



Isaac Fort

Poupart's Bakery - Lafayette, LA

Date: April 5, 2022

Location: Poupart's Bakery

Interviewer: Phillip Norman Reid

Transcription: Sharp Copy Transcription, LLC

Length: Fifty-seven minutes

Project: American Epiphany—King Cake Bakers of South Louisiana

0:00:00

Phillip Norman Reid: Today is April 5. We're here in Lafayette, Louisiana at Poupart's Bakery. I'm Phillip Norman, and I'm speaking with Chef Isaac. Chef Isaac, could you introduce yourself for the recording?

Isaac Fort: Of course, I'm Isaac Fort, I'm the pastry chef here at Poupart's, and I believe I've been here for about eight years.

Phillip Norman Reid: Good deal. Excited to hear your story. Just to start off, could you tell me a little bit about where you grew up and what your upbringing was like?

Isaac Fort: Well, we're in Lafayette, South Louisiana now, but I grew up most of my life in Shreveport. I was born in New Mexico, moved to California, my dad moved around. Then, he got laid off and decided to move back home to Shreveport. North Louisiana. I'm a Yankee.

Phillip Norman Reid: Are North Louisianans considered Yankees?

Isaac Fort: Oh, yeah, I catch hell from people down here.

Phillip Norman Reid: Really? I did not know that.

Isaac Fort: Oh, yeah, it's all in good fun. But I moved there, lived in Shreveport, Louisiana most of my life. Met my wife there, she went to college at Centenary. We didn't have any kids, so we said, "It's a good time to move around."

0:01:04

She's got some family down south. We said, "Let's move to Lafayette and live there for a little while, try something new." We had the means to do it, so we did it.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. Now, you're here. It's interesting to hear that Shreveport is Yankee territory.

Isaac Fort: For down here it is. [Laugh]

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, when you get deeper in. What was it like growing up there? How do you find that it's different from the rest of Louisiana?

Isaac Fort: I almost don't recognize it anymore. I go visit my folks occasionally. But we've been gone about 12, 13 years now, so it's definitely different. One thing that's great about down here, there are so many places like this. Food culture is a big deal down here. That's not really a thing up there. Of course, there's my childhood bakery I would go to and get my king cake from, the things that I liked. And we had a few pop up here and there.

0:02:01

But it's totally different there. It's a different culture, for sure. It's definitely Louisiana, but it's totally different.

Phillip Norman Reid: Not as much cultural emphasis as in Lafayette.

Isaac Fort: No.

Phillip Norman Reid: Interesting. Where would you get your king cake from growing up?

Isaac Fort: We had a place called Julie Anne's not too far from Byrd High School in Shreveport. I would always get a strawberry and cream cheese. That was my go-to as a kid. I loved it. I get a lot of pleasure from the king cakes because I think about stuff like that, where it's like, when I was a kid, this was amazing. I loved it. It was something you looked forward to. It's

a holiday. You would look forward to that all year long, and when you got it, it was amazing. You wanted to share it with everybody. It was great. It's a cool memory. Before I left town, I was working for some other bakeries, and they would do king cakes as well.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, strawberry cream cheese is one of my favorites as well.

Isaac Fort: Can't beat that. For fruits, yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: Absolutely.

0:03:02

Just from seeing the stuff in the display cases, I was blown away the first time I walked in here. I can tell you're a very creative person.

Isaac Fort: I can't take all the credit. I do have a wonderful team. I've got my sous chef, cake decorators. I can't take all the credit. But it's a labor of love, for sure.

Phillip Norman Reid: I was just going to ask, what did creativity look like for you when you were a kid? Where did that instinct come from? Have you always been that way?

Isaac Fort: My mom and dad cooked a lot, and we definitely ate everything. We were not picky eaters as a kid. Occasionally, maybe a mushroom or squash, I'd turn my nose up at. But they were really good about letting us try everything and eat everything. We just had that kind of culinary mindset. We were very focused on that stuff growing up, and that's where I got my passion for cooking and stuff. But that was not my first choice. I went and got a degree in computer science, was wanting to do computer networking. I just woke up one day and was like, "This is soul-crushing. I don't want to do this."

0:04:03

I just didn't like it. I had a friend, and he enjoyed what he was doing, so I just started cooking with him and fell into it. Then, I went back to school, to culinary school, and have been cooking since.

Phillip Norman Reid: You had the exposure growing up.

Isaac Fort: Yeah, from my family. We're the kind of family where you're sitting around, eating lunch, and you're talking about what you're going to cook for dinner. That's a very Louisiana thing, I feel like. You're always worried about the next thing.

Phillip Norman Reid: I can identify with that, family trips, it's always just planned around the meals.

Isaac Fort: Of course.

Phillip Norman Reid: Where did you go to get your pastry training? What was that like?

Isaac Fort: In Shreveport. Northwest Louisiana Technical College. Then, I did the rest of my school at Southern University. I stayed in Shreveport after school another four or five years.

0:05:08

But school was fun, it was interesting. When I was going to school, it was a general culinary school, so there wasn't a pastry focus. I didn't want to work the line, I didn't want to work late nights at a restaurant. That aspect of cooking didn't call to me. But pastries and cakes definitely did. I love it.

Phillip Norman Reid: What made those jump out to you? Just because that's what you liked?

Isaac Fort: I don't eat a ton of sweets, believe it or not. [Laugh] I try not to. You try to limit yourself. I feel like it's something where you can really pour your heart and creativity into something. I'll do these big fruit tarts, they're kaleidoscope-looking things. You can really spend your time making something very unique and eye-catching.

0:06:02

And cooking can be like that, too. You see amazing stuff on TV all the time, at fancy restaurants and stuff. But I felt that for my skillset and what I enjoyed doing, this was where it was at. I could really focus my attention on things and have it how I wanted.

Phillip Norman Reid: Felt like there was some room for creativity.

Isaac Fort: Absolutely.

