



Jesus Mendez
The Louis Bar

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Interviewer: Michelle Little

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Michelle Little: This is Michelle Little interviewing Jesus Mendez at The Pizitz Food Hall in Birmingham, Alabama. And today is January 25th of 2022, and this is for the Southern Foodways Alliance project on the Central Business District. So Jesus, to start us out, will you just tell me where you're from, where'd you grow up?

Jesus Mendez: Where am I from? Very detailed answer on that one.

Michelle Little: Great!

Jesus Mendez: I am born in Mexico, so Tabasco, Mexico. So out of the thirty-two states I am the most bottom state that borders Guatemala and Belize.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Jesus Mendez: Born in [19]88. I come from a small town called Los Cullos which belongs to a little inner city called Tenosique and then my capital is Balancán. It's a big, big thing. Anyways, my dad migrated here first to Birmingham, Alabama.

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And then in 1993 he came back, and he brought me and my mom.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Jesus Mendez: I think there's this cheesy question of who are your biggest heroes in life or who are you most grateful for? And there's always two people in my life. One is Arnold Soni, which

is the guy that got me into this career that I'm in, and my dad for making that life's choice of going back and getting me. 'Cause if he wouldn't have gotten me then we're not having this conversation at all. So for him just to go back, pick me and my mom up, and bring us here to the United States is the biggest, more important decision that has ever been made upon me and I'm very grateful for it, 'cause once I'm here then I have all the possibilities in the world to do what I want. I actually grew up in Arkadelphia first, then from there I moved to Bessemer and then in the [19]90s kind of I moved to Shelby County.

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I grew up in Shelby County. I went to Riverchase Middle School, went to Pelham. Then my parents ended up separating and I ended up going to Thompson High School so graduated Thompson. As a kid I was just a typical teenager living a normal life, I'm guessing. My mom had a buy-here pay-here car business, so I wasn't really in the food scene just yet, but I was learning how to actually be more hands on and work and clean cars and sell cars and my communication skills were kind of clicking in a little bit. Unfortunately, some mistakes were made and that business kind of died off. My mom ended up going back to Mexico and at that time, like I stated, my parents separated so I wasn't talking to my father either.

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So I believe in 2010 I'm broke, I've got, I think, if I remember, thirty-five, thirty-six dollars in my pocket, and I need a job. And so what does somebody like me do who doesn't know what to do period? I actually go and apply for a job at Frontera Grill in Hoover. I walk in and I ask for a job

and they say no, they're not hiring. So that was the first door to close on me. I was totally confused. I'm, like, wait, I thought restaurants were always hiring, a dishwasher, anything. I just needed a job. I just needed to eat something. And then a friend of mine named Alex Plata [sp] gives me a shout and he was, like, "Hey, man, we're hiring for servers at Margarita Grill in Pelham with Javier Jerez." And I'm, like, "Okay." And I walk in there and there's this man printing up his menus. And I walk in, I'm, like, "Hey, sir. I heard you guys were hiring."

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And he looks at me and he's, like, "Yeah. Have you ever served before?" I'm, like, "No." "Have you ever bartended before?" I was, like, "No." "Have you ever managed?" "No." And he was, like, "Well, damn."

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: "You speak really good English." I'm, like, "Oh, well, thanks." [Laughter] He's, like, "Well, I think we can do something for you." I'm, like, "Oh, all right." So we do that. He was, like, "Do you want to come back later today at four?" I'm, like, "Yes, sir." I walk out, go back in my car, walk right back in, and I'm, like, "Well, what do I do? I'm confused. What do I wear?" He's, like, "Well, you need to get a black shirt, black pants, and some black shoes." I'm, like, "Yes, sir." And at that time I think I only had the black shirt, the black jeans, but not the shoes. So I asked my ex-girlfriend at the time, "Loan me thirty bucks." And she did, bless her. I paid her back the next week, by the way.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: Go to Walmart, buy me some shoes, and that was just the beginning.

