

Jason Gendusa
John Gendusa Bakery – New Orleans, LA

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Location: Mr. Darenbourg's home, New Orleans, LA

Interviewer: Dana Logsdon

Sound Engineer: Thomas Walsh

Transcription: Lori Lawton

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Project: The Lives and Loaves of New Orleans

[Begin Jason Gendusa Interview]

Dana Logsdon: Okay, this is Dana Logston for the Southern Foodways Alliance. Today is Monday, May 11, 2015. We're next door to Gendusa Bakery at 2009 Mirabeau Avenue in New Orleans in the Gendusa Family home. Could you please introduce yourself and give your name and your occupation and your date of birth?

0:00:29

Jason Gendusa: My name is Jason Gendusa. I am co-owner of John Gendusa bakery. I am the fourth generation baker at Gendusa Bakery and I was born on October 24, 1978.

DL: Can you describe a little bit about what your bakery produces?

0:00:48

JG: Sure, well our main producer is still the po-boy bread that people use to make the po-boy sandwiches on around the city and around the state and sometimes around the world. We also do muffaletta, different variations and sizes. We make pistolettes and Italian breads and everything we make is the same mixture, the same dough, so it's all got the same consistent French bread shell and very light on the inside.

DL: Do you actually ship any bread anywhere? You said you have some stuff that goes other places than New Orleans.

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JG: We actually do have a man that comes, he has his own courier business and he comes and picks bread up every Monday and Wednesday and he ships it all over the place to New York, Wisconsin and some parts of California.

DL: Can you talk a little bit about what you do in the bakery and who else you work with?

0:01:57

JG: I think it would be quicker to tell you what I don't do in the bakery, but basically, the problem with a 24 hour a day business is you really have to be able to do everything because in the middle of the night, you're not going to get too many people that come fix things or help you out with stuff, so me and my dad do everything from the baking and making the bread to working on the equipment, working on delivery trucks, office work, you name it. It's definitely a true definition of a small business.

DL: And we're next door to the bakery, so you live here correct, in the house next door I think and you're with your family, correct?

0:02:41

JG: Yes, I've lived here since 2000 when I got out of college and it's definitely been good and bad living next door to your business, but more pros than cons; being nice and close if there's a problem definitely helps out if you can get there quick and try to fix it or come up with a solution.

DL: So part of wearing many hats is also being a father, correct?

0:03:29

JG: Correct. That’s just one more hat I’ve had to put on in the last few years.

DL: I’d like to get a little bit of background information on the bakery. This is a family business. Can you tell the story of how John Gendusa Bakery began?

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JG: Sure. It started in the early ‘20s, early 1920s. My great-grandfather and his family came over from Sicily and what they did originally was they had a grocery store and my grandfather enjoyed baking because in Italy, back then, there were bakeries on every corner almost, so it was kind of one of those things you saw and you just became accustom to, so he got into the baking business and not too long after that, they bought a building and he started the John Gendusa Bakery in the early 1920s and that’s where we got our origins from.

DL: How long have you been in this location on Mirabeau Avenue?

0:04:37

JG: We moved here in 1996 and before then we were on the original location at 1315 Touro Street for almost 75 years.

DL: Was it always called “John Gendusa Bakery”?

0:04:52

JG: Correct. John is my father's name, but John Gendusa is also my great-grandfather's name, where the bakery got its name from.

DL: And your grandfather was what name?

0:05:05

JG: He was Emanuel Gendusa.

DL: I'm trying to get the family tree a little bit straight. Was it your great-great grandfather who came from Sicily or your great-grandfather?

0:05:21

JG: My great-grandfather came over. It's a little sketchy being so long, but he was I believe in his early 20s when they came over with his family from what we have gathered in the past. We still don't even have an exact origin date of the bakery because there's no records of it or we have no papers, but we know from word of mouth it was early '20s, early 1920s.

DL: I know a lot of people got into the baking business because it was the way of life. Your grandfather or your great-grandfather was a baker in Sicily before he came here?

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JG: He wasn't a baker, but he enjoyed – there were bakeries on every corner in Sicily, so it was just one of those things that always caught your eye and I guess maybe lit a fuse and he realized that was something he wanted to do.

DL: Interesting. Do you know the sorts of things that your father and your grandfather and your great-grandfather baked before they baked po-boy loaves? Did they have a retail location or was it always wholesale?

0:06:46

JG: We've always been mostly wholesale. My father and grandfather did sell doughnuts at the time and I know my father, he had cut it out not too long after he took over because I remember him saying the cost of sugar went up and you can't charge that much for a doughnut and it wasn't something we made plenty of, so that wasn't really much room for profit. Profits weren't that much, so we cut that out, I guess that was in the late '70s, early '80s he stopped making those and we strictly stuck with the bread.

DL: Your bakery is probably most famous for the creation of the original po-boy loaf. Can you describe what a po-boy loaf is and how it got its name?

0:07:37

JG: I sure can. The story goes back to the late 1920s when there was a streetcar strike here in New Orleans. There were two restaurant owners named Bennie and Clovis Martin and they would get their bread from my great-grandfather and the problem with the bread back then was it wasn't uniform, so when people would

eat a sandwich, if one guy went in with his friend, he might have gotten the piece of bread that was nice and fat and full and his sandwich looked very good and filled him up whereas the guy sitting next to him got the piece of bread that was very narrow and almost came to a point, so his sandwich wasn't too filling and it wasn't much of a problem before the streetcar strike, but then when that happened, Bennie and Clovis Martin, they were former streetcar workers wanted to help out their former workers that they worked with and were friends with, so they would feed them for free when they came into the Martin Brother's Restaurant.