Phillip Norman Reid: Did you have any other artistic interest growing up?

Isaac Fort: Sure, when I was a kid, I would paint, draw pictures and stuff. I still do a little bit of that. Not as much as I'd like. Out in the garage, I built a little studio for my wife, for her painting and stuff. I'll occasionally go play around with that. A little painting, a little sculpting. Not too much. But I think if you're into this kind of thing, you have some of that in you, for sure.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, that's kind of what I'm getting at. It's interesting to see where it comes from. Because even those macarons, some of those, it's like, "That's almost like sculpting." There's a lot of artistry.

0:07:00

Isaac Fort: Our resident macaron master—what is it, 10,000 hours until you're a master? She's a master. She's got it. It's so cool. Back in the day when I was doing that, I could barely keep up.

I only had a couple flavors, I'm doing all the other pastry, trying to do macarons, too. It was a little difficult. When we hired her, that was something she pushed for and really wanted. It speaks for itself. You look at it, they're amazing. They're so cool. When little kids come into the store—when you first walk in, the showcase on the right is where we've got all our macarons. It's so fun to see kids, they come in, and they just lose it. They love it. They're like, "Oh my God, look at this. They look like ladybugs," or this or that. They love it. And fun flavors for them, too.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, it really brought out the kid in me, seeing them like little ducks and everything. Super cool. Well, your initial entry into the field of baking and pastry, were there challenges early on working in Shreveport? How did you get used to it?

0:08:01

Isaac Fort: My Shreveport jobs were very good, actually. One of my first jobs was with a guy, and his daughter was my flower girl at our wedding. My wife was friends with this family. When I got out of culinary school, I went there. It was a deli, so we did a little bit of deli, sandwich stuff, and then cakes. A little pastry case. That's all we were responsible for. Then, obviously, king cakes, when that rolled around. Then, I left there, and I went with a friend, and we helped open another bakery in Shreveport. Sadly, I don't think they're around anymore. It was a lady who had cooked out of her house, then she said, "I'm going to upgrade and have a storefront." We kind of got her business off the ground. Not too long after that is when we moved here. There was a cupcake shop that's no longer around. At that time, when I moved here, cupcakes were the big deal.

0:09:06

Everybody had a cupcake shop. There was Cupcake Wars on Food Network. It was crazy, everybody wanted cupcakes. For a couple years there, that was a hot business. We couldn't keep up. It was wild. Then, not too long after that, I found myself here.

Phillip Norman Reid: Let's talk about the first day you came in here.

Isaac Fort: The first day I came in here, they were not hiring. [Laugh] But then, I came back because I saw a hiring sign. I said, "OK, now they are hiring. I'll come back." At that time, my boss's ex-wife was working here with a lady named Marie. They took a look at me and said, "We like the way this guy looks. He's a handsome man, let's give him a job." They harass me about that. They hired me on, and we were just off to the races. When I first started, it was just cakes.

0:10:03

I was mostly assembling cakes, decorating cakes, pouring petit fours, that kind of stuff that's time-consuming and stuff they needed help with. But it wouldn't take long, over the year, the holidays are pretty busy, and you've eventually got your hands in everything.

Phillip Norman Reid: And just, yeah, your initial impression of the place, I remember you told me last time we spoke that you were just kind of blown away because, you said, places like this don't exist anymore.

Isaac Fort: No, they don't.

Phillip Norman Reid: What do you mean by that?

Isaac Fort: They don't, and I think they're going away. I mentioned the cupcake shop. It's a very singular-focused thing. But here, we make breads, pastries, soups, we have a full lunch menu, we do catering. You hear this a lot, "Keep your menu simple, don't do too much." I feel

like we don't hear that advice. [Laugh] We always have way too much stuff going on, and we're scrambling around.

0:11:03

But it's amazing. It's rewarding. When you look at that showcase, it's packed, there are tons of different options, and you have things for everybody—"I can't have gluten." Well, guess what? I've got you covered. We can do something about that. It's amazing to see that. But I worry that these kinds of places won't be around. I feel very fortunate that I'm here when I am and that I'm able to contribute to this. If you live here, you know about this place. We have regulars who come in all the time, and I see 'em, and it's like, "Man, they've been coming here longer than I've been alive." It's cool. It's neat. I was talking to someone last weekend, I saw this family that comes in on Sunday, and they've got a young kid. I'm starting to see some of the new generation of people bringing their kids here, and that's going to be their Sunday tradition. It's nice seeing that.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's what I get a lot from interviewing bakers, that it's so important for families to have a community bakery.

0:12:02

Isaac Fort: Absolutely.

Phillip Norman Reid: Like you said, you remember your bakery growing up.

Isaac Fort: We're going to make someone's wedding cake, then when they have their first baby, they're going to come back for that smash cake. You see stuff like that. I've never worked at a place like this before where we have such a personal relationship with the customer.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's really cool.

Isaac Fort: We chit-chat, I ask people how their kids are, sometimes they come in the back and talk to us. But it's nice.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's awesome. Very much a community institution. Been along for how long?

Isaac Fort: 50 years. Francois moved over here with his wife and his twin brother I believe in the 1970s.

Phillip Norman Reid: From France?

Isaac Fort: From France. They moved to Acadiana in Louisiana because of the French population here. They were immigrants. They just wanted the opportunity to come here, and they made it happen.

0:13:02

I think he initially worked at some restaurants, but not too long after that, opened the bakery, and they were across the street, which is now a diner. I think they were only in that building for 10, 15 years or so, then they moved into the building we're in now.

Phillip Norman Reid: It's kind of grown and stuck around since.

Isaac Fort: Absolutely. It's a staple of the city, for sure.

Phillip Norman Reid: I know Poupart's kind of prides itself on being the only traditional French bakery in this region. What makes a traditional French bakery? What does that mean?

Isaac Fort: It's our offerings. There are some French offerings that I don't think anybody else makes. Some things, probably in the state, other things, I know for sure in the city.

