales: Oh, yeah, totally.

[0:02:10.6]

Justin Nystrom: Where in Mexico are you from?

[0:02:12.0]

Nelson Gonzales: I was born in Puebla and spent probably the majority of my time in Mexico City, but my mom and her family is from Mérida, Yucatán, so Mayan roots.

[0:02:24.1]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah. Do you—because Mexico City is an incredibly fascinating place.

[0:02:29.0]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah.

[0:02:29.3]

Justin Nystrom: Was there anything about New Orleans that maybe reminded you a little bit—

[0:02:32.4]

Nelson Gonzales: Oh, totally, yeah, no, without a doubt. Yeah, its Caribbean climate.

[Laughter] Yeah, and it just—it reminded me, I think, that after being sort of exposed to the United States in Lafayette and a very specific culture there—and it's a somewhat—you know, as warm and as friendly as everybody was there, there was a sense that it was a very kind of closed community with not a lot of other outside influences, whereas New Orleans, I think, obviously being a port city and having sort of a longer history of immigrant culture, just felt a little bit bigger [Laughter], you know, and probably closer to what maybe I was familiar with, you know, with Mexico.

[0:03:22.8]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, cool. Yeah, definitely, much lower in elevation than Mexico City, of course [Laughter], but—

[0:03:29.9]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, a little different in that regards.

[0:03:31.1]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah. So was food something that you grew up with or—I mean—

[0:03:37.5]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, I mean, my mom wasn't the best cook, unfortunately. My stepdad actually probably did a little bit more of that when he did, when he was in town. But, yeah, you know, I was lucky. I was lucky, because I used to work with senior citizens, like, you know, when I was in junior high and high school, and I actually used to take trips to New Orleans with one lady in particular, and she was fascinating. But she cooked a lot and was very clear about, like, showing me things when we went out to eat or even when I was at her house and she cooked, and sort of letting me know, you know, what the significance of that meal or that preparation or whatnot. So I knew I was always a little bit fascinated with that. And my mom, you know, she had her staples. She had chicken enchiladas and flan and rice pudding, and, you know, to this day, I still have [Laughter] a strong, you know, memory and attraction to that as well.

[0:04:39.3]

Justin Nystrom: I grew up with rice pudding as well.

[0:04:41.3]

Nelson Gonzales: Ah, *arroz con leche*, it's just fantastic.

[0:04:45.0]

Justin Nystrom: It's good stuff, and so inexpensive to do. [Laughter] So your stepdad, I guess, was working offshore or—

[0:04:56.0]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, he was a pilot, and so he spent—he would fly, you know, and take trips for, you know, a week or two weeks at a time.

[0:05:03.5]

Justin Nystrom: Okay. And, of course, your mom was around?

[0:05:06.7]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, she was mainly around. She worked also. She's an ESL teacher—

[0:05:10.7]

Justin Nystrom: Oh, great.

[0:05:11.6]

Nelson Gonzales: —with a very, very strong accent [Laughter], so I was always aware that her accent was *really*, really strong, and she still has it to this day.

[0:05:22.0]

Justin Nystrom: That's great, that's great. So you had this, you know, coming-to-New-Orleans experience at a young age, right?

[0:05:28.9]

Nelson Gonzales: Uh-huh.

[0:05:29.7]

Justin Nystrom: So how old were you, maybe, when you first came?

[0:05:31.7]

Nelson Gonzales: Oh, god. I mean, as soon as I—I mean, we probably came through New Orleans first to get to Lafayette. Yeah, right away. I would say at like nine or ten, you know, I was coming here at least once, two, three times a year.

[0:05:46.3]

Justin Nystrom: Was there somewhere you would always go every time you came to town?

[0:05:49.0]

Nelson Gonzales: We'd always go to the riverfront and we'd always go to the French Quarter and we'd always go to Uptown New Orleans. I think my mom had, like, an attachment to, like, a church, I think, out in the suburbs as well, so we'd always make visits, you know, with friends there as well.

[0:06:09.9]

Justin Nystrom: Cool, cool. So you came to college.

[0:06:16.8]

Nelson Gonzales: Mm-hmm.

[0:06:16.2]

Justin Nystrom: How did that unfold?

[0:06:17.7]

Nelson Gonzales: Interestingly [Laughter], you know, it's a pretty campus and good university, but it was a similar kind of thing that you feel, you know, the way that Tulane [University] was at the time—and I'm sure to a certain degree it still is—it's a small campus, and they try to keep your experience sort of like, you know, contained somewhat. And I think I always felt, again, the need to kind of like branch out and explore more beyond that, and so where my life there, especially the first three years, was pretty limited to life, you know, university life in that area. I always kind of wanted to kind of go further, and, I mean, that's part of, you know, your becoming an adult, you know, and kind of like wanting to see a little bit more of that.

And when I decided, I guess, that I wasn't going to sort of pursue the things that I was studying per se in college and, you know, wanted to be exposed to a little bit more, I, you know, eventually kind of found a restaurant, you know, and the first restaurant that I found was Kevin Graham's restaurant, believe it or not, was Sapphire restaurant at the time. And he was a European chef, so, you know, that right there immediately connected me to, you know, something beyond, you know, North America [Laughter], which was, you know, sort of what I was more exposed to at that time.

[0:07:51.7]

Justin Nystrom: Is Sapphire still there?

[0:07:52.8]

Nelson Gonzales: No, no, no, no, no, no.

[0:07:54.4]

Justin Nystrom: I didn't think so.

[0:07:54.8]

Nelson Gonzales: It's long gone, and he's long gone as well.

[0:07:57.1]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah. Where was that located?

[0:07:59.5]

Nelson Gonzales: It was downtown.

[0:08:00.3]

Justin Nystrom: Okay. In the CBD [Central Business District]?

[0:08:01.8]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah.

[0:08:03.3]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, I think I recall it.

[0:08:04.1]

Nelson Gonzales: Do you?

[0:08:04.1]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah.

[0:08:06.1]

Nelson Gonzales: God, it hasn't been open since like probably—

[0:08:08.6]

Justin Nystrom: Before [Hurricane] Katrina.

[0:08:11.3]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah.

[0:08:11.7]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I could be confusing it with Cobalt, another shade of blue.

[0:08:16.9]

Nelson Gonzales: Another shade of blue. Yeah, that one came probably five or ten years after.

[0:08:22.5]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So what were you doing at Sapphire?

[0:08:27.6]

Nelson Gonzales: You know, you do the normal thing. You start out as a, you know—I think I probably fibbed my service experience [Laughter], you know, and for whatever reason, I was there at the right time or at the right place and I was able to get on as a waiter. And they had team service, so they had, you know, front, back waiter, food runner, this and that, and I immediately jumped in as a server and got kind of bored with that. You know, it's a glamorous, you know, fine-dining setting, but I was instantly kind of attracted to the fact that this was, you know, a master chef from Europe that had secrets and talents sort of beyond, you know, what I could really learn from, you know, I think, just serving the food in the front.

So I kind of like immediately wanted to sort of start doing stuff in the back, and learned pastries and baking and, you know, did a little garde manger there and was exposed to the kitchen life, which was pretty, pretty crazy. [Laughter] But I did that for about a year, to the point that I ended up getting a hernia from it [Laughter], because I was in and out of a huge Hobart.

[0:09:45.2]

Justin Nystrom: Okay, yeah, yeah, a mixer.

[0:09:46.8]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, yeah, where you made all the doughs and whatnot and anything huge batches, you know, that was prepared for his desserts.

[0:09:57.5]

Justin Nystrom: For those of you reading this transcript, a Hobart is like a floor-standing mixer that you can—

[0:10:03.3]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, literally, yeah, that I was in and out of. I mean, it was—

[0:10:06.0]

Justin Nystrom: Probably hold 100 pounds of flour or something like that.

[0:10:07.8]

Nelson Gonzales: Oh, completely, yeah.

[0:10:08.5]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So you decided the baking was not in your future?

[0:10:08.5]

Nelson Gonzales: No, not at all! I mean, in comparison to the sort of money that I think you made front of the house, you know, I realized that my passion for food, you know, wouldn't be through making it [Laughter] as much as, you know, as I learned from it. I realized that, you know, sort of to do the things that I wanted to do, which was primarily theatre and acting, I needed to work shorter hours and maximize my income potential, I think, in that time.

[0:10:52.5]

Justin Nystrom: So it sounds like you learned, to me, one important lesson in that period of time in that maybe you didn't want to be in the kitchen; you wanted to be in the dining room.

[0:11:02.1]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah.

[0:11:02.8]

Justin Nystrom: Are there any other kind of early sort of awarenesses that you had at that time about what it was to be a waiter?