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It's just serving tables at this restaurant-- it was a Mexican restaurant-- came so naturally. I didn't really fall in love with what I was doing, maybe about a year or two in once they moved me up to floor managing. And so from there I started really engaging in restaurant ownership and restaurant management and leading staff and teaching my staff and just encouraging them and being like a good leader that I was trying to be at that time. From there I think what I realized what my skillset was was hospitality. I get a high of serving people and making them feel a certain way in an environment or an establishment. Or the way that I came out with the fajitas or the way that I celebrated their kid's birthdays. I just loved how everybody was just so happy with me.

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Honestly, I think the trick to selling your product is the building that relationship with the guest. If you come to Unos Tacos and you really don't like my tacos but if I'm giving you such a good service you can be, like, "Hey, Jesus, I really don't like the chicken tacos." "Yeah, of course. We can change it out for something else, or do you want a gift card? Do you want your money back?" As long as we're happy with each other then I'm happy. I'll take the loss on the quesadilla or the burrito, whatever, but I know you'll come back again.

Michelle Little: Um-hm.

Jesus Mendez: I think later on life kinda happened. I tried to do the whole gettin' married thing and trying to have kids and settle down. Unfortunately, that was not me. It just wasn't me. I'm not too proud of it but it is what it is. So I had to really learn the hard way by making my first adult mistakes at a young age.

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And my morale went down. My work ethic dropped dramatically. Started losing a lot of weight. I wasn't really the Jesus or the Chuy that people knew at that time, and I ended up losing my job at Margarita Grill. I worked there for about five years. As I lost my job, I think I was jobless for one day until Cocina Superior gave me a shot. The word started spreading by, like, hey, there's this-- thankfully, I've always been good-- there's this guy, he's looking for a job, he's good, just give him a chance. And they gave me a call and were, like, "Hey, we're hiring for servers. We know you were a manager at that other restaurant, but this is the best we can do for you right now." I'm, like, "Yeah, man. I'll take it." And that was my first job in Birmingham, Alabama. Complete culture shock, by the way. Because working in Brookwood is completely different than working in Pelham, Alabama.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Jesus Mendez: The kids yell differently. The servers are different. The cooks are different. Everybody thinks differently.

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It was so weird. I was just, like, what's going on? It was a brand-new challenge. And once again I felt like I didn't know what I was doing again 'cause it was a brand-new restaurant. I technically forgot how to serve because I didn't understand that environment, but once again I adapted to it. I was at Cocina Superior for maybe three years, but I took complete advantage of every single day that I was there. I wasn't gonna make the same mistakes that I made at Margarita Grill, and what I mean by that is that everybody that came in and interacted with me either at the bar-- 'cause I eventually moved up to bartending, as well, and management also-- it was just always my hunger to be at the top. I just made it like a life goal every single day to interact with as many people as possible, to network with as many people as possible, to just make as many friendships as possible because I truly believe that every door opens a new door.

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And a lot of business opportunities opened up while I was there, but I never took any of them. I'm not going to throw any restaurant names out there, but I just said no to them 'cause I was happy at Cocina. My life actually started changing towards my last six months at Cocina, like, late 2017 when I realized that I wanted way more. And I met my current business partner, Arnold Soni, and he kept trying to make me go work with him at Taco Mama 'cause that was one of his concepts. He's a licensee there. And I just kept saying no 'cause as an entrepreneur I was looking at my vision, but I wasn't looking at the vision that somebody who's actually doing it and making it was trying to show me. I was only seeing what I wanted to see, but he was trying to

show me bigger things and I was just being ignorant to the fact, like, no, I can do this on my own type of situation.

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But you can't. You need help. And then something happened at Cocina kind of personal, but I ended up just quitting. It was not my home no more. It was not where I wanted to be anymore. There was just no more room for growth for me there 'cause I knew ultimately what I wanted in life and that was to own a restaurant in Birmingham, Alabama. I even made a post on my Facebook late 2016, like, "I'm gonna open up a taco place and a tequila bar in Birmingham, Alabama one day." And it's still there. I'll show it to you.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] Yeah.