0:14:03

Our king cakes. There's one in particular, like a galette. It's almond paste and puff pastry. I don't believe anybody does that. I've seen a few home cooks sell them on Facebook. But as for the volume and what we're putting out, I don't think anybody does that. But you got your artisan bread, the pastries we've been talking about, it's the offerings. These traditional old-school French pastries that you just don't see.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. And the French bakery tends to have the living quarters upstairs, where we are right now.

Isaac Fort: Yeah, that's where we are right now. We hopped upstairs. In France, you will have your living quarters above the bakery, so you wake up in the morning, you walk down, you're right there. You don't have to commute to work. This bakery is built like that. I think it's a three-bedroom apartment up here, and we're in the kitchen now. There's a dining room, living room, it's got everything you need. This is where Francois lives, and with his wife, when she was here.

0:15:05

Right now, his son has actually been staying up here because he's having some renovations on the house. I think it's a little packed, but we've got it to ourselves right now. I think they're out doing something.

Phillip Norman Reid: Say a little bit more just about your relationship with the family and what it's been like getting to know them.

Isaac Fort: A lot like this relationship with the customers, we have a very personal relationship with my boss and the whole family. My boss, Patrick, he has a big heart. He's just a kind person, always willing to help somebody out. Are you familiar with Cajun Navy?

Phillip Norman Reid: A little bit.

Isaac Fort: When the hurricanes hit, he's out there pulling people out of their houses, helping people out. He's that kind of guy. He wants to help people. For those who don't know, the Cajun Navy is a group of guys down here. During hurricane relief, they'll go get in a boat and literally pull people out of their houses. They're trapped and stranded.

0:16:03

There are some areas where it's so hard for rescuers to get to people. He's that kind of guy, he's out there helping people out.

Phillip Norman Reid: The Cajun Navy are often the first responders, right?

Isaac Fort: Correct. Wonderful relationship with him. We just went fishing down at his fishing camp last week. We hang out together, we cook together. It's great. The whole family's like that. We're looking at a photo on the wall here, and I can see Patrick, his dad, his two boys, then on the end, there's Francois's twin brother. But we're always getting together and doing stuff. Very cool relationship. I never had a boss like this, for sure. And I've never had a job where I've been here this long. A lot of people bounce around to different jobs. I've been here for eight, nine years. That's new to me.

12

Phillip Norman Reid: That says something, for sure.

Isaac Fort: We have a lady who retired last year, and she worked here for 40 years.

0:17:04

Phillip Norman Reid: Wow, that's awesome. Family business, top to bottom.

Isaac Fort: They made her wedding cake before she was an employee here. She came here to get a wedding cake, loved it so much, was into icing cakes and stuff, and thought, "I'm going to go get a job there." She was here for 40 years, loved it.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's cool. For the record, Patrick, the current owner, is Francois's son?

Isaac Fort: Correct, yes.

Phillip Norman Reid: It's changed hands through the family.

Isaac Fort: Yeah, Francois is in his mid-80s. Unfortunately, he's not in the best of health. But, at the end of last year, you know, he lives upstairs, he comes down, he would work until about 10 o'clock, tell everybody goodbye, then maybe come check on us a little later in the afternoon, after he took a nap or something like that. But a little poor in health right now, can't do it. He's taking a break. We're doing our best.

0:18:01

Phillip Norman Reid: Absolutely. Talk a little bit about how you've grown as a pastry chef while working here, being able to work with such a wide range of products.

Isaac Fort: Oh, yeah, I'm very fortunate that we're able to make so many different things, and the facilities here are pretty amazing. I have tons of room to work. Also, again, the people here. I had a great amount of people who had a ton of knowledge, they were able to impart that onto me, teach me what I needed to know, bounce ideas off each other. We'll have employees who stop working here for a while, then they want to come back. We have the upstairs bedroom here, they'll live somewhere else and then, "Hey, I'm going to come hang out for a week," and they'll come work. [Laugh] I know this sounds strange, but people will come, hang out at the bakery, and work for a week just because they want to come and hang out. It sounds odd, but it happens. The woman I just mentioned, the one who retired, she comes in a couple days a week just to ice some cakes because she just feels like it. She just wants to come in, bang out ten cakes, and just be a boss.

0:19:05

Talking about the family aspect, she's like my second grandmother. I love this lady. We would butt heads when we first started, strong personality, fierce person, but now she's like my grandmother. I love her. She's so fun.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's awesome. What's her name?

Isaac Fort: Marie Shakesneider. She's the one who was here for 40 years.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, if you've got people coming back to work on their vacation, it must be a cool place to work. [Laugh]

Isaac Fort: Yeah.

Phillip Norman Reid: What are some of your favorite things to make, some of your favorite skills you've learned?

Isaac Fort: Talking about something unique and French, a croquembouche. Are you familiar with this?

Phillip Norman Reid: No, not at all.

Isaac Fort: You're familiar with cream puffs. You take pate a choux dough, then you make these little cream puffs, then you assemble a tower, a cone, out of these things. Then, you wrap spun sugar around there.

0:20:01

It's a beautiful, elegant centerpiece, usually for weddings. We see a lot of groom cakes do that. But in the holidays, for Christmas, people love these as centerpieces for their Christmas table because it's amazing-looking. I make so many of these things. But they're fun, they're cool. It's a very eye-popping thing, it's unique, people love it. Unfortunately, though, we are Louisiana guys, so it's weather permitting on that. Any sugar work is just going to melt and fall apart. South Louisiana can get humid. There have definitely been a few weddings where I'm kind of sweating when I'm working on the sugar because I'm thinking, "Oh my God, is this going to make it?"

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. The interview I did before this, I was talking to a couple folks who'd had the traditional French king cake here, and they were like, "It's impressive to do that in Louisiana, to make puff pastry dough."