[0:11:12.2]

Nelson Gonzales: No. I mean, gosh, I don't know. It's been a while. I mean, I certainly haven't thought of it in those terms, to be honest, but I think now I can definitely put it to words, you know, and I think in the end of the day, in whatever profession you're in, we're all in the business of sort of taking care of people, and that's essentially what we do, you know, and I think it came naturally to me. I don't know. I mean, seeing the process from specifically, I think, with baking and making food and then having it touch the plate and then having it go out, I mean, you do miss that if you don't know that experience from the front of the house, you know, what that entails and what kind of, you know, sort of like—you have an appreciation for the chef. You know, you have an appreciation for the cooks more, I think, when you're aware of that level of, you know, work and slaving in a way that kind of goes into it. I mean, these kitchens are hot [Laughter], you know, and the hierarchy in the world, and the structure of a kitchen, especially for a fine-dining restaurant, is *extremely* intense, and they work for pennies. They really do.

But understanding the steps and the amount of work that's involved in that and then what goes out to the front and what's appreciated, you know, by the guests and by the diner, it's *huge*, you know. It has *huge* impact, and being able to see it and being able to be connected to it immediately, though, you know, in being in the front of the house is obviously much more gratifying. And then when you're rewarded at the end, it's also gratifying. So there's, you know, there's ways to, I think, be connected a little bit more to the experience, but at the end of the day, you know, we're in the business of taking care of people, you know, and people like that. You know, *we* like that, you know. I mean, it's from being a little kid, you know, you enjoy, you know, a meal, a sandwich just tastes

better when it's made for you as opposed to when you make it yourself. [Laughter] I know it is for me, so—

[0:13:24.4]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, so that's cool. So your experience in the kitchen gave you—probably helped you become a better server.

[0:13:32.2]

Nelson Gonzales: Maybe. Yeah, maybe. Oh, yeah, totally, actually, yeah.

[0:13:36.5]

Justin Nystrom: Cool. So how long were you at—I mean, I guess what year would this have been, about, when you were at Sapphire?

[0:13:43.1]

Nelson Gonzales: This was probably like 2000, yeah.

[0:13:46.4]

Justin Nystrom: Okay. Yeah, and so you stayed there only a year or—

[0:13:49.6]

Nelson Gonzales: Two years.

[0:13:51.0]

Justin Nystrom: Two years?

[0:13:51.5]

Nelson Gonzales: Two years in total, and then I had to leave. I had to go back to Lafayette, because, you know, I was done in school and, you know, I didn't have any medical insurance and, you know, I had to have the surgery on, you know, this hernia that I had as a—

[0:14:05.6]

Justin Nystrom: The Hobart-inspired hernia.

[0:14:06.7]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, yeah. So I did that in Lafayette and then worked in a friend's restaurant. It was kind of like the first time that a real sort of modern fine-dining restaurant opened in Lafayette, and I did that for about a year.

[0:14:19.5]

Justin Nystrom: What restaurant?

[0:14:21.0]

Nelson Gonzales: It was called The Bank.

[0:14:21.5]

Justin Nystrom: Oh, yeah.

[0:14:22.5]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, The Bank at 500 Jefferson. And I did the same thing. I did front of the house and baking and pastries, because, you know, I was still very much attracted to that, and, you know, I had a lot of experience with—and wanted to do something, I guess, kind of creatively with regards to that. And then, you know, quickly knew that I wanted to get back to New Orleans, and so I did.

[0:14:46.3]

Justin Nystrom: Cool. So you came back and—

[0:14:48.3]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, yeah.

[0:14:48.3]

Justin Nystrom: What year, would you say?

[0:14:50.7]

Nelson Gonzales: That was 2000, 2001, yeah.

[0:14:54.2]

Justin Nystrom: So just a little sojourn in Lafayette.

[0:14:56.1]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, totally.

[0:14:56.8]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. And so you came here and you found a job, I guess, waiting tables?

[0:15:00.7]

Nelson Gonzales: I did, yeah, and I found it, like, right across the street from where Sapphire was. It was no longer there. I worked at Lemon Grass and then worked at Restaurant Cuvée, which were kind of like the two big things in the early 2000s in the downtown area, and I actually lived right in between those two places on Gravier Street, and I lived there for about ten years.

[0:15:20.6]

Justin Nystrom: Wow. So here you are in the CBD at a time when it's really changing.

[0:15:23.9]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah.

[0:15:24.7]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. Tell me a little bit about your time at Lemon Grass and Cuvée. Who were some of the people you were working for and with?

[0:15:31.2]

Nelson Gonzales: Well, I worked—Lemon Grass was cool because, you know, it exposed me to, you know, the French and the Vietnamese fusion, and Cuvée was a, you know, pretty strictly French and New Orleans type of menu, and they were both sort of celebrity, you know, New Orleans chefs at the time. Cuvée was great because it kind of exposed me to the wine, you know, the breadth of sort of wine experience, I guess, that kind of goes, you know, with enjoying that type of food, and, you know, it had a really wonderful French sommelier who was really big about pairing, you know, courses with a specific wine. They had a *dégustation*, which was like a tasting menu for six courses, that was kind of like the standard thing to have there. And, you know, you learn. You know, you're excited by that. I did the sommelier training course there. And wasn't very far from Restaurant August.

I left to do a little theatre. You know, I would take sort of little breaks at a time, because, you know, the schedule doesn't match up with that. [Laughter] You know, when you do a theatre run, you know, you're doing rehearsals for five nights a week and then you do shows on the weekend, and then when that was done, you know, you're obviously broke again and you need to make money. So I think I was poached by John Besh, who was famous for doing that sort of thing, going to restaurants and picking out, you know, sort of what he considered to be talented people and asking them [Laughter] to start working in his, you know, his next new place.

[0:17:22.8]

Justin Nystrom: Oh, that's interesting. So, yeah, so you waited on John Besh or—

[0:17:25.3]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, Restaurant August was a block away, and he was friends with the chef there, so he would stop by. And he'd come and have meals as well, and he just sort of paid attention to what, you know, the people that he noticed, and he had a good eye for, you know—

[0:17:44.6]

Justin Nystrom: And good people are hard to find.

[0:17:46.9]

Nelson Gonzales: I suppose, yeah.

[0:17:49.3]

Justin Nystrom: Everybody tells me that.

[0:17:51.2]

Nelson Gonzales: Oh, is it? [Laughter] I don't know, I don't know. I don't necessarily consider myself that great of a, you know—or talented of a person, you know, necessarily, but I don't know. I don't know what people see in, you know—

[0:18:03.7]

Justin Nystrom: So you were working in the CBD, and, of course, first at Sapphire and then Lemon Grass and then Cuvée. What kind of customers are you getting at these places?

[0:18:15.1]

Nelson Gonzales: I mean, you get a lot of, you know, sort of high-end, you know, travelers that are staying, you know, in the area. You're also getting, you know, your long sort of like storied diners of New Orleans. You know, you get to know who the people—you know, the people are that sort of making up the city certainly in business and, you know, and in real estate and whatnot. I mean, you know, I mean, you're definitely aware—I think you're shown—you're aware of class, I think, specifically when it comes to, like, the New Orleanians, especially, that could afford to have meals in these type of restaurants. Yeah, and, you know, you're always told who these people are, so it lets you know, essentially, you know, how business, I think, is operated, I think, to a certain degree, in New Orleans, yeah.

[0:19:17.9]

Justin Nystrom: So you would have regulars, I guess.

[0:19:19.8]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, of course.

[0:19:19.8]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah. Would you find yourself having call parties?

[0:19:22.9]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, yeah. People enjoy that. People enjoy—especially, you know, there's a connection, I think, to fine-dining restaurants and fine-dining guests, you know, what they're sort of used to, and I think they generally enjoy, you know, the people that, you know, that take care of them and that know what their specific needs are, and that those things are sort of like remembered. So, yeah, there's certainly an appreciation for that.

[0:19:54.8]

Justin Nystrom: Does any moment from that time stand out to you?

[0:19:58.3]

Nelson Gonzales: No. I mean, just that, you know, I was gaining, I think, a lot of experience quickly and that, you know, that I always wanted to learn something else. And when John Besh picked me up, he sort of like brought me over to The Steakhouse at the casino, and that was a completely different world altogether, and that's probably where I did the majority—the biggest stint and made the most money also, because it was, you know, casino clientele and very expensive. And, you know, the main thing from that was just, again, just—I always knew that I liked working with very, very talented chefs, that

that was, like, the biggest thing, was that I had to believe in the food that I was serving, you know, and that it had to be more than a job, because my time, you know, my time's valuable and I like to be associated with good product [Laughter] if I'm going to be, you know, involved with it in any way. I worked with Alon Shaya there, and worked with really wonderful front-of-the-house people, I think, that, you know, have gone on and opened up their own restaurants, and that was always exciting.