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As I said, the original loaf wasn't uniform, so they spoke to my great-grandfather, John Gendusa and told him what the problem was and, as I mentioned earlier, from him growing up in Sicily and seeing all these different types of breads, he had a simple solution. He said, "I can make a long, uniform loaf, there will be no waste and everybody will be happy with." It only took him a day or two to come up with this and he brought it down to Martin Brothers and bam, it was a hit. Everybody loved it. The story goes that the sandwich got its name po-boy because when the streetcar strikers would walk into Martin Brothers to eat, the people behind the counter would say, "Here comes another po-boy." They were eating the sandwiches and so the sandwiches got the name po-boy and the bread also. It's an interesting story.

DL: It is. Let's see, we stopped when we were talking about the po-boy loaf. Do you want to go back to your family history?

0:09:59

JG: If you want to talk about the family tree.

DL: Okay, so if we could go back a little bit to the family tree, from records I found in the newspaper, it appears as though your great-great grandfather was Emanuel who came from Italy in the late 1800s probably in that big wave of immigration and he came from a town in Italy close to Palermo called Juliana.

0:10:31

JG: Yes, that rings a bell, yes.

DL: And he operated a bakery in mid-city New Orleans called City Park Bakery in the 4000 block of Orleans.

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JG: Yeah, I do remember my father speaking of a bakery on Orleans that was – I didn't know he had part. I knew his Conchetta who you have as his sister I believe – I thought that was [inaudible], but that's interesting to know that what you found had him tied to that also which would make sense.

DL: Okay, well, we can do a little more geneological research, but I believe that he was married – from the obituary to a Conchetta [inaudible]. Then I believe there was another Conchetta who appeared later on who would have been an aunt.

0:11:26

JG: Yes.

DL: Okay, going back to the po-boy, can you describe the length of the original po-boy and if it has varied to what you produce now?

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JG: The original French bread loaf that they used was about 24” and then when my great-grandfather did the po-boy loaf, it was 36” to 38” and the only thing that’s changed today is that we’ve had to scale down to 36” for the racks in the ovens because back then they didn’t have – everything was manual. You had to slide the bread into the old brick ovens and you didn’t really have too much of a size constraint. Today, with the manual ovens that rotate, they can only accommodate the 36” long screens, so that’s the only difference between now and 1927 or ’28.

0:12:28

DL: That’s amazing. I also love the idea of the side-by-side relationship between bakery and sandwich maker. Can you describe the relationship from what you’ve heard from your relatives of John Gendusa Bakery when it was on Touro Street and Martin Brothers sandwiches, a little bit of what the neighborhood was like and how much bread your family’s bakery sent over to the Martins?

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JG: Yeah, from stories my father used to tell and doing history reports like this, they were very close, especially he would tell me stories about when he was a young

boy that him and his cousins each throw a bag of bread which had 10 loaves in it on their shoulders and run down the street to Martin Brothers if they were getting close to running out and the guys would give them a Coke or something to eat to show their appreciation. I know they would use – I remember my dad would tell me during Mardi Gras – it would be non-stop down there and they would use thousands of loaves of bread a day which, sometimes we make thousands of loaves of bread just for everybody of our customers, so to have just one customer to do that much was amazing. They started the po-boy sandwich and were known for it and they had a very good following.

DL: It sounds like the popularity of the po-boy was a big part of your production then and it's a big part of your production now. Did the po-boy change how the bakery was run back when they first started making po-boy loaves for Martin's from what you know?

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JG: From what I know and I have another example of how it changed things was – this was kind of a “monkey see, money do” kind of thing; people seeing Martin Brothers making this sandwich and having a jam-packed restaurant, people started copying it. That was evident with my great-grandfather's brother a few years after had to go and open – they actually had to go open another bakery because the demand was so – people wanted it and he opened the Angelo Gendusa Bakery not far from the original location and he opened up just to service the French Quarter and John Gendusa Bakery serviced Martin Brothers and all the other restaurants

that began using the po-boy bread, but that goes to show you how things change just that quick just by tweaking the bread just a little bit. It really started something that people are still enjoying today.

DL: What was the address for Angelo Gendusa's Bakery?

0:15:19

JG: I know it was on North Rampart Street. I'm not exactly sure. It's sad, but I believe now it's condo buildings. There's nothing even left of it.

DL: Is the po-boy loaf still your most popular item?

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JG: Oh, by far. I would say that's 85% to 90% of our business is still making the po-boy loaf. All the other stuff kind of comes and goes in fads, but that's stuck around for almost 100 years now. It hasn't gone anywhere.

DL: Can you talk a little bit about the formula? At one time I know your father used to keep a copy of the recipe or the formula on your wall and this was before Katrina.

0:16:08

JG: Yeah, it was actually my great-grandfather who made it up through trial and error and once he got it down pat, he wrote it down on a big poster board and we had it on the wall at the Mirabeau location up to Katrina and we tried to save it, but unfortunately, basically with it being so old to begin with, it basically

disintegrated. One thing about that, and still to this day because we kind of have it ingrained in our minds is if we ever change anything and things don't come out like they should, my dad always tells me, "Go back to doing it like we did in the beginning," and sure enough, it's fail-proof. Everything will go back to normal if you do it like it was done back in the beginning, so he definitely perfected it then and we're still using it now.

DL: Have ingredients as far as you know changed much over the past few decades and has it affected how you bake or how the loaves come out?

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JG: Just in my short time being here, I know the FDA is pushing for the no trans-fats in the bread, so we've had to change the shortening which we used for as long as I've been around and that luckily didn't seem to be too much of a problem, but I know throughout – I know my dad has had to play with things in the past to help with the flavor. It all goes back to the flour; if you get a good batch of flour, you don't need to put anything in there but yeast and shortening and the usual stuff, but if the flour is bad and you can't get that good spring in the bread when you put it in the oven, you've got to add some things to it to help it along the way. That's one thing about it; you've kind of got to see how your batches are coming out and you'll have to change things along the way, so it's definitely not set in stone on what you do, but it has changed in that regard as the flours – you've got to watch your flour and the protein content and you might have to add a little more stuff like to help it out along the way.