Isaac Fort: Yeah, your limit is—.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, yeah. Any other things you really enjoy making?

Isaac Fort: Oh, yeah, I mentioned my kaleidoscope fruit tarts. Those are always fun.

0:21:03

You can get super creative with that. Especially, depending if the sizes are large, I can really get some creative stuff going on in there. I usually like when I'm left to do it myself. Sometimes people go, "I want X, Y, or Z fruit," and I'm like, "Oh, no, I don't want that." I kind of have in my mind how I want to make it look aesthetically, and when they're picking the fruits for me, I get a little ornery, but that's all right. [Laugh]

Phillip Norman Reid: Doesn't always fit the vision.

Isaac Fort: No.

Phillip Norman Reid: You mentioned this last time, how Patrick really allows you to sort of be creative, but you're also caring a lot about preserving the tradition of these French recipes.

Isaac Fort: Absolutely. We've been here for 50 years, customers have been coming their whole lives. They come in, there's got to be a certain thing they want. There's this old-school tradition of deserts that we'll always have around and never get rid of. But then, we have a huge showcase, so it affords us the opportunity to make different things at different times of the year.

0:22:03

I've got kind of a newer crew now, so it's been interesting bouncing some ideas off of them and getting some feedback. A couple weeks ago, we did a little cornmeal pineapple upside-down cake. Man, that turned out great. It was good. But that was the brainchild of someone else there. It's good. They can give me feedback on what I'm thinking and vice versa, kind of make unique stuff, play around. But it's cool. We definitely have the opportunity to try new things. Sometimes,

it doesn't work out. Sometimes you make something, and nobody likes it, so you go to the drawing board.

Phillip Norman Reid: Take it out of the case and try it again. In terms of the traditional stuff that the old-timers come in and always have to have, what are some of the most popular things you've got to keep around?

Isaac Fort: Oh, certain types of croissants, and danish. We do breakfast as well, so there's some breakfast that is absolutely staple.

0:23:00

On the weekends, we have certain things we will only do for the weekend crowd, like a Parisian croissant, which you soak in syrup, fill with almond paste, and twice bake them. That's a very traditional thing for us on the weekends, here. Then, we do brioche triangles that we fill. Kouign amann, it's a laminate dough, kind of hard to describe. It's puffy like bread would get, but it's laminate, and it's crunchy. Those are a good thing for the weekends. As for the must-haves—the macarons.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, those are standard, for sure. Let's zoom out a little bit just to Lafayette.

0:24:02

You're not from here, but you moved here, really enjoyed it. What's distinctive about this place? What makes it special? Why do you stick around?

Isaac Fort: I would say it's the culture. I'm not French, I don't speak a lick of French. You'd think I would by now, being around all these French people. I can pick up a little bit, nut no. But

17

it imparts this culture here that is so unique. Lafayette has a lot of surrounding cities, and every city has their own themed festival. We have the Boudin Festival, we have the Crawfish Festival, we have the Frog Festival, everything. Every city has one. There's an Omelet Festival. They cook a 16-foot omelet in the middle of the street, and they have a sister city in France that does the same thing on the same day. It's so fun. They throw crawfish in there and make a big omelet. That was one of the first things I did with my wife. When we moved here, we didn't know anybody other than her family. We're just looking for things to do. Like, "There's this festival. Let's go check out this omelet festival. That sounds weird."

0:25:05

We went, and we loved it. I guess we kind of stuck out because the locals were like, "Oh, y'all ain't from here." They knew immediately. But that's kind of a funny thing. Everybody knows everybody down here. The sense of community. But these festivals and all, it just makes you want to stay. We also work these festivals, we have food booths, cook for them, and stuff. That's always nice. We just had a festival a couple weekends ago. I was getting back to that. We haven't had them in a couple years. But that was fun. It was amazing seeing everybody come back out and have fun.

Phillip Norman Reid: What's it like for the bakery to be a part of stuff like that? Why do you enjoy that?

Isaac Fort: How can you not? You're putting a smile on somebody's face. On our sign outside, I think we just changed it recently, but it was, "Delivering happiness for 50 years." That's what we do here, we make people happy.

0:26:04

Phillip Norman Reid: To really be able to become a part of the DNA—that was Festivale Acadiane, right? Y'all had, like, four different booths.

Isaac Fort: Oh, yeah, we're making snow cones, beignets, coffee, all that. I don't work the festivals, I just kind of stay at the bakery and cook the stuff. We have a whole crew of volunteers who want to hang out there. Again, people just want to volunteer, help out, do what they can.

Phillip Norman Reid: Y'all have become a really essential aspect of that tradition for people, for sure.

Isaac Fort: Oh, for sure.

Phillip Norman Reid: Got to have food at a festival. It's not fun without food.

Isaac Fort: No. That's half the reason I go.

Phillip Norman Reid: Oh, for sure. Me, too. Me, too. The one thing my friend told me to try was the pistolettes that y'all do. Something else I noticed just being around the bakery, the shirt that says, "50 years, and still no donuts." Tell me about that. [Laugh]

Isaac Fort: Yeah, I'm glad you asked. As it says, we've never had donuts. To this day, people come in at least twice a week and want donuts.

0:27:05

And we don't sell donuts. So we just kind of had fun with it. We made a little t-shirt and put it on there. It's just a running gag over here. People want donuts, and we're like, "No, we're not a donut shop." But I get the confusion. If you're unfamiliar with what we look like, it might look like a donut shop at first glance. You walk in, you see the long rectangular trays and your glass showcase. It has that look to it. And we have eclairs and some other things you might see at a

donut shop, but not donuts in particular. Just beignets. Just our French beignet. That's what we've got. But luckily for them, I've got two donut shops about a block away in either direction. They can have their pick if they really want.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, easy reference. It sounds like it's kind of part of maintaining this traditional bakery. It's like, "We're going to serve traditional pastries," trying to broaden horizons to some of those things, rather than what folks are used to seeing, which is donuts, for the most part, around here, for sure.