[0:21:12.7]

Justin Nystrom: Who are some of these people that have their own places?

[0:21:14.7]

Nelson Gonzales: Well, right after Katrina, because, you know, we obviously shut down during that period, but we immediately opened up probably four or five months afterwards, after we returned to the city.

[0:21:25.3]

Justin Nystrom: Did you stay in New Orleans during Katrina?

[0:21:27.1]

Nelson Gonzales: No. I was gone for two months.

[0:21:30.6]

Justin Nystrom: But not too terribly long.

[0:21:32.0]

Nelson Gonzales: No, no, not terribly long at all. I was back in November.

[0:21:36.8]

Justin Nystrom: So you were working at Besh Steakhouse when—

[0:21:39.2]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah.

[0:21:39.9]

Justin Nystrom: Describe the arrival of the storm and sort of your experience through that, if you don't mind.

[0:21:47.9]

Nelson Gonzales: I mean, it was pretty horrific, obviously, you know. You know, you really hated to see, you know, sort of the destruction that kind of happened in the city and, you know, what it did to, you know, to people's lives. It was awful. It was really, really awful.

[0:22:09.9]

Justin Nystrom: So what happened to some of the people you work with? Were there—

[0:22:14.0]

Nelson Gonzales: A lot of people were displaced. I mean, you heard a lot of stories. I think when you came back, you really just wanted to see the city sort of get back on its feet, and that specifically mean, you know, yourself, you know. And you didn't want to lose anything with regards to, you know, maybe the momentum that you'd had before or the life that you had here, and you wanted to kind of like see that revived as quickly as possible. And I think that was part of, like, how you dealt with the trauma of—the horror of the whole experience. But, you know, for a lot of people, you know, it really left a lot of deep wounds, I would say.

[0:22:58.0]

Justin Nystrom: Mm-hmm. Now, Besh Steakhouse opens up again pretty quickly then?

[0:23:01.5]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah. It opened up—we came back—one of the first restaurants that opened up—and I did a stint there for a little bit—was Table One on Magazine and Washington, which I think now is Coquette.

[0:23:14.9]

Justin Nystrom: Right.

[0:23:16.2]

Nelson Gonzales: Because restaurants don't have a long life. [Laughter] You know, there's—you know, at best, if you did five years, you know, that's pretty good. Ten years is, you know, that's a job very, very well done, but, you know, beyond ten years, it's very difficult, I think, to stay open, you know. There's so much competition.

[0:23:37.3]

Justin Nystrom: I think some people would be uncomfortable with that in their careers. They want to get a job, and they're always concerned about job security, but, like, do you think that's just sort of endemic—

[0:23:45.4]

Nelson Gonzales: Well, but long term you don't have a whole lot of job security if you're, you know, you're just waiting tables, you know. I mean, you can, but I don't know. I consider myself a little bit of a free agent in that regards. I did a long stint, obviously, with Besh and, you know, the Steakhouse in the casino, but you did have, you know, benefits and you did have incremental pay rate, you know, and you had better than \$2.13, which is the quoted—you know, the famous income wage, you know, per hour that the front of the house are paid here in the city, which is, I think, a shame, really. But in any case, you know, they wouldn't be able to—honestly, they wouldn't be able to afford, you know, a very good front-of-the-house staff if they had to pay them, you know. I mean, they wouldn't be able to stay in operation just because that's how the practice, you know, of doing business here in the city is.

You know, New Orleans and Louisiana in general, because it falls under that law, it's a right-to-work state, you know, so the job security is also connected to that. You know, at any time, you're disposable, you know, so I very much understood that, you know, as hard as I work and as talented as I am according to, you know, whoever decides to hire you or, you know, how they perceive you, it's all very much connected to the fact that at any time, you know, somebody else can come in and do your job as well. So, you know, I pretty much take that sort of same attitude. I let people—you know, I let the places know now, you know, that I have other, you know, sort of interests and that takes priority beyond, you know, the job that I do, and I know that there's always going to be sort of like a period of where the contract sort of ends, you know. It's an unspoken thing, but I think it's pretty well understood.

[0:25:42.2]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah. So you like the mobility.

[0:25:44.5]

Nelson Gonzales: I do, yeah, and there's always somewhere else. You know, there's always somewhere else that we can do what we do and, you know, lend our, you know, our hands, our bodies, our voices, you know, our personalities, you know, and it's always, for the most part, for me, at least, worked out well wherever I've gone.

[0:26:03.5]

Justin Nystrom: You say you worked with Alon Shaya while you were at Besh Steakhouse?

[0:26:06.2]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, yeah.

[0:26:06.5]

Justin Nystrom: Tell me a little bit about that relationship or—

[0:26:09.0]

Nelson Gonzales: He was great. I liked—I mean, I thought he was fantastic. I always knew that he was very, very talented and he was very personable. I mean, I didn't live very far from the place, so I got to know them relatively well, and, you know, to this day, you know, I still see him. I saw him, actually, at the last place—at the current place that I work, at Gabrielle [Restaurant], and, you know, every time I saw him in Mexico City when I last was there, and, you know—

[0:26:32.6]

Justin Nystrom: You could run into somebody in a place as large as Mexico City?

[0:26:34.9]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, yeah. I mean, the world—global cities, you know. It's not that difficult, and the way that people travel nowadays, you know, it's not that far-fetched.

We saw each other at a really wonderful bakery, actually, in Mexico City. [Laughter]

He's like, "I'm not surprised you'd be here."

And I was like, "I'm not surprised you'd be here either."

[0:26:52.2]

Justin Nystrom: [Laughter] That's great, that's great, yeah, yeah. It's an international language, you know.

[0:26:56.4]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, totally.

[0:26:57.3]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. And so you said some of the people that you were working with there opened up their own places after—

[0:27:03.9]

Nelson Gonzales: Oh, yeah. Oh, at Besh Steak—well, I meant—Jeff Gulotta was one of the most talented front-of-the-house managers, and his breed, to speak to that sort of like—what that's like, the front-of-the-house managers, that landscape has changed as the tradition now is to, you know, to actually go and get a degree in [Laughter] HRT maybe from UNO [The University of New Orleans] if you're a New Orleanian, you know, and have, like, this textbook way of operating a front-of-the-house restaurant, you know. And

generally it's a lot of younger people, because it is—you know, it's an attractive—I mean, it's still seen very, very—as an attractive thing to do.

I knew right away I never wanted to do management work just because it requires so much more of your time, you know, and then to be paid really by the restaurant to do that kind of work, you put in much more than even, like, those forty hours oftentimes, you know. So it was always—the reason why I do this kind of work is so that I can have a life beyond, and I accept, you know, my low wages, for the most part. It doesn't add up to more than what I need, but New Orleans has always been that, you know, and especially a haven for, you know, for creative people, for artists, you know, to do, you know, their other things.

Yeah, so Jeff Gulotta, though, was my general manager at Besh when we reopened after Katrina, and he and his brother now own MoPho and Maypop, and he was just—I mean, he was a beast, and he was in the old tradition. He was the sort of manager that rolled up his sleeves and got down and dirty with you and just did what you needed to do. It was you against the crowd, you know, and we did huge numbers working at Besh Steak. And it was a difficult crowd to work because, you know, there were primarily players, you know, gamblers, and high rollers at that, so they didn't want to have long meals, but they wanted to have very nice meals, and usually on the casino. And it was just about taking care of the masses, but being able to give them this experience within a pretty short amount of time, which was difficult. But he absolutely did as much and more work than any one individual at any time there, you know. He was just—I mean, his energy and his—you know, and his ability to lead through, you know, through, I think, actually being able to do the work himself and not just dictate it to somebody was beyond, and I've

never had that experience with another manager again, unfortunately. But, you know, now he runs his own places, and the last time I went to MoPho, he was still running food in his own restaurant, you know, which I think it's becoming kind of less and less a thing, unfortunately.

I tend to like, you know, as a person, when I go out to places, I like things that are a lot smaller and that you can actually see the people that are making the things and that are actually serving it to you, because there's less interference, so to speak. And to me, food has love. Like, it has love in its preparation, and I think it potentially has love even in the way that it's served to you, and those things can quickly evaporate, you know, in certain environments, and certainly if they're being mass-produced too much.

[0:30:58.7]

Justin Nystrom: So you had to do that on a rapid-fire scale at Besh Steakhouse.

[0:31:04.3]

Nelson Gonzales: Oh, yeah, totally, yeah, totally. [Laughter]

[0:31:07.3]

Justin Nystrom: Get the temperature right away.