DL: So it sounds like you are still very much an artisan bakery and run by touch and feel and not just machines.

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JG: Exactly. Yeah, touch and feel for sure. I tell people I can mix a dough with my eyes closed because you don't mix the dough by looking at it, you really got to get in there and feel it. That will tell you everything you need to know about it is with your hands.

DL: Going back to what French bread used to be like back before your time, so these are memories from your father or your grandfather, French bread in New Orleans used to be different. Do you remember hearing stories about what it used to be like?

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JG: If you're referring to the old time French bread with the pointed ends, yeah. It used to be almost like you took a piece of dough and you rolled the ends out to a point so you had a nice fat middle, which was good for whatever you needed it for and then, as it came to the ends, it would become very narrow and skinny and come to a point, so that part wasn't too conducive for making a good sandwich or anything. Maybe it was good for dipping in your soup. I know they liked to dip it in their coffee back in the old days, so maybe it was good for that, but not much else, so that's where the old time French bread needed to make the transformation

to the po-boy bread and the po-boy loaf to give you a more consistent loaf where you could use one end to one end and it didn't matter. It was all the same.

DL: It's actually interesting how many breads that used to be baked in New Orleans have disappeared. Before the po-boy loaf, there was the French bread that you described. Do you remember hearing of any other types of breads that were baked?

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JG: I know one thing that's close to not being around much is the Italian breads. I know Mr. Sal used to do – people would die for his Italian bread because he did it the old fashioned way still which was make the dough, let it, as we call it, get old. You'd almost let it start to proof before you [inaudible] it. The old time Italian bread, that's definitely not around anymore because people don't have the time to do it and it costs money to leave the dough sit, go back to it, go back to it. That can get expensive, so people still make the [inaudible] bread with the seeds that's called "Italian bread," but it's definitely not the old time Italian bread that a lot of people were used to.

DL: Can you say who you mean by "Mr. Sal"?

0:21:21

JG: Sal LoGiudice, United Bakery.

DL: I actually discovered that there was an advertising campaign in the 1930s to try to preserve the old style French bread because the po-boy loaves were so popular.

Do you remember any feelings that the old style French bread was being pushed out by po-boy loaves?

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JG: Not really. That's the first I've heard of that. That's very interesting. But there's always people who don't like change so they always want to hold onto what they're used to, so it doesn't surprise me.

DL: Do you remember hearing any stories about packaging whether plastic changed the bread and also, I think you all, before Katrina, used to use someone named Southern Paper in the Ninth Ward and I remember your father saying that they were stopping to make the really long sleeves and that he didn't have somebody else. I don't know if he ever found anybody.

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JG: Right, well to touch on that, we did find someone else to make the long sleeves, but it's such an odd shape for a package that I'm sure not to many people outside of New Orleans would use something that's 40" long and just about two or three inches wide. It was an odd size for a packaging material, but to touch on what you said about the plastic, that's one thing even I've seen since I first started until now. Before, the po-boy loaf was a one day usage. You got it in the morning and if you didn't use it by the time you closed that night, that was it, you either used it for croutons, bread crumbs or fed your hogs and horses with it.

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But now with the cost of doing business has gone up, people now put their bread in plastic and I don't know if it's good for us or not, but our bread holds up very well. People, we have some people come from – we have a couple come from Mississippi as a restaurant and they come once a month and get about 200 loaves, put it in plastic and freeze it and when they toast it, if it's the last day of the month and they toast it, they said it still comes out as good as if it was just baked, so yeah, plastic has definitely changed the game and I understand that being a business owner, you've got to watch your costs, but the one thing I don't like about it is when you put it in that plastic bag, to me it's not a po-boy loaf anymore, it's just soft and you can stick the hole loaf on your finger and it just folds over. I think it's supposed to be nice and crispy. It's not the same to me, but I can't tell my customers what to do. So yeah, we do use a lot more plastic now than even 20 years ago. It's definitely more prevalent.

DL: You touched a little bit about what the ideal po-boy loaf or French bread loaf is. Can you describe that a little more?

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JG: Well, the finished product, you definitely have that nice crispy outer shell and when you cut it open, it's nice and very airy and fluffy so you can pack on whatever you want in there; the shrimp, the roast beef and you really can taste what you're eating and not just bread. The secret to that is steam and the way you accomplish that is by two different processes with the steam. After the bread is stretched and put on the screen, it's rolled into a proof box or a steam house and it

can sit in there from anywhere to three to five hours while it proofs and while it's proofing with that steam, it's picking up that moisture on the inside and it's rising very slowly so that it's creating those air pockets inside and the nice fluffy inside that you want and then when it's time to bake, you put it in the oven and before we even hit the start button, we hit it with some steam, so then the steam from the oven and that heat puts that nice crisp shell on the outside while it's baking and you can hit it with that steam a few times before it's done to really give it that nice – I know they call it the alligator shell where the top of the bread looks kind of like the skin of an alligator. That's really what it's supposed to be.

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But going back to the whole plastic and people wanting to make sure they don't have waste, we really don't make the bread as hard either as we used to because then it wouldn't last. It would only last one day. So we've kind of had to adapt to the times. I know it's something – my dad growing up, he was so used to having that French bread. He still, to this day, is like “Ah, that's not French bread.” But like I said, you can't complain to the customer. You've got to do what they want.

DL: Why don't you sell retail any longer in the grocery stores?