Jesus Mendez: 'Cause I knew that's what I wanted. And I knew that at Cocina I wasn't going to get it. So I quit late December and as soon as I quit, I started telling all my regulars, like, "Hey, this is my last week. It was an honor to serve you." One of them being James Allen.

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He's a pretty big-- how would I describe him?-- pretty big deal in the city. He owns Birmingham Legion. He owns a couple other companies here, as well. And then he asks me, "Well, what's next?" I'm, like, "I don't know, man. I think I'm gonna go to Taco Mama or I think I'm gonna go apply for restaurants downtown. I just want to be more involved in the city to grow in it, but I just don't know how to do it yet." One way or another, either through him or I believe my friend

Mark [sp] my name came across with the Stitts. And I believe her name was Ann Stevens [sp]-- I think she was in charge of human resources for the Stitts Company-- gave me a call and she was, like, "Would you like to interview and see if you wanted to work with us?" Me being oblivious to who Frank Stitt and Pardis Stitt is, and what Highlands and Bottega and Chez Fonfon were. "Sure." I don't know who the heck they are. I did chips and salsa, like I said, from 2010 all the way to 2017, 2018.

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That's all I know. I don't know that group. I go and I interview with Pardis. And talk about an interview! This woman looks you in your eyes and sees through your soul and just digs you up, just picks you apart just to make sure that you're the right person for her team, as she should. And we did, like, a two-hour interview just talking about my work ethic, where I come from, what we're doing now, what do I want in life. And we finish up the interview and for two weeks I'm still jobless, by the way. I ended up going to work at Taco Mama just because I needed to have a job, so I'm very grateful that Arnold took me in. And he was gonna use me for a different project instead because the job offers that he was offering before were already gone.

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And so he just kind of was helping me put food on my table, and I was just very grateful for that. So two weeks go by and the Stitts don't call me and I'm losing it 'cause I don't want to work at Taco Mama. I want to work at a restaurant. I want to keep growing. I applied at EastWest. Didn't

get a call from them. I applied and Hot and Hot. Didn't get a call from them. I don't know if I need to be saying this or not.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: I applied at Bistro 218. Didn't get a call from them. Nobody was wanting me, and I felt really bad, just, like, why does nobody want me? Because my resume was just chips and salsa, I guess, and they wanted five years of fine dining experience or they wanted you to be a sommelier or they wanted you to work somewhere in the-- I probably would've passed up on me, too. Pardis finally gives me a call back. She was, like, "Hey, sorry. We were busy, but can you come in Tuesday?" I'm, like, "Yes, I can."

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I actually worked for them for three months. And if anybody that knows how to work with the Stitts realizes that you train for four to six weeks, you take your test, and then you start seeing tables. I trained for three to four months because nothing was clicking. Nothing was making sense. And I was getting very, very angry at myself. Actually, I was getting angry at them but that was just me being selfish because I was not letting myself adapt to a new environment. I kept trying to go back to chips and salsa. Which there's nothing wrong with that. People are still in that which is okay. But I knew that if I wanted to get to the next level of restaurants and bars and hospitality that I really needed to suck it up and open up a book and keep training and pass these tests that they were throwing at me.

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Eventually, I quit. I called Ryan [sp], which was the manager at Highlands at that time-- this was, like, in April-- after four months in, I'm, like, "I can't do this, dude. I am so sorry. Thank you for investing all these months in me. Thank you for believing in me, but I'm not coming to the shift this afternoon." And he was just, like, "What do you mean?" I'm, like, "I can't work with you guys anymore. I just don't understand what the hell is going on. Your menu keeps changing. I don't know. I keep failing the sansera [sp] test. I don't even know what sansera is"-- now I know-- "And then the chef comes in, he says all these really crazy words on animals I don't know existed. I don't know what's going on, man." And he was just, like, "No, no, no, no. How about this? Take tonight off." I'm, like, "Ryan, I just said I'm not coming in. I'm already taking off." [Laughter] "What are you telling me to take off for?" He's, like, "I'm gonna give you a call back." I'm, like, "Yes, sir."