[0:31:08.5]

Nelson Gonzales: Right away. Had to be very, very precise, and if it wasn't right, you know, exactly right [slaps hands], then it needed to be corrected right away, you know.

[0:31:15.7]

Justin Nystrom: Because they had Blackjack to play.

[0:31:16.4]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, exactly. [Laughter]

[0:31:18.3]

Justin Nystrom: That's great, that's great. Now, starting in 2000 and, you know, coming up to, like, kind of like the storm and then after the storm up till, say, like 2010, did you see changes in, like, kind of who the people were waiting tables? Do we see more—was it mostly men at the time waiting tables? Because especially at **[unclear]**.

[0:31:40.6]

Nelson Gonzales: No. I mean, I was lucky in the sense that it wasn't—I wasn't in a male-dominated—even when I worked at Sapphire, you know, his pastry chef was female and his front-of-the-house manager was also a female. He had a reputation for being very old-school and European in, you know, in that sense of being—I mean, none of these things would fly now, you know, and certainly, you know, the way whole Besh thing panned out, it was still a very difficult environment. I didn't personally see that per se, and maybe I'm lucky, and I think men, in general, are blinded to the realities of what it really is to work, you know, in sort of a male-dominated industry. But I've had a lot of, like, coworkers, other female waitresses that have spoken to me about that sort of thing,

you know, and when I do take the time to actually understand and hear where they're coming from, I imagine it's a lot more difficult. But it wasn't something that I—you know, I always felt that I was, like, in an environment that was pretty balanced with regards to men and women, and so—

[0:32:54.8]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, because the long tradition—

[0:32:56.9]

Nelson Gonzales: —I probably would have noticed, I think, if I wasn't, you know, and probably if I was working in a restaurant that was more old-school, you know, where you had to compete with the old guard. I mean, I never had that. I was always—these were always places that relied on young talent. And, I mean, it's a strange thing, because I'm a little bit older now, and now I see the—it's, you know—they still do, they still do like young talent to a certain degree, those type of restaurants, and now, you know, if I were to go out and get a new restaurant, I do realize I'm competing against younger people.

[Laughter] And, man, I can relate. Now I can see what probably women would have to deal with in a sexist or in a male-dominated environment where they're the minority. You know, society can be very ageist as well, you know. I see it certainly in the acting world also, and it's a strange phenomenon to all of a sudden be aware of what it is to feel like the minority. Strangely enough, I mean, even being Mexican, you know, in the Caribbean sort of climate of New Orleans, you just sort of melt in with everybody else, you know, so I haven't been quite as aware of that. Maybe a little bit of class, because I think that's

pretty prominent [Laughter] certainly in a lot of circles, you know, that I've been involved in. But, yeah, I don't—as far as sex, you know, I've been lucky in that it's never been that big of an issue with, you know, a lot of the places that I worked.

[0:34:29.8]

Justin Nystrom: New Orleans has changed a lot in the time since you started, even, in this sort of—

[0:34:36.3]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, yeah, yeah, totally, totally.

[0:34:37.6]

Justin Nystrom: —this twenty years you've been living here. And a lot of people have made the Katrina casual—you know, how dress codes have changed over time. Is that something you've observed?

[0:34:50.9]

Nelson Gonzales: I mean, I think New Orleans downtown is certainly—you know, because I lived there predominantly, has become more vibrant in the sense that it's more alive, but that's just—you know, there's more apartment buildings, there's a lot more younger people living there. You know, I felt like I was probably more in the minority in that regards, you know, because I wanted to feel like I was in a big city, and that's why I chose that, you know, as a neighborhood. But, you know, I spend less and less time now,

you know, the longer that I've been here, in what I consider to be a *real* New Orleans neighborhood, Mid-City. [Laughter]

[0:35:28.0]

Justin Nystrom: The heart of it all.

[0:35:29.8]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah! [Laughter] But when I go downtown now, it's just like—I mean, it really is, it feels like an even bigger city. You know, it's grown a lot, you know, but that's how New Orleans, you know, operates. It's a tourist-based economy, so, you know, its jewels are the, you know, are the French Quarter, obviously, you know, and downtown, and so how it presents itself, you know—and I think to a lot of people, when they come downtown, if they want to be—I mean when they come to New Orleans, that's also representative of, you know, sort of up-and-coming or being at the heart of it.

[0:36:11.9]

Justin Nystrom: So when are the best times to wait tables, of the year, of the year in New Orleans?

[0:36:18.0]

Nelson Gonzales: Not right now. [Laughter] Not right now.

[0:36:20.6]

Justin Nystrom: You mean when it's like 90 degrees out?

[0:36:22.1]

Nelson Gonzales: Oh, *god*, it's awful. It's absolutely awful, but, you know, it takes me like a week or two to kind of sink into it, and then I just accept it again, you know, and think, "Oh, I need to get away for the weekend," and be around water and the beach or just a completely different environment.

No, the best times are obviously probably like November, October to April, you know, with little pockets, you know, but anytime there's, you know, there's a big thing going on in the city. And the city's done a lot better job of kind of, even in the summer, you know, trying to promote it, you know, and offer something up, you know, even if it's like, "Oh, there's something—there's music at the bayou," you know. You know, they manage to get a little bit of a crowd, and festival season's gotten longer, you know. So they do a good job. I think the Convention Center and the tourism end does a really good job of continuing to promote the city in what would normally be a very, very dead period as far as especially for what I do, you know.

[0:37:24.1]

Justin Nystrom: So Mardi Gras, tell me a little bit about waiting tables at Mardi Gras.

You don't go to Aspen to ski, like up—you know, like—

[0:37:32.8]

Nelson Gonzales: No, I wish I was like that. [Laughter] I wish I—I still dream of it, but I don't get away. I don't go to—you know, I don't go skiing for Mardi Gras. I would if I could afford, but I can't, unfortunately. Yeah, it's crazy. I mean, I've been in the middle of it, you know, at different times, and it's pretty insane, but in some fine-dining restaurants, it can still be really slow, because that's not what motivates people to have, like, really nice, long meals per se.

[0:38:05.5]

Justin Nystrom: So the places that you're waiting tables at, at Cuvée and Besh—well, Besh Steakhouse would be a little bit different, but, like, Cuvée had this, you know, wealthy New Orleanian kind of regulars client, but did they really partake—did they do any of the Carnival stuff, the luncheons and stuff that [unclear]?

[0:38:24.3]

Nelson Gonzales: I mean, I remember—when I was there, I remember, you know, anytime there was anything sort of going on, like the Sugar Bowl was going on, I think when the Saints were doing really well, all that, you know, anytime there's strong, like, really positive feelings going on in the city, you know, that's a time to celebrate, I think, for them. So, yeah, that's when they would be out, you know, enjoying—I mean, you know, anytime I guess they were celebrating something special for themselves, that's when they went out as well, so—

[0:38:24.3]

Justin Nystrom: But not like, say, a Bacchus—well, Bacchus would be going to Brennan’s I guess, but, like, you know, [unclear].

[0:39:03.8]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, I don’t know about any specific, like, yeah, Mardi Gras kind of night.

[0:39:10.7]

Justin Nystrom: And I suppose those newer restaurants, they don’t have that built in where it’s like this is—

[0:39:14.2]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, I mean, they do when I’ve worked—I’ve worked in Toups’ here in Mid-City, and at Toups’, you know, during that time, there was a couple of krewes that have floated through. And now I’m at Gabrielle and, you know, they have strong connections, you know, with certain groups of people that—you know, we close, obviously, during, like, the peak of whenever something big is going on, but I’m a little bit more aware of, I think, the groups of people that like to go out together on a particular time. But they usually have an association with that particular restaurant, and that’s why they would go there.

People are very faithful to, like, you know, a certain restaurant for a certain thing or a certain neighborhood for a certain time of the year, you know. New Orleans is made up of great, great, very interesting neighborhoods that all have their own little vibe and their

own little clique and their own little special places that you go to. You know, when they got copied and they try to be, you know, mass kind of produced in another neighborhood, it loses something, you know, and I think a real New Orleanian kind of understands that, that that's what it's really about. It's really about the neighborhoods and their unique kind of charm, and that's defined by the restaurants that are there as well.

[0:40:36.7]

Justin Nystrom: And, I guess, tradition as well.

[0:40:38.6]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, totally.

[0:40:39.7]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So—I lost my train just a moment. You were talking about, well, Toups'. I want to talk a little bit about Toups', but also getting back to the festivals, what about Jazz Fest?