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JG: As with anything in business, money. What it is in the grocery stores, if you put 20 loaves of bread in in the morning, when you come back the next day, if there's

18 loaves left, you've got to pick that up and that's your loss. What we learned over the years is that the groceries kind of got smart and instead of just having John Gendusa Bakery and maybe one other, now they have John Gendusa bakery and ten other bakeries in there to give their customers the variety, but it doesn't give you as much chance to sell. So we did that up until Katrina and that was kind of one thing we definitely shut out after that. It was just that we had a lot of waste that now we don't have because of that. That's really the whole reason behind it; you really didn't make much money going in the grocery stores now.

DL: People must miss seeing your bread in the grocery stores.

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JG: We get lots of calls and some of our customers have gotten keen to it like Mr. Al out of Parran's on Veterans, he now will put the bread in sleeves and sell them to people because so many people ask that it doesn't hurt to make a few extra bucks here and there, so we give them some sleeves and people go up and ask him, "Hey, can I buy a loaf of bread?" But that works out good for both of us because what he doesn't sell, he can make sandwiches and sell.

DL: Can you talk a little bit also about your neighbors and how they might be able to buy a loaf of bread?

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JG: Well, one thing I remember, even being very young on Touro Street, my dad took care of the neighborhood people and we still do now. Our neighbors, some of

them come every day and they get their free loaf of bread. Even though we're a business, you've still got to look out for your neighbors, so we take care of them when we need to. Other than that, we still have people drop in. We'll sell them a loaf of bread for \$1.50 which is a bargain. After I went to the grocery the other day I saw that they were getting almost \$3.00 for a loaf of bread, but that's a different story. Like I said, not much of our business is retail. I'd say 0.1%. It's nothing we push. We don't have a retail store. As soon as you walk into the bakery, you're in the warehouse, you're in the production area, so we don't want a lot of people in and out of the bakery because we've got hot racks and machinery, so it's nothing we've ever really pushed for. I know back at the older location, there was a little front shop. It was separate where people would come in and I remember they had a little opening in the gate, it was about maybe 2X2, you could open it up and slide the loaf of bread through and they'd give you the money through and I remember doing that as a kid. That was pretty cool, but here at Mirabeau we've kind of stayed away from that.

DL: How do people know when the bread is ready?

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JG: They smell it! People all come pass by and oh, it smells so good. I don't know if this ties into your kind of baking, but I've been around it so long, I don't smell it anymore. That's one thing I've lost is that smell of fresh bread because I've been smelling it for so long that it's all the same to me now. People know when it's

ready because they'll come walk up to the door and say, "I can smell that hot bread. Do you mind if we get a loaf?"

DL: That's one of my favorite things is seeing people come to the door. Can you tell the story of how your – is it your father met your mother or was it your grandparents?

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JG: Yeah, my grandparents. My grandfather Emanuel when he was working on Touro Street met my grandmother Rita Famiglio who lived next door and that's – I'm sure they saw each other quite often and one thing led to another and they ended up dating and marrying and it's funny because I remember her telling me that her parents didn't want her to be around him too much in the beginning, so they tried to cut that out, but I guess love prevailed in the end, so that was interesting. She kind of grew up in the bakery herself even not being a Gendusa, but being right next to it and then dating my grandfather. Back then, you started dating at a young age and got married young. She was in it for a while.

DL: I think I heard that they met by getting bread through the window also though wasn't it?

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JG: I believe it was the back window. He would sneak her the bread out the back so she didn't have to pay for it.

DL: Since we're on the topic of grandmothers, have there ever been any women working in the bakery?

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JG: Oh yeah, my mother still works with us Monday through Friday. I remember my dad telling me that some of the best bakers were women. They seem to be a little more detail oriented than us men. I know when my dad first took over the bakery and he was partnered with the other side of the family, I believe it was Margarite who was working there and my mother, she worked there and along the way we've had other women we've hired, but it's mostly been family members that have worked there. Just one thing; it's so hot in there. It's something that a lot of women, it just gets too hot. They don't want to do that. Like I said, we've had a few and they've been very good workers so they can hold their own in the bakery if they want to.

DL: It's definitely a family business. And you have two daughters?

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JG: Right, I have a two and a half year old, Leah and a three month old, Lauren. Actually my two and a half year old comes and she'll make little mini muffalettas with us. I'm getting her started early. But that's how I got involved in the bakery. I remember being – some of my earliest memories are of running around the bakery. My dad would bust open a bag of flour, throw it on the floor and I'd bring my GI Joes or whatever and I'd play in it all day long. You just kind of get attached to it. I'm bringing her over and kind of letting her help out a little bit.

DL: I remember from an interview your father did in 1994 that he talked about how it was almost time for you to spend an overnight shift in the bakery.

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JG: Yeah, back then they used to work overnight before you really had coolers to where you could make the bread and store it. I remember him joking with me about that. You can't say that you worked in the bakery until you worked an overnight shift. Needless to say, there are some interesting things with the workers. It's a whole different ballgame working in a bakery at night. It's something that we've kind of gotten away from a little bit. Now that you have low humidity coolers and low blow coolers, you can make the product in the day, store it as a dough form and then pull it out at night, put it in the steam house, it proofs up and you can bake it and you can't even tell the difference. It really helps out to where you're not producing as much at night so if something happens, somebody doesn't show up, it takes a little less stress off of you. I don't know if I'll be able to tell my kids that because there's not too much more of that whole nightshift stuff going on.

DL: When did you all change from night shift and were you part of the reason that you switched to some of the day shift, finding equipment like retarders to help with production?