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Calls me back about two hours later. He's, like, "Hey, you have another meeting with Pardis at Bottega at one-thirty at Bottega Dining. Okay?" I just told you I quit, man. What is so hard about that? [Laughter] And I'm, like, "Fine, whatever." So that was a Tuesday. Here comes Friday. I sit down. Here comes Pardis again. I call her mom because this lady talks to me like a mom. She still does when I see her. And she was, like, "Jesus, what's going on, now?" And I'm, like, "Look, man. Thank you but I don't get it. I don't understand." More deeper questions. She was just, like, "I think it's Highlands." And I'm, like, "What do you mean?" "I don't think you belong at

Highlands." "Okay." And then she was, like, "I think you belong at another restaurant." I'm, like, "Yeah, I know that already."

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: "Where do you want to go?" And I'm trying to be funny, "Well, because I'm Latino and I can speak Spanish I was thinking maybe I could come to Bottega if you want to take me here."

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She's, like, "That's a possibility. That's a possibility." And we leave it at that. She calls me back later that afternoon and she sends me to Chez Fonfon, which is Highlands' little sister, basically. I walk into my first day of training at Fonfon and it just all clicked. It all made sense. I think it was just the change of environment is what I needed. Trained for, like, four weeks, took my test, and I just became good. Everything came in. I was very, very happy there. I would probably still be with them there unless Arnold Soni wouldn't have gotten back into the picture again. So Arnold Soni, even though I wasn't his full-time employee, he gave me a call and he was, like, "Hey, man." I was, like, "Hey, what's up?" "I got something for you." I'm, like, "Yes, sir. What's up? What's going on?" He was just, like, "Have you heard of The Louis Bar at The Pizitz?"

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I'm, like, "I've never heard of The Louis Bar. I've never even heard of The Pizitz. What are you talking about?" He was, like, "Okay. Listen, hear me out. There's this bar in the middle of

downtown and I'm really good friends with the people over at Bayer. And they approached me, and I will go in there with you, and I'll support you, whatever you need, if you do this with me." I'm, like, "Hell, yeah, I'll do this for you. Why would I say no?" And that was, like, a Thursday morning. And he called sometime in the middle of August-- I remember that-- when he gave me that news. And that's when I started realizing my life was gonna change. Everything that I'd ever wanted and worked for was happening. The bar that I wanted downtown was about to happen. Being a business owner was about to finally happen. All these years of being in the restaurant business what I've always wanted to be was about to happen. And I met with Bayer. I met with some really great people.

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At that time it was Catherine Holcombe who was the manager here. Mindy [sp] was super sweet. She was very supportive the entire time here. Christopher [sp], all their attorneys, everybody was just very supportive, and they believed in me and Arnold the entire way. But they were also very cutthroat, "This is what we need, and this is what we need from you now." And I'm, like, "Can you do that?" In the back of my head, I'm, like, "Yeah." [Laughter] But I don't know until I get in if I can really do it or not.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Jesus Mendez: And after that we signed some documents, signed some paperwork, and they brought me in October 2018, to The Pizitz Food Hall. And coming in here automatically I kind

of just saw what the bar was and what it needed. And it started off with customer service. I hope the staff that I had before doesn't hear this, or maybe they do.

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But I'm, like, nobody cares if you make the perfect margarita or if you serve the coldest beer, but if you don't got the best attitude and the best intentions with your guests and if you don't know how to read who's on the other side from you wanting to give you money for a product, you're not gonna make it in this industry, especially in Birmingham, in my opinion. In my opinion. I don't know what anybody else says. But if you don't have that down, why should I come to The Louis Bar? Why should I buy tacos at Unos Tacos? It didn't make any sense to me. And that was the big red flag of the program at that time. And me coming in I just had to really clear and wash that out and start brand new and try and regain all those customers again and do what I've done in every single restaurant all over again. I figured out what The Louis was and I kind of tell everybody, oh, The Louis is an airport bar. It's a bar where everybody comes in for a quick drink, a quick meal, happy hour, their first date, their first argument, their business, they do everything here.