[0:40:56.1]

Nelson Gonzales: That's the best time [Laughter] at all these places that I worked at because you get—yeah, that's—I mean, that's the best diners, in all honesty, you know, for those two weekends, that restaurants will do their best numbers. That clientele, that crowd really, really appreciates—at least the restaurants that I go to, but certainly most restaurants here in New Orleans, they really—and they go all out. You know, they really

don't mind spending a lot of money for the best wine, you know, and just really having great meals.

[0:41:31.9]

Justin Nystrom: Any customers at these places that kind of stand out, people visiting? You don't have to name names, but you could tell stories about, I guess.

[0:41:41.6]

Nelson Gonzales: Specific people? Gosh. Lately, they've been—I don't think they've been particularly standing out as far as, like, specifically. I mean, I've waited on famous people, obviously, but I don't really think about it very much. We tend not to notice too much and sort of leave them alone. I try not to make too much of that sort of thing, you know.

[0:42:06.1]

Justin Nystrom: This is interesting, because different waiters have a different engagement—

[0:42:11.1]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah. No, I mean, I like my privacy, and I tend to try to respect others' as well, yeah.

[0:42:17.4]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah. So your approach is more—

[0:42:18.9]

Nelson Gonzales: I engage—I mean, my attitude now, I mean, certainly I think I engaged a lot more when I was younger and probably had less discretion. [Laughter] But now I generally—you know, I only engage if it's natural to engage in a more personal sort of way. I mean, there was a joke that when I did meet a famous person, I would probably not even rec—like, to the point of, like, not even acknowledge it, where it almost stood out to them, and it became kind of like a little joke of, you know, of like, “Oh, do you not know who I am?”

Or, “What are you in town for?”

“Oh, I'm making a movie.”

I'm like, “Okay. That's cool,” you know. [Laughter] And I think they generally would appreciate that to a certain level.

[0:43:05.5]

Justin Nystrom: “What kind of movie?” [Laughter]

[0:43:06.8]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, right? “I work in movies.”

I was like, “Oh, that sounds nice.” [Nystrom laughs.] I wasn't playing tennis with Will Ferrell. [Laughter]

I don't remember who I waited on, somebody from *Jackass*, at Besh Steak, and we sent out a special dessert, because the chefs all knew who it was. And I brought out something, and I think when I brought it out and it had the name and it made some funny joke that I was completely surprised at, and I dropped it off at the table, I think he saw on my face that I was sort of pretending, that at that moment it hit me who he was, and he just thought it was the funniest thing ever. [Nystrom laughs.]

That's kind of my thing, I guess. That's my own little personal thing. But generally I try not to, you know—if it's natural, if it happens, but I try not to, you know—I think people want to have, like, a nice meal, and I think even the Orleanians, to a certain degree. We're very gossipy. We do like to talk about others [Laughter], but we do it in private conversation. You try to have a little bit of discretion with regards to that, you know, and especially in a restaurant. You go out to be seen, but you do want to enjoy a little modicum of privacy, and I think if you go beyond that, then you probably take away a little bit from the experience.

[0:44:26.4]

Justin Nystrom: Do you think other New Orleanians are respectful of the dining room as a space?

[0:44:30.7]

Nelson Gonzales: Oh, completely. I mean, the way I see it, you know—and I think that's why I'm able to continue to do the work that I do, and I genuinely still enjoy it—is because the dining room is—I mean, it's live theatre every night, you know. Yes, there's

attention being paid to where you sit, where you're sat, where you hope to sit, I mean, everything from that just to the way you move, I mean, entrances and exits. It's live theatre completely *every* night, and from the front end, you know, from the professional standpoint, you can prepare, you can be as—all of that as much—but there's never going to be a set script. I mean, you do have a set script, but at anytime, things will—there's always discoveries and surprises and—

[0:45:23.0]

Justin Nystrom: Improv.

[0:45:24.7]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, yeah, disasters, and you just have to react. [Nystrom laughs.] Yeah, you have to use your, you know, your reaction skills and your improvisational skills, and that's the kind of waiter I'm generally. Sometimes with the old-school line of waiters, which I've generally been more exposed to at this job, they're just like, "We have never waited tables with anybody like you," you know. [Laughter] And I'm like, "Well, you know, that's just how I am." [Laughter]

[0:45:52.9]

Justin Nystrom: So I was going to ask, you know, how you brought your acting in, but it is—do you create a persona for yourself in the dining room that's different from on the street or elsewhere?

[0:46:08.2]

Nelson Gonzales: I try—generally, not so much, I mean, not so much. I’m probably a little bit more outgoing, I think, you know. I do tend to be a little bit more reserved, I think, you know, in my own private life.

[0:46:19.4]

Justin Nystrom: So you’re more outgoing in the dining room?

[0:46:22.3]

Nelson Gonzales: I try to be a little bit more outgoing because it is—there is a responsibility, you know, to, I think, the place that you work at and also to the—you know, they want a little bit. I mean, there’s a degree, you know, and a volume knob that you have to work with. I mean, theatre people, in general, have to be a little bit more amped up, so I’m used to that, and I do think of, like, the moment that I actually get my first table. You know, some waiters have a different attitude. I mean, some of them, you know, the minute we open up, the minute the first time a guest opens the door—to me, I don’t begin until I actually have the first person that I’m actually taking care of, that I have the interaction. That, to me, is act one, scene one, you know, my entrance.

[Laughter]

[0:47:08.0]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[0:47:09.6]

Nelson Gonzales: You know, and there is, there is something there and there's something about the way that you move and that you interact that's going to be informed by all of that, and you have to always be aware of others' movements, you know, other people, what they're looking at. I mean, they're always going to be seeing things, so there is an awareness of that.

[0:47:30.7]

Justin Nystrom: What's the biggest thing that disrupts a wait staff?

[0:47:33.3]

Nelson Gonzales: The biggest thing?

[0:47:35.7]

Justin Nystrom: Or what are the things you like to see never happen as a wait staff?

[0:47:41.6]

Nelson Gonzales: I mean, you never like to break anything, obviously. [Nystrom laughs.] That's a bad kind of attention to be getting, you know, and you don't want to cause damage to—you know, you don't want to spill anything on anybody. I mean, there'd be a little bit of attention probably paid to that. I don't think—these are things that I don't think of anymore—

[0:47:59.2]

Justin Nystrom: I guess what I'm getting at more with this question is what are sort of conditions that can be detrimental to the overall happiness of the dining experience?

[0:48:09.9]

Nelson Gonzales: There is a rhythm that you establish, I think, with your other waiters, and the more that you work with them, I mean, the more comfortable you are with that, and you want to kind of ride that. Like anything, in any work situation, there's always, you know, a zone that you could potentially get into, you know, and any disruption can cause that to go awry. I wouldn't particularly want to work—I mean, I don't have that happen, you know, where I'm at now, but it's never fun to work with someone that's having, like, an off night, or, you know, sometimes you do have to pick up the slack for somebody else, you know.

There's the thing that they call in the restaurant world—it happens to everybody—it's called being in the weeds, which is just you're overwhelmed. You have too much that you need to do with how much you can reasonably—you know, so it becomes all about just time management, and realize that you're eventually going to get it all done. I don't think of anything as being too emergency [Laughter] necessary. Like, that kind of attitude I just don't—I mean, I don't think we're—you know, I think people are pretty—even though they're paying a lot of money for it, people are pretty accepting and forgiving of a lot, so I'm not afraid to make a mistake, in all honesty. You know, I don't believe in perfection, but I do try to do the best that I can, you know. So I don't know if that answers your questions or—

[0:49:42.9]

Justin Nystrom: No, it does, it does. Do you ever see somebody start waiting tables and you're like, "That person's not going to last"?

[0:49:49.7]

Nelson Gonzales: No. I don't think in those terms. I don't—no. I hate to—yeah, I don't have that kind of attitude about it. I mean, I've worked at places where there were a lot of inexperienced people, and I did probably make the statement—yes, all right, maybe I did at one point. [Nystrom laughs.] I did say, "This place is a zoo!" Like, I literally looked at my friend who'd gotten me a job there—and I'm not going to name the place

[Laughter]—and I went, "This place is a zoo! Like, no one has any sense of what they're—and everyone is just left to their own—" I thought that level of inexperience was pretty insane, in all honesty. But, I mean, I thought of it as, like, their management—you know, like, I just thought the whole place was just a *zoo*, and they do *really*, really big numbers. I mean, they're primarily a lunch place, and it was just absolutely insane to me.

I did my year's time [Laughter], and then the manager was like, "I don't think we're a good fit."

And I was like, "I think you're exactly right. Here's my badge. Goodbye." [Laughter]

[0:50:59.2]

Justin Nystrom: And thus ended your career at Shoney's, right? [Laughter]

[0:51:01.3]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah.