0:28:04

Yeah, that's kind of a marker of how y'all are distinctive, for sure. Then, let's pivot to Mardi Gras. You spoke a little bit to this, but Shreveport, up north, is Mardi Gras as big up there?

Isaac Fort: Yeah, it is. They have huge krewes. I used to live on the parade route. I hated that, that was horrible. Don't do that. But it's a big deal there. And yeah, when you're a kid, you're catching beads, and it's amazing. They definitely have Mardi Gras, but I just feel like the king cakes weren't that big of a deal. We had Julie Anne's, and later in my life, we had Lilah's and a couple other places that would do king cakes. But a lot of these places would ship them in from down south from some other place. That food culture wasn't there. The Mardi Gras was there, but not the food culture.

0:29:02

Phillip Norman Reid: A lot of it was imported from the south part of the state.

Isaac Fort: Yes.

Phillip Norman Reid: Do you have any other memories of Mardi Gras growing up?

Isaac Fort: The parades, people I would see in the parades, people I knew in my life, living on the route. But no, I was mostly young when I was going to parades, when I was a kid. That was about as Mardi Gras as it got down there, the parades and my strawberry king cake I'd get every year.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. What about the difference when you moved here? What was different about how Mardi Gras was celebrated in Lafayette?

Isaac Fort: Here, we have the traditional Mardi Gras at the Acadian village. They'll do the chicken chase, all the kids will chase after a chicken and catch it. I had some friends come in from Chicago, and they brought their kid, and they wanted to go do that. "Oh, that sounds fun." This kid caught the chicken. It was so great. It was this kid from Chicago beating all these Louisiana kids.

Phillip Norman Reid: These Yankees coming down. [Laugh]

0:30:00

Isaac Fort: Yeah, stealing their chickens. He got a trophy for it. It was amazing, they had a blast. But they came here, and we got to show them traditional Mardi Gras down here. And they had the guys with the Rougarous outfits. Are you familiar with this?

Phillip Norman Reid: A little bit.

Isaac Fort: Rougarou is a Catholic kind of folklore, urban legend thing. It's like a werewolf-type creature that kind of gets the bad Catholics. I forget the story exactly. But they'll wear this traditional garb that is a costume that resembles this werewolf character. Traditional Mardi Gras is very interesting. If you haven't done that, watch a video or go check it out. It's very

interesting. They're walking down the road, they have a big pot, and they're calling for everybody to bring their ingredients to the pot because they're going to make a gumbo at the end of the trail. It's stuff like that. It's fun and activities.

Phillip Norman Reid: Here, you kind of get the traditional Cajun Mardi Gras.

0:31:00

Isaac Fort: Yeah. All these little towns around here they do stuff.

Phillip Norman Reid: I've seen videos. They wear the masks, chasing the chicken, and everything. It looks wild, to be honest.

Isaac Fort: It's unique. It's definitely different.

Phillip Norman Reid: Totally. Let's get into king cakes. First of all, with the brioche king cake that y'all do, the more traditional New Orleans/Louisiana king cake versus the French king cake that y'all do, what are the major components of each of those?

Isaac Fort: What most people are probably familiar with is that brioche one. It's like a big cinnamon roll. Very similar dough, treated similarly. Our classic is cinnamon-flavored, a cinnamon spread in there, so a very similar idea. Then, we glaze it just like a cinnamon roll, and it gets topped with granulated sugar that's Mardi Gras-themed, so it's gold, green, and purple.

0:32:03

That's the classic king cake that most everybody's familiar with. Here, we do what we call our French king cake. It's a puff pastry with almond cream that gets puffed up, then you're intended to take that home, heat it up in the oven, maybe serve it for breakfast, have a little coffee with it.

But it's meant to be warmed up a little bit. That's something you don't see too much of. It's something people will definitely come out for. They love it. It's a big hit here, for sure.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's a distinct thing y'all kind of contribute to the king cake legacy, the traditional French king cake.

Isaac Fort: Yeah, people will come from Alabama, Georgia, Texas. They'll drive here for that stuff. Maybe they don't know we ship, but we ship those. [Laugh]

Phillip Norman Reid: Well, that's an interesting thing, too. That's come up in a lot of these interviews.

0:33:01

The extensive distribution during carnival season. It sounded like, when we talked, that y'all are making as many to sell here as you are shipping around the country.

Isaac Fort: This last year, I was shipping almost 100 a day then selling 100 a day in the shop. This was by far our busiest year since I've been here. It was pretty wild. Everybody was ready to get out and ready to have Mardi Gras. Luckily, when things got slowed down in '20 and '21, there were no parades, no Mardi Gras balls. We forgot to mention, that's another big Mardi Gras thing, these balls. They have that up north, but not—they throw some extravagant parties down here. But those two years, we were actually OK.

0:34:03

People ordering and getting king cakes shipped kind of kept things afloat. Obviously, people were not coming into the store, there were no balls, no Mardi Gras. What can you do? You can't go to Mardi Gras, you've got to bring Mardi Gras to you, so you go get that king cake. And that's

what we saw. It was slow, but it was definitely steady enough where it's just that kind of stuff. But this year, once everything opened back up, it was insane. People came out for the king cakes. It was great.

Phillip Norman Reid: With each kind of king cake, the brioche and the traditional French, what are the tricks to getting them right? When you learned to make them, what was hard about figuring them out? Or was there anything that was hard to figure out?

Isaac Fort: Well, believe it or not, the day of the week, temperature and stuff. If it's too cold outside, your brioche is not proofing right. You've got to make sure it's proofed just right. But on the flip side, if it's cold outside, then when we take them outside they're going to cool quicker outside, and we can produce more.