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JG: Yeah actually I remember how we made the switch. I had just gotten out of college. It was maybe early 2000s and our foreman that ran the night shift had

gotten real sick and he actually ended up passing away, so I was working the night shift and coming and working in the day to help out getting the routes out and just keeping things going, so I was working like 18 or 19 hours a day. Being a young kid I was like, “Ah, I can handle it. I can handle it.” Well, one morning I came in and my dad was like, “You look like you’re about to die.” So we started building a cooler. We built two of them that way I didn’t have to work from 6:00 pm to 6:00 am. We got the first cooler built and we could store about 1,200 or 1,500 loaves in there and so that helped out a lot. Then we got our second cooler built and we pretty much could cut out the night work if we ever needed to. We have enough capacity. But that really was the problem; finding people to work at night. It’s a lot easier to find good help in the day than it is at night in my experiences. I don’t know about any other business, but that’s really when we changed from doing the whole work at night to the daytime.

DL: Can you describe a few of the old production methods that have changed over time whether it’s brick ovens or mixing or shaping?

0:37:20

JG: Oh for sure. I mean I have it easy now compared to what they did. I remember at the old bakery on Touro Street there used to be – it might have been longer than 20 foot, a stainless steel table and they would throw – they would mix the dough and I mean back then they had huge mixers, probably 200 or 300 pounds at a time. They would just throw the whole slab of dough up on top of the table and you’d have maybe four or five guys all around the table just chopping the dough

out by hand and then they would take that dough and you'd have to let it relax so you could shape it and then they'd have to roll it out and then let it relax a little longer and then stretch it. I think they would put it on the conveyor belt that went very slow and by the time it got to the end, you could stretch it to the 36" long po-boy. You had that. They had brick ovens that you had to shovel, literally shovel the bread in and out of the oven as it came around and it was baked. Now we can roll 105 loaves of bread in the oven on the rack at a time, hit two buttons and sit down for 25 minutes or so. I'm trying to think what else. I'm sure when they first started, there wasn't electric mixers I know that. I've never seen how that was done, but I'm sure that wasn't too fun either. So we definitely had a lot of changes over the years and even now, one change that I'm used to and we've been looking into is to go totally automated. That was an option that wasn't available 20 years ago, so it's ever changing and I'm sure 20 or 25 years from now there's probably something that we'll be into as well.

DL: It's not a glamorous job. Why do you do it?

0:39:22

JG: [laughs] I don't know if I should answer that question. No, speaking from experience, you know – I think just growing up in it and seeing my dad do it. The biggest thing is – one reason I do it is when you give somebody a loaf of bread and they take a bite out of it and they say, "Wow, that's the best bread I've had!" That's really a sense of accomplishment. It makes you feel good and I guess that's really why you do it is to give something to people that they really enjoy

and I'm glad I can do that because other than that, I really couldn't tell you because it's long hours, seven days a week and not much of a break, but like I told [inaudible] this once, I said, "I think I have some flour mixed in my blood!" So that's what keeps me going.

DL: I've heard that saying that when you cut a baker that they don't bleed red they bleed white!

0:40:30

JG: Very true.

DL: At one time in New Orleans there were a lot of small bread bakeries pretty much on every corner and that is really dwindling now in terms of the old traditional French bread bakers. Do you know about how many there are now and what you feel is the future of small traditional bread bakeries or the big ones like Leidenheimer?

0:40:55

JG: Well as far as numbers go, there's not many of us left. Before Katrina, you lost Angelo Gendusa. After Katrina you lost Mr. Sal at United. There's us, Leidenheimer, Binder, Cartozzo to an extent, but even he is actually getting out of the French bread in the city and he's starting to do more of a packaging and sending it out around the country type of deal. There's not many of us left and I think the problem is – and you could probably talk to anybody at one of the [bakeries]; Sandy, even Sal. It's not anything you can buy a building get some

equipment, turn the lights on and get started. You really need a lot of experience to do it. You need a lot of know how to do it and it's just something. I don't think a lot of, especially younger people, are really too interested in learning to do because I'm still learning. I tell people that today; I'm still learning. I'll learn something new all the time. I also messed up a lot when I was young to learn, so that's the thing, it's not just walk in, flip a machine on and you're making bread. You've really got to know the in's and out's to it and every dough is different. It all starts in the mixer. If you can mix a good dough, it will run smoothly the whole way. If you mess it up in the mixer, you might have to watch it or change it up along the way. It takes a lot of detail. You've got to be very patient also and the younger generation, I don't know if they want to learn for five or eight years before they really feel like they can do it on their own. I can see in 20 years me and maybe Leidenheimer and that might be it.

DL: Well I'm glad you count yourself in the number.

0:43:03

JG: Yeah, well I'm still young, so I don't plan on going anywhere anytime soon.

DL: There are several new bakers in town who are, in a sense, trying to revive the old baking traditions, probably from even before your bakery was founded and there are also some immigrant bakeries, Latino and Vietnamese. Do you ever visit any of those bakeries and do you see any sort of mixing that could happen between the new and the old?

0:43:39

JG: I visited a few bakeries when I was younger. My father had a pretty good relationship with Alois over at Binders. We'd go over there sometimes. He actually bought one of our brick ovens when we moved. I've seen how their operation works, but other than that, it seems to be keep everything secret. You don't want your competitors finding out what's going on. As far as the Vietnamese bakeries, that's something that could overtake the po-boy maybe 30 or 40 years from now because that whole family ties. I'm sure they've probably got like ten or twelve year old kids that can make the banh mi rolls which have become very popular in New Orleans to make your po-boys on. So yeah, they have a good – they're getting in good in the market, it's still if you want a traditional po-boy sandwich, people come to get a po-boy loaf. I haven't had much experience with them though. The most I'll say is that one of our equipment guys, he does a lot of work for them and he'll kind of tell me some stuff going on, but other than that, that's about it. We keep pretty to ourselves so not to let somebody find something out that they maybe shouldn't or we don't want them to.