[0:51:02.2]

Justin Nystrom: No, I'm just teasing. So tell me a little bit about—

[0:51:05.9]

Nelson Gonzales: No, it was actually a much nicer place, believe it or not. [Laughter]

[0:51:10.3]

Justin Nystrom: No, I'm just teasing. Tell me a little bit—going to Toups', in your neighborhood.

[0:51:17.2]

Nelson Gonzales: Oh, I love Toups' because it was—yeah, again, it was a neighborhood place, and I wanted to be—I mean, I generally pick places that are close to me. I don't want to have to make it a much, you know, bigger, you know, driving or more complicated than it needs to be, you know. And they were really great, and again, another wonderful, like, celebrity chef was doing something, and does really, really interesting thing, you know, with the whole meatery concept. And, you know, that was a hot thing, and I'm sure it still is, but the main thing there was that it's a neighborhood little staple and it's a small restaurant, which I really, really like.

[0:51:52.7]

Justin Nystrom: Because you've worked at some big ones. Like, Besh Steakhouse is—

[0:51:55.4]

Nelson Gonzales: That was probably the biggest, yeah.

[0:51:56.8]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah. How many tables, would you say?

[0:52:02.1]

Nelson Gonzales: Oh, god. At any time, nine to eleven at one time. I mean, that's—there was just—you know, and we didn't do—after Katrina, we did have front and back before Katrina, but after Katrina, it was single service.

[0:52:15.9]

Justin Nystrom: Oh, wow. So there wasn't—

[0:52:17.7]

Nelson Gonzales: One food runner, and that was it. No bussers, no anything, and that place was *huge*, and you just *ran*.

[0:52:22.2]

Justin Nystrom: No bussers?

[0:52:24.4]

Nelson Gonzales: No bussers. You had to do all that work as well. You had to help each other out. I mean, teamwork really was important.

[0:52:29.5]

Justin Nystrom: Kind of unusual, though, right? That's kind of unusual for a restaurant like that at that time.

[0:52:32.6]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, but, I mean, because of the level of—because of how fast [snaps fingers] the service was, you know. And then if you were to add a team to it, it would get too complicated.

[0:52:43.4]

Justin Nystrom: And, now, the menu there wasn't super big either, right?

[0:52:45.7]

Nelson Gonzales: No, I mean, I guess not by what would be considered a super big menu, but it wasn't super tiny either.

[0:52:53.8]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[0:52:53.8]

Nelson Gonzales: And you had a lot of service to offer. Like, you had bread service. You gave everybody pâté. You know, I mean, it was a lot. It was a lot. And then, you know, the casino had its own standards as far as, like, the type of service you were giving to the tiered player, and they would get feedback. And so our success was based on scores that were determined by the casino that were actually, like, rated on surveys, so, I mean, you always had to be up. You always had to, like, hit your mark with certain things that you needed to say. You know, you did definitely have a script there.

[0:53:34.7]

Justin Nystrom: Wow.

[0:53:35.7]

Nelson Gonzales: But it was still very much based—I mean, still, you know, personality went a long way. So, yeah, that was a unique experience and unique environment.

[0:53:48.4]

Justin Nystrom: So being a server can be kind of a challenging job.

[0:53:54.9]

Nelson Gonzales: Mm-hmm.

[0:53:54.9]

Justin Nystrom: And New Orleans can be a challenging place to live.

[0:53:57.9]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah.

[0:53:59.8]

Justin Nystrom: Can we talk a little bit about the nexus between those two challenges?

[Laughter] So do you consider New Orleans—a lot of people—there’s been a bit of discussion publicly about the cost of living in New Orleans lately.

[0:54:11.7]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, yeah.

[0:54:12.9]

Justin Nystrom: How has that affected you?

[0:54:15.4]

Nelson Gonzales: I see it. I mean, I just don’t spend the kind of money that I did when I was younger, I think. You know, I’m very, very judicious about that sort of thing. I feel like I make—I earn a lot less money, you know. When I tell people that I work in a

restaurant that pools their tips, which is becoming more and more the norm, you know—and it's whittled down, you make a lot less of even what you're being tipped, you know. I take home—and, you know, it was practice at both the last restaurants that I worked at. You know, you come home with 30 or 40 percent of what you're actually being left by the guest that tips you personally, but because it's a pooled house, it's shared evenly among all of the front of the house. And the practice for that, for a lot of places, is, you know, management is supplemented that way as well so that they don't have to pay the managers, straight up, their entire income. You know, that's also pulled from that tips. I don't know how legal of a practice that is, but that's just the norm, you know, and generally it works out okay. But, yeah, I mean, I don't—you know, I'm very, very judicious about how I spend my money, you know, and I really believe that the dependency on this type of work to make a really big or extravagant life is just probably asking for trouble, I think, but that's just me as a person, I suppose.

[0:55:50.8]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, so how about things like healthcare? How do you navigate that?

[0:55:56.3]

Nelson Gonzales: I do the marketplace [Laughter], you know, unfortunately. I say unfortunately, you know. I mean, you get a pretty good deal, obviously, because, you know, you're not earning—I'm not personally earning a whole lot of money, but that's just—you know, I accept that as, you know, as, you know—if my quality of life is equal to being able to do the things that I want to do, which for me are creative pursuits, and

enjoy a coffee, you know, out from time to time, then, you know, I'm doing okay. And as long as I'm taking care of myself physically, you know, I don't have too many concerns with regards to that. I pay my little clinic fees, you know, or do sliding scale, you know, as it stands. But, I mean, that all speaks to job security as well. I never expected it to be taken care of. I mean, different people have a different attitude about that. If you work for the bigger places or if you work for a corporation, yes, you will have, you know, a better sense of job security or better benefits or maybe even a better pay rate, but a lot more is expected out of you as well.

[0:57:04.5]

Justin Nystrom: So you were saying when—because like when you at Besh Steakhouse, you had benefits.

[0:57:07.4]

Nelson Gonzales: Yes, definitely.

[0:57:08.6]

Justin Nystrom: What did those benefits look like? I mean, just—

[0:57:10.7]

Nelson Gonzales: It was a great—I mean, it was a great package. You had a 401(k) plan, you had retirement. And I have friends that stayed there beyond that, and, you know, they bought their homes that way. You know, they certainly made the most out of that

situation, but they're probably more defined as what would be a career waiter or career, you know, service staff, you know. And, I mean, consequently, you know, it is a career of mine, but it's not my only career. So it's different, you know, for everyone. It's what you put in, I suppose, or what you expect out of it.

[0:57:46.4]

Justin Nystrom: A career that allows you to have your other career.

[0:57:48.2]

Nelson Gonzales: Exactly. [Laughter] Yeah, and I think it is that for a lot of them as well. That's the attraction, you know. I mean, most of the places that I've worked at also had people that were doing other things, were musicians of some kind or, you know, did something artistic or creative, and that was the benefit to them, was being able to do this kind of work.

[0:58:10.2]

Justin Nystrom: Do you find the people you do theatre with, are a lot of them in—

[0:58:14.0]

Nelson Gonzales: It's changed now. No, the landscape of that has changed. The majority of people that I know that are in theatre are actually in education now. Yeah, that trend's completely changed. That was a post-Katrina change, that the younger people that came here—

[0:58:28.0]

Justin Nystrom: Before then, it was—

[0:58:29.1]

Nelson Gonzales: It was not the case, yeah. It was not the case.

[0:58:32.8]

Justin Nystrom: So before Katrina, it was—

[0:58:35.5]

Nelson Gonzales: And, I mean, that's speaking, I think, to a certain degree, to, you know, the disappearing bohemia of New Orleans as well, you know, that it's becoming a bit—Millennial culture and bohemia are kind of at—you know, they're not on the same level, what was historically bohemia, as it's gotten further and further and further pushed out of the French Quarter, the Marigny, the Bywater. I mean, now the Bywater isn't so much that. I mean, it certainly has corridors of it, but as it gets more and more expensive to do that sort of thing and to get by and enjoy a living, you know, you're getting pushed out of the city more and more, unfortunately, because you don't make more money in this kind of work that we do. You never make more money. That has *never*, never changed over the entire time that I've been living here. You know, I've had peaks of making much, much more money way back then, you know, and I hear it from others that have been doing it as long and not longer, that their peak of income was at a much, much

different time in New Orleans than what it is now. And it is, unfortunately, because of the cost of living. You know, it's just not equal to your—what you're getting paid hasn't kept up with that.

[0:59:53.9]

Justin Nystrom: That's super interesting, and particularly in an industry that the city relies upon so much for—

[1:00:01.6]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, yeah.