0:35:04

For the French, like we were talking about, the laminate dough is a little tricky here with the humidity. That just took a lot of practice. Just doing it over, and over, and over, and we're making tons of them anyway, so we're going to get that practice. But just the repetition, then working fast and clean because we carve into the top of this puff to make a little decorative pattern. Just getting better at that, getting quicker. We're a high-yield and very fast-paced bakery, so it kind of would come to you because you're just doing it as fast as you can and getting that practice in. But yeah, just the repetition, just doing it every year and working at it. But as for tips and tricks, it was just hard work and practice.

0:36:00

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, just getting the repetition in. Take me into a typical week during Mardi Gras of this intense demand, high-yield. What's a day look like?

Isaac Fort: During this time of year for Mardi Gras, I will be getting here super early. We open at 7, generally, I'm here 5, 6 o'clock most of the year. But Mardi Gras, I might have to get here earlier than that. Some 4 o'clock, some 3 o'clock mornings depending on the day or our load. But we have a night crew, and they're going to just be finishing off baking our king cakes when I hit the door, so I'll have some waiting on me. They'll have those ready, then we can start icing them, sugaring them, getting them packed, sorting our orders. I'll come in and have something ready for me. We do a lot of shipping to Baton Rouge three days a week, so usually I'll have some king cakes I have to prepare for that.

0:37:05

We'll make a drop for Baton Rouge because we sell bread and other things to restaurants down there. What we'll do at that time of year is send king cakes down there to sell to restaurants, little corner stores, stuff like that. Finish the ones that need to leave, then make some for us in the front. Like I said, that's another 100 or so per day, get those made, then we may have to make more in the afternoon, depending on what we're doing. Then, early weekdays, we're dealing with our shipping, we sort out all these shipping orders, try to get that done as fast as possible so they can be out of the building in time to be shipped. We do next-day air, so it's going to be a fresh king cake.

0:38:00

During all that, I'm just trying to struggle and juggle doing all that, then having the pastries as well. We get a little bit of slack at that time of year, people are buying less of the pastry because they're coming in for the king cakes. But you've still got to have some stuff. It's a little challenging. You're doing all these king cakes, then, "OK, now I can start my job." [Laugh]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. That's how people describe it to me for a bakery in Louisiana, it's like having a separate business during Mardi Gras season because you're balancing these two full-time jobs basically on their own.

Isaac Fort: Yeah. I know one guy who gave it up. He only does king cakes now. That's all he does. Kind of like, down here, we have guys who do crawfish, so they'll crawfish farm, then they'll have the restaurant for three or four months, then they're off the rest of the year. This guy's figured that out with king cakes. I'm not quite there yet. I still like working and being involved.

Phillip Norman Reid: Doing it all.

Isaac Fort: Yeah.

0:39:01

Phillip Norman Reid: I've heard some stories from people who are just getting into the king cake game, they're trying to figure out how to ship them, and they've had some nightmare scenarios. How do you keep the shipping regimen tight?

Isaac Fort: It can be a nightmare. Last year, I think we lost 200 of them or something like that. There was a bad storm in Memphis, and we ship with FedEx and that's the FedEx hub there. That happens. It's not fun, it sucks. We pack it with a little plastic cup inside with some beads, and that goes into the cavity in the center of the king cake. It kind of gives it a little bit of stability. If there are smaller ones, there's going to be some other stuff in that box to kind of hold it in shape. But no, it's a delicate item that's getting shipped, hopefully in one day, to its location. After it's left our shop and will be touched by 12 other people, who knows, they might turn it sideways.

26

0:40:08

It's a nightmare. But tips, we're very careful to pack them. The ones that are shipped, you want to let them dry a little more with the icing on them so it's not getting all sticky in the box. It's definitely challenging. You don't want to have to reship something. It's annoying. Like I said, we lost the 200, so we have to make that again.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's tough.

Isaac Fort: Then, you've got 200 people calling you on the phone, wanting to know where their king cake is.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right.

Isaac Fort: That's never a fun conversation. You try to smooth it over, but it happens.

Phillip Norman Reid: I think that winter storm in Memphis last year was one of the worst things that's happened to king cakes recently. I just did another interview where a lady mentioned the same thing. And she just started, that was her first year.

Isaac Fort: Oh, no, what a nightmare.

Phillip Norman Reid: She lost, like, her whole order, basically.

0:41:03

Isaac Fort: Poor thing.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah. She just had to bite the bullet, bounce back next year. Like you said, she kind of learned some of the tricks to make it go better. But it's tough in Memphis. That is the shipping capital. FedEx is headquartered there.

Isaac Fort: Yeah, I think it has something to do with the owner, that's why they wanted the headquarters there.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, if they get a winter storm, which they barely ever do, they're screwed.

Isaac Fort: There's a Cajun grocer that ships Louisiana products all over the States, and they were telling us a couple years ago that they lost, like, \$30,000 worth of crawfish. It was a nightmare. [Laugh]

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. I'm interested in the shipping just because Louisiana has one of the most distinct cuisines of any state in the US.

Isaac Fort: When you move away, you want that king cake.

Phillip Norman Reid: For sure. At the same time, there's been a history of a lot of economic and infrastructure issues that I think have pushed people away, not to mention natural disasters. It's a state that a lot of people get displaced from, but it also has food that people want more than any other state's food. There is this huge trend of shipping all kinds of stuff.

0:42:06

Isaac Fort: Oh, absolutely. My buddy I grew up with moved to Pennsylvania, no intention of coming back, but I make sure to send him a king cake every year. This year, his son got to try it for the first time. That was amazing, he was telling me about that. The kid was stoked, he loved it.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's awesome.

Isaac Fort: He'll get a little bit of that Louisiana tradition from his dad, even though they're up north.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. That's awesome. It seems like money is no object for a lot of folks. The guy I just interviewed basically didn't have the capacity to make as many as he needed to make, so he just kept raising the price, almost to, like, \$125. People will complain, but they'll still buy it. It's wild.