DL: You talked a little bit about some of your longtime employees. Do you still have people that have been with you for a long time and if you could talk a little bit about some of them.

0:45:27

JG: I have a good story I can tell you about one of them. Yeah, two of our guys that still work for us, worked for my father at Touro Street. They actually worked at

Angelo too, so they've been in the bakery business probably 30 years or so. After Katrina, I got one of the bakers from United Bakery. He's still working for us. And then some of the other guys, they haven't worked for me per say for long, but they worked at Angelo and Binders. That's what you kind of see is that bakery guys, once they're in it, they're in it. It's hard to take somebody off the street and have them stay in the game for a long time because just from experience, if you hire somebody in the middle of August to come work in the bakery, they might stay a week or two and then – it's just that they're not used to that. I mean it gets 120 to 125 degrees in there literally and you've got to be accustomed to it you know. So that's one problem. Talking about one of our old-time employees, he doesn't work for us anymore. Unfortunately he got old. He's still alive, but he got real sick. I remember we were at Touro Street at the old bakery and I mean I must have been five or six years old and his name was Clinton. I'll never forget; he looked at me and he said, "Jason, when you take over the bakery, are you going to still let me work for you?" I can't really remember what I told him, but 20 years later he was still working for us and when I started working there, he was still there. He was one of the few guys that really cared about the bakery like it was his own and unfortunately he doesn't work for us anymore, but that shows you, these guys started young back in the day. He actually worked for my grandfather that's how long he worked; three generations he worked in the Gendusa Bakery. He was around a long time.

DL: No plans to get air conditioning in the bakery?

0:47:43

JG: [laughs] I mean I would but I would probably be closed after the first energy bill, so no, no. We've still got to suck it up the old fashioned way with plenty of fans and lots of water.

DL: And you touched on this a little bit, about what makes po-boy bread special. I've heard stories from your father and other bakers that it's the New Orleans water also. Can you talk a little bit about that and just about why New Orleans bread can only be made in New Orleans?

0:48:15

JG: I only have experience in New Orleans. I know my father has tried to do it other places, which I'll talk about soon, but yeah, the water in New Orleans, that hard water, people say that makes the difference, the humidity, that actually helps out, the high humidity and then the steam, which I touched on earlier. All those factors go into it. I know my dad, I believe it was in the '80s, my dad had a fellow from Dallas come to him and he wanted to basically open a Gendusa Bakery in Texas. He came, he replicated, had all the same equipment. I mean he spent tons of money, all the same equipment, actually rented two of our bakers for a while, went to Texas, everything the same. You would think you were in Gendusa Bakery standing in this building; the flour, the ingredients, the machinery, but they could not – they just could not do it. I mean they tried and tried and I think the little guy ran out of money. It just wasn't the same. That's where people say the water is very different, the weather. Another thing, something I learned after Katrina is that the yeast particles get in the air, get on

top of your equipment and all and that plays a role in your bakery process and my dad was worried after Katrina that all that would have died and went away and it would take years and years to get back and get that taste back in the bread, but luckily, it didn't, so all that just plays a part. All the little pieces all tie together.

DL: That's good that there was enough in the air still after Katrina. Can you talk a little bit about post-Katrina and if you guys considered not coming back and what your struggles were or your story rebuilding here on Mirabeau?

0:50:24

JG: Unfortunately the levy broke about four blocks from here, so we got it pretty good. I'm sure with everybody's Katrina story, that initial sight was just devastating and all you wanted to do was get away and not even worry about rebuilding. The first thing, it took us a little over a year to reopen because all of the houses were gone, so we had to get a place to live first and then we started to tackle the bakery not knowing if we were going to reopen or not. We had to clean it out, get all the equipment out and then I remember me and my father talked and he said, "[I am] almost 60 years old, I can walk away and I'm okay." He was like, "We're really going to do this for you." So it was kind of I don't want to say "putting me on the spot," but it was a tough decision and we spoke about it, we talked about it and one day I just realized we're such a big part of the history of New Orleans, why not be a part of the rebuilding of New Orleans. So we decided to start rebuilding. Believe it or not, me and my father did everything ourselves. We stripped the machines we could keep down to the bare metal, had them

cleaned, we bought all new bearings and rollers and belts and chains and motors and you name it and we rebuilt them all. We'd start at six in the morning. We were living with my sister at the time. [We would work] until eight or nine o'clock at night, but we got it done. We started off small. We had a friend of my fathers that he had met going to baking shows owned Apex Equipment, Mr. Herb Freeman, he sent us a mixer and an oven at cost. He said, "That's the least I can do to help you all out." We started small and it was a struggle. You didn't have any of your employees around. You had very few customers. We were the last man up, so everybody else was kind of already established and going and had their foot in the doors of our old customers. The one thing that did help us out and actually gave us a good target date, our biggest customer before Katrina throughout my dad's whole time at the bakery, Gene's Po-Boy, he was also going through the rebuilding process and he was like, "I'm going to open up on this date," and we were pretty close. We were like, "We can't let anybody else get in there before us. This guy has carried us through hard times. We're going to make sure we're open. I mean we worked around the clock for a few weeks and when he opened the doors, he had John Gendusa Bakery po-boy bread to serve. That really got us started. Word of mouth got around. I went out and saw old customers. A lot in business is not your product but also the ties you make. I'm a very people person. I like to keep in touch with my customers and that made a big difference when I showed up at their door. They welcomed me back with open arms. So still to that point, there were a lot of customers that were not reopening, not coming back, so it took us a good four to five years to really get

back up to where we were pre-Katrina. Luckily we're back. Things are going well and we look back on it and we don't regret anything we did.

DL: It sounds like Gene's Po-Boys was kind of like your modern day Martin's.

0:54:25

JG: That's a good one. I didn't think of that, but yeah, that's a very good way to put it.