[1:00:04.0]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah. So you used to—where you used to work, you would have more conventions. Did you notice—I guess in the CBD, would conventioners seek out these places like—

[1:00:13.2]

Nelson Gonzales: Oh, yeah. No, I mean, anytime there was anything going on in town with regards to a convention, you saw spikes—

[1:00:18.7]

Justin Nystrom: Has that declined, do you think, over time?

[1:00:20.9]

Nelson Gonzales: I've heard that it has. I've heard that it has, you know. Where I work now, at Gabrielle, it's not based on that as much. You will see a few out-of-towner, but it's a neighborhood restaurant that's dictated by just, you know, the popularity of its clientele, you know, coming and doing their thing there, you know.

[1:00:44.0]

Justin Nystrom: Do diners come in and say, "Hey, I read about this place"?

[1:00:47.0]

Nelson Gonzales: Oh, yeah, yeah. I mean, still—I always still like to work in a place that has a very good reputation that way, and I do like taking care of people, you know, that are also visiting. That's just natural, you know, to a New Orleanian and, I think, to a person that does this kind of work. You enjoy playing the host, you know, to your outside visitors. And people are very curious about New Orleans. They love it, you know. It's a very different city from anywhere else in the country, and, yeah, I mean, I've always enjoyed that kind of clientele as well.

[1:01:19.5]

Justin Nystrom: Cool, cool. I'm going to actually look at my sheets here now and—

[1:01:24.7]

Nelson Gonzales: Okay. [Laughter] You've run out of things to ask?

[1:01:26.8]

Justin Nystrom: No, no. I just want to make sure I know—I feel like there’s some things that—I’m going to ask you a little bit about unhealthy work atmospheres. One of the things that is—one of the topics that’s really gotten a lot of attention, I think rightly so, in the food world has been mental health, particularly in the post-[Anthony] Bourdain world.

[1:01:49.2]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah.

[1:01:50.5]

Justin Nystrom: What has been your interaction with that not, necessarily personally, but what have you observed in terms of how well restaurants do or do not, you know, think about the mental well-being of their employees?

[1:02:07.5]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, I mean, I don’t know that they take as much of an active—I think it’s understood that, you know, that it’s an intense environment, and they probably look at that sort of thing in their hiring practices, just like what’s the maturity level of the person that works there, or, you know, maybe it’s different in different places, you know. I mean, I would imagine if you were a French Quarter restaurant, you know, you don’t have that as—I mean, the stress level, I would probably imagine, would be a lot higher,

but I also think that it would also require a certain level of, you know, of—yeah, just a certain person that'd be willing to put themselves [Laughter] at that level, at that level of stress, you know.

As a rule, I have worked in the Quarter, and it's *not* a pleasant thing at all. At all. And, you know, it could potentially be lucrative, but to me it's just not worth it. But, no, I mean, it depends, you know. I mean, restaurants have a reputation, you know, certainly for kitchens, you know, for intense kitchens to, you know, the front of the house, I mean, but it's all dictated, I think, by that particular place, what is the trend there, because, you know, it's very tribal, and so whatever your scene is or whatever your issue is, you will find good company in whatever place that you end up at if that's the connection that needs to happen.

[1:03:48.5]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah.

[1:03:49.7]

Nelson Gonzales: You know, I see unhealthy things, you know, anywhere, you know, anywhere you're at, you know, and New Orleans certainly has a lot of issues with, you know, with drugs, with crime, with abuse, you know, of all kinds, and, you know, I generally try to stay away from it, you know. I personally don't—you know, that's just been my own experience now, you know. As someone that's a little bit older and removed from it somewhat, I don't partake of it, you know. I choose not to unwind for hours at a time after work. That, to me, is just adding too much to the work that we do.

[1:04:35.9]

Justin Nystrom: I was going to ask you about that, yeah.

[1:04:37.1]

Nelson Gonzales: I need to be able to leave my work at the door.

[1:04:39.6]

Justin Nystrom: So when you leave work, you're not going out to a bar with other servers?

[1:04:43.2]

Nelson Gonzales: No, no.

[1:04:44.4]

Justin Nystrom: Have you ever been that guy?

[1:04:45.0]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah. Yeah, certainly when I was at the casino, I think I probably was, you know, and I was, you know, with my coworkers, you know. It was a very, very intense environment, you know, and you did feel the need to do that, you know.

[1:04:59.8]

Justin Nystrom: Where would you go? Was there a favorite—favorite places that y’all would go?

[1:05:04.9]

Nelson Gonzales: Oh, god. When I was at the casino, it was probably like the Ernst Café or any little watering hole in the Warehouse District, yeah.

[1:05:12.7]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. Because I know there are certain sort of spots where—

[1:05:16.3]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah.

[1:05:18.7]

Justin Nystrom: What time did y’all let out at The Steakhouse?

[1:05:20.6]

Nelson Gonzales: Oh, god, we’d be out at like midnight or 1:00 o’clock sometimes. The hours changed at different times, but it was generally like a 1:00 o’clock kind of like leaving the place.

[1:05:33.3]

Justin Nystrom: Do you like late nights?

[1:05:34.9]

Nelson Gonzales: No. [Laughter] No, not at all, and much less now. You know, to me, a late night is after 10:30. [Laughter] You know? God, if I'm, like, still at work at 10:30, I'm like, "Oh, this is not good."

[1:05:55.1]

Justin Nystrom: Do you feel that sets you apart from other people who consider themselves—

[1:06:00.0]

Nelson Gonzales: Night owls?

[1:06:01.3]

Justin Nystrom: Waiters?

[1:06:01.7]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, there's still a sense that—because the city, you know, it still likes to go on for a while, but I don't think anything good happens after midnight, you know. I don't see anything worth pursuing after that hour. And to me, you know, especially living in a quieter neighborhood that generally tends to rise early, you know, peak hours for me would be 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., you know. Like, that's when

it's happening. Or the unwinding period, you know, after most people are getting off work at like 5:30 to sunset. Like, that's, to me, the evening, you know.

[1:06:42.6]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. This is the earliest interview I've done so far, in the morning.

[1:06:46.5]

Nelson Gonzales: Oh, wow. Okay. [Laughter]

[1:06:51.7]

Justin Nystrom: Now, you're, I guess, Generation X, if you ascribe—

[1:06:54.6]

Nelson Gonzales: Yes, that's correct.

[1:06:55.6]

Justin Nystrom: —to these kinds of things. I'm sort of in the earlier part of that myself.

[1:06:58.1]

Nelson Gonzales: Okay.

[0:00:00.0]

Justin Nystrom: Do you see generational differences in the approach to your job between people who are older and then—

[1:07:07.0]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah.

[1:07:08.6]

Justin Nystrom: —because we're in between, right? We're in that in between.

[1:07:10.4]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah.

[1:07:11.5]

Justin Nystrom: Can you tell me a little about that?

[1:07:14.3]

Nelson Gonzales: Sure. I mean, you know, I've always had a flexibility and ease at being able to, you know, be around people that are both younger and older than myself, and, yeah, I mean, I would say that, I don't know, people are still people at the end of the day, you know, and if you enjoy a certain kind of lifestyle and, you know, that's your thing, then you—I mean, I do find that, you know, as you get older, you do mellow out a little bit, you know. And so even where I work now, the older—I mean, I do work with—I'm

the youngest waiter, and they're all a lot older than I am, but I've been around people that are a little bit younger than me and that probably party a little bit more.

I don't know. I mean, the maturity of a person, I think, it's just individual. You know, I try not to make those generalizations about, you know—I mean, Millennials were interesting to me four years ago, I think, when I first started considering them. [Laughter] I didn't see them generationally as having a different way of being than myself until I really started to pay attention to that sort of thing. And, you know, that's just youth in general. You know, you have blind sheers on sometimes with the way that you approach life or the way that you approach work.

I don't know. I mean, I think that managers—I notice that managers, in particular, because I've had more of an experience of working with Millennial managers lately, and they have a very different kind of, like, style of doing things than I think that I'm used to at times. So that's marked, you know, obviously, people being, you know, on their phones a lot more, you know, than the previous generations, you know.

[1:09:16.7]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, I mean, customers, too, I guess.

[1:09:20.3]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, although I'm pretty good about—you know, I've worked in places—the majority of the places that I work at, there's always kind of like a shutting down, like a respect that if you're eating, you're not going to be on your phone at the same time. You know, I don't work in places that have, like, televisions or those kind of

distractions. You want to be able to have the company, you know, of the person that you're eating with and the meal that you're having, and then just the natural, you know, exchange that happens, you know, with the staff. You know, that's all part of why you're there.