Isaac Fort: They'll still buy. Yeah, we recently increased prices, adjusted our whole menu, supply chain stuff. You kind of have to. For certain items, the cost went up. But we haven't had many complaints at all.

0:43:03

You're going to want to spend money on that comfort.

Phillip Norman Reid: Totally. If that's what you're getting of Mardi Gras, that's your whole experience, you'll stretch a bit.

Isaac Fort: And it's a shareable thing. You're buying that thing to take to the office, or to bring home to your family.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, that's really cool. Just talking about what makes a king cake a king cake, we should have this conversation because there are so many creative interpretations now.

Isaac Fort: Oh, yeah, I've got opinions on this. [Laugh]

Phillip Norman Reid: OK, this is going to be a good part of the interview. Bare minimum, first of all, what are the boxes you have to check to still be able to call your thing a king cake?

Isaac Fort: Going back to my childhood, I think about that strawberry king cake from Julie Anne's, this brioche dough. It's got to have the white icing, and it's got to have the sugar. I see people putting sprinkles on these things. They have jimmies on them, and those are waxy, I don't like that. It's weird. I don't like the taste of sprinkles. Or nonpareils.

0:44:04

Nonpareils would be too crunchy. It's not right. It's got to be the sugar because the sugar will soak into that icing, then you get this crust, and it's perfect. That's one of the best things about the king cake, the sugary crust you get on it that every slice will have. Then, if you're going to have a fruit filling, you've got to have some cream cheese in there, too. It really melds well, keeps it a good consistency. One thing I've seen in more recent years, and this is a hot item all around town, also in other cities, these donut shops we were talking about earlier that I refer people to, they make king cakes now, they're getting into the business. But it's a big donut, man. It's a giant donut, and they glaze it, they decorate it. I'm not with it. I know people love it, but it's not for me.

0:45:04

This is just all my opinions, with the sugar and all that. There are a lot of places in New Orleans that do the drizzle. They put icing, drizzle, it's a little different. Just from my memory as a kid, what I grew up with, what we do here, that's what I like. This is the kind I think's the best.

Phillip Norman Reid: Yeah, the key components. It's interesting. I know the donut king cake debate is hot, there's a lot of stuff online about that.

Isaac Fort: It's a hot issue. We did a little tasting during Mardi Gras, a little contest for the news. Everybody said, "Oh, are you nervous?" I said, "I don't care who wins as long as it's not the donut." [Laugh]

Phillip Norman Reid: Did the donut win?

Isaac Fort: No, it was another place, but it was fine. No, but I love the donut places. I love my local donut places, I'm just razzing them. But when I'm doing king cakes, I don't want that.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, you've got your ideas about king cakes. It sounds like a lot of it's tied to what you're used to growing up.

0:46:02

Isaac Fort: Sure. Yeah, and I guarantee you there'll be some kinds that the only king cake they want is that donut. It's what they got. There are those people for sure.

Phillip Norman Reid: Let's talk about the baby, which people also have a range of opinions on, somewhat surprisnly. First of all, I was curious, does the French king cake get a baby?

Isaac Fort: It does. We just do a plastic baby. I would love to get into doing little ceramics like they do in New Orleans and some other places. I would love that. That's a whole thing to figure out. [Laugh] Is the debate whether you put it in or not? What's it about?

Phillip Norman Reid: There are a few. What's the meaning or history of the tradition? Who or what does the baby represent? What color should the baby be? I've seen controversies over those things.

Isaac Fort: Really? OK. We've had multiple color babies, we can accommodate that when we can find them. But it's a Catholic thing. It's baby Jesus, right?

0:47:08

Phillip Norman Reid: What does it represent? What's the meaning or history behind that tradition of putting the baby in? And the colors of the baby.

Isaac Fort: What I would always hear as a kid is, you put the baby in there, and the person who finds the baby is responsible for buying the next king cake. I was doing some dinner parties with some friends a couple years ago, and we'd buy a king cake from a different place around town, and whoever found the baby would host the next dinner party. We were just trying all the king cakes, just having fun with it.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. it's one of those interesting things, like, I haven't heard the right answer. Other people have other interpretations.

Isaac Fort: There's lots of that. I was doing something I didn't know was bad juju. I was informed of this a little while ago. For Halloween, I'm a pastry chef, I'm not going to give out a candy bar.

0:48:02

I'm not going to give out some—

Phillip Norman Reid: Not going to phone it in.

Isaac Fort: No, no, no. I'm bound and determined, and I'm pretty confident that I have the best stop in all of Lafayette for kids on Halloween. I make them a little two-ounce king cake. I've got a sealing machine, so it's sealed, it's got a nutritional label, it's perfect. I'll make those, and

my neighborhood is insane for Halloween. I gave out 200. Each kid gets one. I had one kid who was like, "Oh, my dad loves king cakes." I was like, "Take two." And there was another kid who really wanted another one, so I said, "Sure, go ahead." But other than that, 200 kids? It's insane. It's really hoppin. I don't know if I've done that, if I've brought all the people to my neighborhood and they just know the spot. [Laugh] But no, I had an old-timer tell me, "That's bad juju. You don't do that. You can't feed people king cake at that time of year." [Laugh] I had no idea.

0:49:07

Phillip Norman Reid: That's totally another thing, though, because people will do Paddy cakes, St. Patrick's Day, Easter cakes. I've seen a lot of debate around that. "Can it still be a king cake if you call it that and it's not during Mardi Gras?"

Isaac Fort: Not that time of year. I'm told no. But we sell them year-round. If you want one, we got you covered.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. "If you're going to buy this king cake, we'll sell it to you whenever." I think I might have to come out of trick-or-treating retirement to get your Halloween king cakes. That sounds awesome.

Isaac Fort: Oh, it's amazing. And the parents, you would think they'd say, "Oh, don't eat the thing, it's homemade." But no, like I said, it's sealed, it's got a label. The parents will see it, they'll come up, and they'll say, "Thank you so much for being different, for doing something else. This made their day."