DL: Just a few more questions. Did you ever think about another career?

0:54:35

JG: You know, after Katrina I was fortunate enough, my girlfriend at the time, now my wife, her parents lived in Baton Rouge, so I was very close. My parents were all the way in Destin, Florida. I was coming down to New Orleans a lot. A good friend of mine got me a pass to get in very early, so seeing everything firsthand in the beginning and talking to my father on the phone, we were like "Oh, there's no chance." And then you didn't know what the city was going to be like. So yeah, I remember talking to people about getting other jobs. I never had that excitement talking to him like hey, maybe I can go do this or do that. It was always like, "Man, I miss New Orleans. I miss making bread and all." So luckily things worked out the way they did because I don't know how good of an employee I would have been for somebody else because I don't know if I would have enjoyed my job.

DL: Is there anything else that you'd like to mention or talk about that I haven't touched on?

0:55:44

JG: You know really a lot of what we're doing now and a lot of stuff after Katrina, I do need to thank Mike Mizell because he really brought the po-boy to the front of people's minds which is something maybe I didn't even realize at the time was that you have McDonald's and Wendy's and whatever fast food on every corner now whereas 50 years ago that was a Po-Boys shop. I want to thank him because he's done a lot.

0:56:27

Just this whole history, a lot of this I didn't know before him. It's good for me to know now because one day I'm going to be the only one in my family that knows it. Luckily my grandmother is still alive, my father is still alive and they can pass on some of their history, but he opened the door to a lot of stuff we didn't realize. That was something he didn't have to do for us. He didn't know me or my father, but he came in and really helped us out and did a lot for us, so you know, that means a lot and that's why anytime we need to do something like this, no problem, my door is open.

DL: Thank you and we're talking about Michael Mizell Nelson who passed away in December. Do you remember how your father first met Michael Mizell Nelson?

0:57:16

JG: I believe it was the streetcar story. That was my first that I can remember. I was very young then, but I remember they came to the old location on Touro Street and did almost like a documentary on the bakery and how they made it. I know we spent a good amount of time over there. He probably did a few night shifts over there filming. That was my first – and even then to be honest, I don't really remember Michael because I was so young, but I think that was how the ties began with him and my father and Gendusa Bakery.

DL: Okay, thanks. And just in closing, is there one particular part of the production that is your absolute favorite or is there a favorite moment in the production that you love?

0:58:06

JG: Eating some hot bread. That's a good question. I think, like I said before, it all starts with the mixing process, so I think when that mixer goes off and you pick the top up and you look down and you feel and you know you got it right and it's going to turn out to be a good product for the customers. I think that's a very satisfying moment.

DL: Thank you and what is it like working with your father?

0:58:37

JG: [laughs] Can I take the Fifth? I mean it's much easier. I will say, and I think I've told him this, I think Katrina humbled him. He's a different person now. He's much easier to work with. Pre-Katrina, the best way I can describe to people was

if they remember that show American Choppers with the father and the son would build the motorcycles, well that was us just in the bakery; constantly at each other's throats. He had his old ways of doing things and I wanted to try things differently, but you know what? We survived because everything we did was for the betterment of the business. So we had our differences, but in the end, we came to agreement and we're still working together so it couldn't have been too bad.

DL: It's a big legacy to inherit.

0:59:38

JG: Yes, well it's something I hope to keep going on. If you're in New Orleans, you know where the po-boy sandwich is and you know what the po-boy bread is, so it's something I'm glad to be tied to and hopefully my kids and their kids can keep it going for generations to come.

DL: Thank you so much and thank you for filling our bread baskets and our stomachs and for being part of our collective identity as New Orleanians.

1:00:05

JG: It's my pleasure. Thank you.

Technician: (In the living room of Jason Gendusa's house right next door to his bakery.)

[room tone] 1:00:25 - 1:01:23

DL: Going back to your Italian roots or your Sicilian roots, a lot of bread bakers in New Orleans were Sicilian. Can you talk about the stories you've heard and how you feel it was important to New Orleans French bread history, the Sicilian contribution?

1:01:44

JG: Yeah well I think a big part of that Italian heritage was my great-grandfather got the idea for the po-boy shape from seeing all the different types of loaves out in Italy, so I think that played a big part in it. Another thing is they, from what I've heard, really were into the baking and I think that also comes from their Italian background because, like I said, there were bakery shops on every corner. It's like you used to see in the old time movies; the hot bread sitting on the window at the bakery and the little kids run by and grab it off. I'm sure he had some moments like that as a child. So that probably all ties into that. Another thing; it's just funny that an Italian baker is making what they call "French bread."

DL: It's true; most of the bakers that are traditional French bread bakers are German. Can you name some of the names you remember?

1:02:59

JG: Well I know Leidenheimer originated in Germany. The two Gendusa bakeries, that's Italian background. I know Mr. Alos Binder, he's German. He's got that German background so yeah, all of us different backgrounds making French bread, but not too many French bakers doing it.

DL: Great and I know that some of the Italian bakers also used to make pasta. Did you ever hear about any of the macaroni factories in the French Quarter?

1:03:30

JG: That's really something. I've never heard about [that]. That's interesting.

DL: Going back to the challenges of baking day to day, as soon as you walk in the bakery, it's obviously hard conditions; it's dusty, it's hot, it's dark. Can you talk about some of those challenges and what gets you through them?