Yeah, I mean, New Orleans has a pretty good respect of that, I think. New Orleanians, in general, there's a respect and a tradition involved with dinner hour and what that entails, and I like that. You know, I like the sense of, you know, of there being a distinction between the earlier part of the day, the afternoon, and the evening, you know. I'm sure people let their hair down. I mean, we see the best and the worst of people in this kind of work. I've been lucky and I've just seen predominantly the best.

[1:10:30.6]

Justin Nystrom: That's great.

[1:10:32.3]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, people being able to celebrate, you know, special times for themselves or just the appreciation of a really good meal, what that's like.

[1:10:40.1]

Justin Nystrom: So what's in the future for Nelson Gonzales and working?

[1:10:46.1]

Nelson Gonzales: With restaurants, you know, it's very laid back. I like the little neighborhood restaurant that I'm at. I really think Gabrielle is—it's old-school. It's very European. I mean, it's old-school and it's still very current now. I mean, the daughter runs the place from the front of the house. That's my predominant, you know, boss, you know, besides Chef Greg [Sonnier] and his wife, Mary [Sonnier], you know, and she is a little bit younger, and she does present a different face, but that's part of, like, the evolution of that restaurant. But it's still very, very old-school, and it's European at its heart because, you know, the chef is back there making all the food, and is there *every* night. And he has a little garden that he tends to in the front, you know, and it's his wife that made all the desserts, you know. And now it's his daughter that's the front person, of literally the namesake of that restaurant, and I really like that. I really like that.

I like that it's a small restaurant, and that people who really love the place had a really special time thirteen, fourteen years ago when it was on Esplanade and Mystery Street, can relive, you know, a certain meal, you know, or share it with, like, another generation, you know, and their family or their friends, you know. And I like being a part of that, and I like being a part—Orleans is not fun to drive to, ride down, at all. [Laughter] It's absolutely *insane* getting to work, and all I want to do is just get out of there, you know, when I'm done. But it's hopefully going to be part of something that's going to grow, you know, and, you know, all the neighborhoods in New Orleans, you know, need that and need the anchor, I think, of a nice neighborhood restaurant that kind of helps define it and makes it attractive, I think, to others.

[1:12:43.4]

Justin Nystrom: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Yeah, I mean, they're there, and they've got no—and, of course, Dooky Chase [Dooky Chase's Restaurant] has been there forever a couple blocks down.

[1:12:48.5]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And it definitely has a little tradition, little story, you know, sort of dining. You know, it's not far—Broad Street has its own—

[1:12:56.3]

Justin Nystrom: Willie Mae's [Scotch House] is around, yeah.

[1:12:57.4]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah.

[1:12:58.0]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So just kind of looking back, the least favorite thing that a customer would order that you had to serve?

[1:13:10.2]

Nelson Gonzales: [Laughter] Oh, god. Oh, anytime they want to go off the menu, honestly. I used to be a lot more flexible with that sort of thing. I used to, like, literally do whatever they want, and I'd be the person that was back there talking to Chef and trying to get him to make [Nystrom laughs] whatever it is that he wanted, and it's just not—it

really throws everything for a loop, *really*, really throws everything for a loop. And now with dietary restrictions, I mean—but we’re prepared for that. We really are prepared for that. The least favorite thing? I mean, oh, god.

[1:13:45.4]

Justin Nystrom: I hear this about flaming—places that serve flaming things, [unclear].

[1:13:48.2]

Nelson Gonzales: Oh, no, no. I don’t do any of that. [Laughter] Oh, that’s just too crazy. I like to impress, and when I worked with Kevin, and, you know, certainly at Besh, we took a lot of liberty to really impress the guest, you know. I mean, I like to put candles in cakes, and I think that’s still really nice, you know. Honestly, I just think, you know, that’s really good. When they start asking for special things, you know, I very politely now just sort of like say, like, you know, “I’ll do my best,” or, “I can ask.” I try not to make any promises now. I used to be that waiter that would bend over backwards and probably never really blinked at anything being too, too odd. I mean, people are curious, and eating habits can be a little bit weird [Laughter], so anytime I think you’re—I mean, anything potentially can be a wrench in that regards. I mean, being a vegetarian is still a curious thing, you know, because if you go out, there’s just a limit to what you can eat.

[1:14:55.3]

Justin Nystrom: Are you a vegetarian yourself?

[1:14:57.2]

Nelson Gonzales: I'm not, no. I mean, I've had little stints of, like, you know—but, no, no, no, no, no. You know, so I don't have much of an—I don't know. I can't really say what the weirdest thing is that somebody's asked. I mean, I've seen some weird things. New Orleans, people like to come to New Orleans and let their hair down, and even at nice places, which is generally been my exposure to it, I've had some weird things come up, certainly, you know, maybe not anything that I'd be comfortable discussing [Laughter], you know. I'm not surprised by anything, honestly. I'm really not. I'll be a little surprised—I mean, I'll be a little shocked and taken aback, but at the end of the day, nothing surprises me. I mean, I did say I've seen the best *and* the worst of people, yeah, doing this job.

[1:15:46.2]

Justin Nystrom: So in kind of wrapping up, is there anything you'd like to append to the end of this interview?

[1:15:51.2]

Nelson Gonzales: No. I mean, I still really believe in restaurant culture. I still really believe in food and the importance of being passionate about what you—and that's the other thing that I wanted to say about Gabrielle, is that there's a lot of passion in food and love in that food, and I like to just be part of that. I still believe in that, and when I take the time to go and enjoy that myself, I really, really pay attention to that sort of thing, you know, and it makes a *huge* difference. It really, really, really does. And when people care

about what they do, you know, it shows. It shows in the front of the house as well, you know. Hopefully, it attracts that as well.

And, you know, like we discussed earlier, you know, New Orleans is becoming a much more expensive place to live in. The cost of living is higher, and, as such, you know, paying for things like food, you know, become more expensive, but, you know, you spend more money at the grocery store nowadays, you know. It's crazy, the European tradition of what people spend in groceries there, like in France, for instance, from what I understand, is much, much different for the quality sometimes of what they're getting. We're lucky here in New Orleans because we do have really great food, great seafood, but, you know, there's a cost associated to all that.

And, you know, from the perspective of seeing what people—the time and the trouble and, you know, the quality of what they're serving, you know, they really, really, really believe in that where I work now, and the majority of places that I've worked, you know, as well. And, you know, how that transfers over and what it adds up to, I think, at the end of the day, to the guests and how they appreciate that is still something I very much believe in and like to be a part of. And, you know, I'm happy to do what I do, you know, and be rewarded for it afterwards. [Laughter] There's still, I think, that appreciation. You know, I still like to get, like, good tips, you know, because it makes me feel good, you know, like that they enjoyed their time, so—

[1:18:17.9]

Justin Nystrom: It can be a measure for sure.

[1:18:18.5]

Nelson Gonzales: Yeah, yeah, unfortunately. I'm simple like that. [Nystrom laughs.] I do like my immediate gratification. [Laughter]

[1:18:26.0]

Justin Nystrom: I guess one last question I did think of. Would you ever leave New Orleans?

[1:18:31.4]

Nelson Gonzales: Yes. It'd probably be a job not related to restaurant, that was so fantastic that took me away, you know, and that required me to go somewhere different. I very much would love to live at least part of the time in, you know, I know, in Mexico or somewhere in Central America just because as charming and as Caribbean as New Orleans is, it still doesn't have, like, a beach. You know what I mean? A proper one to really, really like chill out with. And that's hard. [Laughter] You know, that can be a little bit difficult, especially when five months out of the year is the summer, and it *is* getting hotter, you know, regardless of what anybody might say to the contrary.

No, certainly if any—you know, I do love—I still do love city life and all the culture and the opportunities that could potentially be available, and when I travel, which has, unfortunately, not been in a while, I still have just an appreciation for, like, the neighborhood of a place and the cafés and the restaurant and the parks and the squares and the little bookstores, you know, and I've been lucky. Most places that I've gone to, they all have that, so I know that I could do it somewhere else, but, I mean, New Orleans

is home to me, so unless I had a really great opportunity, you know, come up professionally, you know, in these other areas of my life, yeah, but I'd always come back.

[1:20:04.7]

Justin Nystrom: Of course.

[1:20:05.9]

Nelson Gonzales: I'd always, yeah, I'd always come back.

[1:20:08.6]

Justin Nystrom: Well, great. This has been great.

[1:20:13.8]

Nelson Gonzales: Oh, thank you.

[1:20:14.7]

Justin Nystrom: I really enjoyed it. And, again, this is just to print this. This is Nelson Gonzales, and we're here in Mid-City, and—

[1:20:23.5]

Nelson Gonzales: Oh, yeah, it was a pleasure. Thank you.

[1:20:24.8]

Justin Nystrom: Great. Thank you so much.

[End of interview]