Phillip Norman Reid: Totally. And I feel like that fits because it's such a traditional item. As long as it's in the service of making a tradition that someone will remember—

Isaac Fort: These are little Louisiana kids. I want them to have a king cake.

Phillip Norman Reid: What do you put in the Halloween king cake?

0:50:03

Isaac Fort: I do just a little cinnamon one and a little sugar on top. Like I said, it's a little two-ounce ball. It's smaller than an apple. It's tiny.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's cool. I think we've run through quite a bit of what I have. Let's just think about the future. What are your goals as a chef? What are you still trying to improve at? Then, for the business, I know this is a place you want to see stick around.

Isaac Fort: I do. Family business, so Patrick's son, Andre, he's the next generation. He's a little younger than me. He's our manager now, and he's really kind of coming into his own. It's nice seeing that, seeing that there are people who want it to continue.

0:51:03

I mentioned this before, we had the lady working here for 40 years and retired. When I started, there were a lot of these old-timers with me who aren't here anymore. Retired, moved on, this and that. Me and a couple other people who have been here the longest now, we want it to go on because we see how happy it makes everybody. Keeping the tradition. Who wouldn't want to do that? I'm very thankful I'm part of it.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right, try to keep that legacy alive.

Isaac Fort: I do worry about it, though. This is not a typical place that you see, and I certainly don't expect I'll find another job that I enjoy like this, where I enjoy my boss, and the people, the

34

whole deal. It makes me want to focus on it and work to improve because it's a once-in-a-lifetime thing.

0:52:05

I don't think I'll ever see this again.

Phillip Norman Reid: Totally, you want to keep a place like this around. I feel like there's so much work you have to do, in this age of buying everything online, to remind people of what a special experience it can be to come into the bakery and see all these options. You want to keep that alive.

Isaac Fort: Yeah, it's unique. We have this wonderful showcase that people can come see, and it's an experience. There are little food tours people do around town, and this is one of the stops. They come in and see all the authentic French bread, pastry. It's definitely a location for a lot of people to come check out.

Phillip Norman Reid: Right. That's why I like to do projects like this. Because I care about places like this sticking around. Some of my best memories are like, "If that bakery went out of business, I wouldn't care about my home town anymore." That's so much of what I love about the place.

Isaac Fort: When I go home and visit Shreveport, I'm stopping at Monjunis Italian Food. I'm getting some lasagna. I have my stops. I'm going to Griff's to get one of the best hamburgers in Louisiana.

0:53:09

One year, I went, and they burned down, and I was very sad. But they rebuilt. But that was a bummer. I came in town like, "All right, I'm ready for this hamburger. I've been waiting a month to bite into this thing. Oh, no, they're gone." [Laugh] But I know that happens here, too. People leave, they come into town, they're going to stop here. I talk to flight attendants, when they stop in Lafayette, they run over here to grab something to get back on the plane with. They're like, "Oh, I know I'm stopping in Lafayette. I'm going to go to Poupart's to get some desserts to take home."

Phillip Norman Reid: That's awesome. That bodes well. It sounds like you have a good following. And I know a lot of folks in Baton Rouge, any time I mention the bakery, they're like, "Oh, yeah, I know all about Poupart's." Y'all definitely have a reputation. You said you sell some stuff in Baton Rouge.

Isaac Fort: We do, we have a few stores. Bocage, Calvin's, and Better R I believe is the other one.

0:54:03

We'll send them king cakes, pastries. We even have some people who will call over here who are like, "Can I have something? Can you send it down with the shipment?" We'll send them a cake or something. Occasionally, we'll get some orders over the phone that we'll send with our delivery driver down there, and they'll go pick it up at one of those stores so they don't have to make the drive.

Phillip Norman Reid: Oh, cool. I guess that's how you stick around, too, figure out how to expand and sell in other places.

Isaac Fort: A big part of this is trying to problem-solve and get people what they want.

Phillip Norman Reid: Totally. What about your goals as a pastry chef? Are there projects you want to take on, things you want to learn?

Isaac Fort: Oh, yeah. It's going to sound not directly pastry-focused, but I kind of want to get into 3D printing to make cookie cutters and stuff. I'm like, "There's this shape I don't have." That's where my mind goes. I want to learn how to do some things to kind of better facilitate what I already do.

0:55:04

These French king cakes that we score the tops of, I was having ideas. I was like, "If I had a big, nine-inch cutter, I could make a beautiful design, lightly impress that into the dough. Would that work or not?" That's kind of where my mind's been recently, stuff like that.

Phillip Norman Reid: That's cool. That kind of blends the STEM skillset with the artistic stuff. And you have a background in computer science.

Isaac Fort: A little bit. I haven't looked at AutoCAD in 20 years. [Laugh] I'll have to figure all that out again.

Phillip Norman Reid: I know a lot of people who just figure out how to use 3D printers. There are libraries that have them now.

Isaac Fort: Absolutely, yeah. That's something I've been thinking of. As for just the food itself, we have the internet now, and there's Instagram. There's no shortage of inspiration out there. You can see some people who do amazing stuff. I was looking at I think Loco Bakery, something like that, and a lady does tarts, and they're amazing.

0:56:09

They're so beautiful. These geometric shapes, just really fantastic stuff. I definitely like looking at that because that gives me some inspiration to kind of do something a little out of my comfort zone or something a little different than what I normally do.

Phillip Norman Reid: Cool, man. Is there anything we missed, anything else you want to add? I think that's all of my questions.

Isaac Fort: No, I think that's it.

Phillip Norman Reid: Covers it? Yeah, you did a pretty thorough job. Well, thank you so much for doing this. I really enjoyed the conversation.

Isaac Fort: Oh, yeah, no problem.

Phillip Norman Reid: We're going to leave 30 seconds of silence on here for editing purposes, so I'll hand you that if you want to start filling out that.

0:57:00

0:57:33

[End]