1:03:57

JG: You know, that's a good question because a lot of people don't realize that you're making a product and you're making the same product day in and day out, so you're basically doing the same thing every day and it can get a little boring. It can kind of get you a little down at times because there's nothing new and exciting that you can expect at work except for problems, but yeah, it's really – you come in the morning, your delivery trucks go out, you start the process of making the bread. You might mix maybe 20 or 25 doughs a day and it's the same thing; you load the mixer, you mix the dough, you make the bread and start over, so it can get very monotonous. I joke with people a lot of times; I can tell them what I'll be doing ten years from now because if I'm still in the bakery business, it will be the same thing that I was doing ten years ago, so that's one of the drawbacks; you don't have – when you go to work in the morning, you don't

know what you're getting into. Well, at the bakery you do. It's going to be the same thing. I know a lot of people, some of our friends that work in sales, they like that whole excitement of who they're going to meet and how they're going to make their pitch to sell something. That's not how it is with us, it's just turn the lights on and let's do it again. That's how I feel some mornings; here we go again. You know?

DL: I don't think people realize the blood and sweat and tears that go into making the French bread until they probably walk inside your bakery. I think we take it for granted.

1:05:43

JG: It's definitely – I like to say it's a science because you really – you've got a formula and sometimes you've got to change the formula; you've got to adapt to your flour, you've got to adapt to the humidity, you've got to adapt to the outside conditions whether it's hot, cold, raining, so yeah, it's definitely more than just mixing a dough and running the dough through a machine. You've really got to – sometimes you have to change as the day changes. You might start in the morning where maybe it's cold and you have to do it a different way and if it starts to warm up or rain, then you've got to – those are the two totally different factors; cold and hot and wet, you've got to change things up drastically. Some days you might get that, not too often in New Orleans, but you might get a cold morning and then a warm, muggy afternoon and you've got to really change things up totally differently.

DL: Is there anything you do from feeling like you're bored or in a rut? I know that you have a tradition to balance with maybe trying to be creative and what gets you through those periods? What do you do to recharge or to stay motivated?

1:06:59

JG: That's a good question because, I'm sure as we all do, we all question; am I doing the right thing? But really, now that I have a family, that helps out because I know I have to keep going to provide for them, but even before that, it's just – I have a picture in my office of actually the old time Martin Brothers. It was in the [inaudible] a long time ago and when I had a rut in college, I cut that picture out and put it on my desk to give me something to work to. You know, hey, if I get through this, one day I'll be able to work in the bakery and take it over eventually. So now I kind of use that as my same motivation like hey, now I'm here, I've got to keep it going. But yeah, you definitely have your low points sometimes because your family goes on vacation, but you're stuck here working, but that helps me out and just knowing that we've been around almost 100 years, it's like there's no giving up, so that keeps you going through the day too.

DL: Do you feel like a celebrity really in the local food business?

1:08:14

JG: I don't know if I'd say all that. I'm not on TV like John [inaudible] or some of these other guys. I'm more low-key, but I do remember a few years ago we had the *New York Times* do an article on us and when I went to the gym actually at UNO, some of the guys came up to me who I didn't know and they were like,

“Hey, I saw your picture in the *New York Times*,” so it kind of made me feel a little special for a day or two, but I don’t do this for the attention or the “celebrityism” [celebrity aspect] of it. It’s strictly about making bread and putting some good stuff in people’s stomachs. You know? That’s why I do it.

DL: What did you study in college?

1:08:55

JG: Construction. [laughs] I did put it to good use after Katrina. Not only did me and my dad build the bakery, we built this house and the house they’re living in, so it came to use.

DL: Why did you choose – why did your father choose this location in Gentilly when they moved out of the Touro location?

1:09:21

JG: One problem he used to have at the Touro Street location, it was so big. You would literally walk from the steam house – when you come out of the steam house, you’ve got to go to the oven and when the bread is proofed, the slightest jolt or bump in the concrete and you can lose some of the bread. It will start to become flat and this problem at the old bakery was everything was so spread out. You came out of the steam house and you had to walk (I can’t put a [number on it]) maybe ten or fifteen yards before you got to the oven and being an old building, the floor was beat up and after you finish making the product, you had to walk a good ways. Then you had to go up a ramp to get into the steam house.

You just lost a lot of time. So when he was looking for a place, he wanted something that everything was one, two, three, bam, bam, bam and the location was perfect, the neighborhood was up and coming, it was on a main street. We used to have problems getting big deliveries down Touro Street because you'd have cars parked on both sides, you'd have power lines above. There was no place for the truck to park. You'd have to block the street up for 30 minutes sometimes, so all that played into the part of moving here and then another thing was some of the machinery at the old building was actually incorporated into the building and it was getting so old and constantly being worked on, it was time for them to get out of there.

DL: Do you know what was here before you moved in?

1:11:05

JG: I know they had a bar room at one time, there was actually a hardware store and I'm sure there were a few other things, but I remember back in high school when we started working on the building, when we removed the front wall there was an old glass door that still had (I can't remember the name of the bar) an old guy on a bicycle and it said something "bar room." We probably should have saved that, but I remember that and that was pretty cool, but I'm sure it has seen its share of businesses come through here.

DL: Do you know what happened to the Touro Street Bakery?

1:11:49

JG: We sold it to a fella who used it – to show you how big the bakery was, he actually used it to store – he had big trucks that he would store in the front part of the bakery, actually drive them in there and I believe he sold it recently and I’m not sure – I think the real decided factor as to why we moved was because the neighborhood got bad. It’s something. I don’t even ride down there anymore it’s sad to say because I would love to go see what’s become of the building, but it’s something I put in the past. That was really a big part of it was the neighborhood was starting to go down.

DL: Okay. I think it’s probably changed a lot since then too. Thank you.

Technician: I’m going to have you do one more thing Jason now that we’re all wrapped up. Can you introduce yourself just one more time?

1:12:47

JG: My name is Jason Gendusa. I’m co-owner of John Gendusa Bakery here on Mirabeau Avenue here in New Orleans and my date of birth is October 24, 1978.

[End Jason Gendusa Interview]