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All walks of life come in here. Men in really nice suits and tie from the business direct come by. A single mother with five of her kids from the McWane Center will come by and get burgers and she'll want a quick shot. I was seeing everything that I've learned in my career in one bar, and it was beautiful because I knew how to treat everybody. And I've seen a lot of things go down. A

lot of, like I said, business deals. I've met some girlfriends there before. Stuff like that. First dates. I've seen breakups. It's just such a remarkable place right in the middle of the hall that everybody just kind of comes together as a family or friends and as a community just to eat and interact, and especially when we have special events. I loved it. I enjoy it. I love what it is. Then little by little my entrepreneurship started to click even more.

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I was going to settle with The Louis and then an opportunity for tacos came up. So I did a little bit of market research. I went to New York, I went to L.A., I went to Atlanta and I kind of picked a thing from each space that I went to. One was Los Tacos No. 1 in New York City. Those guys were rocking out their guests in less than six minutes. As soon as you got in line of a forty-people line you had your meal in less than ten minutes even though it was a line of forty people. They were just knocking it out. And I just sat there for an hour just watching the mechanics of that particular food stall run. I picked that up from them. I went to L.A., and I really started looking at what meats they were selling and how they were presenting them and what sauces were they offering. And then I came back home and at this time my dad came back into my life.

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And he's a really good cook, him and my stepmom are. My real mom's in Mexico, by the way, so my stepmom and my dad are still here. And they would always host these little dinners for me and my friends and my partners and I started looking at the food and I'm, like, I can brand this. We can actually sell this. And I talked to my dad about it and he's, like, "Yeah, let's just start

selling tacos." I'm, like, "All right, well let me . . ." Me and Vinh who owns Ono Poke is my partner there. I'm, like, "Vinh, let's do tacos, man." He was, like, "Yeah, man. I got you. I'll support you with whatever you need." We talked to Bayer, we figured out a lease, and we take over the stall where we're at now. And we were supposed to open up March 16th, 2020, and I don't know if you guys heard about this pandemic that happened in 2020?

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: The city shuts down.

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No. We were supposed to open up March 22nd. The city shuts down March 16th.

Michelle Little: Um-hm.

Jesus Mendez: It was a very odd time. The cities were dead. You didn't see this at all. Nobody was walking. The food hall was empty on a usually busy afternoon. Just empty. So it was just very eerie what was going on. And I get on my Instagram, and I see multiple restaurants just closing for two weeks 'cause they thought it was gonna last two weeks, whatever that was.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: And then I finally make my announcement. Well, I contact Bayer first. I'm, like, "Hey, I want to make this announcement I'm closing two weeks. I think you should post something on The Pizitz Food Hall, as well." And then we shut down for two weeks. And then,

on the second week I think it finally hit me that potentially my career was over because food and beverage is what I do, man, and nobody was coming out.

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And a lot of my money had gone into Unos to start that up and we never got our grand opening. And then I have staff, I have my parents who quit their jobs 'cause they were gonna come work with me and do this, so I have all this pressure on me. And I admit it, I cried. I cried for, like, three hours, just bawling out. Just this sucks, I'm over with. How am I gonna come back from this? I was in my emotions. I had a couple of drinks that night. I cried myself to sleep, I think. I wake up and I'm just, like, what am I doing? Why do I feel this way? Get over it. Let's just figure this out. I go to my dad's house and he's just there watching Telemundo drinking coffee.

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And I'm, like, "Are you not stressed?" And he was, like, "No." My dad's old generation Mexican. He's still in there cooking. He's 57 years old now. He has three jobs. He's here with me. He goes and cleans offices, then he goes on the weekends to do landscaping. He's still active. How [**does he** 0:26:24] do that? I don't know. But I'm looking at my dad, I'm, like, "Dad, what are we gonna do? I'm just concerned." And he's just listening, drinking his coffee, watching TV like nothing's going on. And I'm, like, "Are you okay?" And he was, like, "Yeah. I got two jobs. I'm fine." [Laughter] 'Cause he still gets paid with his other jobs. And I'm, like, "Dad, this is going to be really stupid, but I think I'm gonna open up Tacos and start doing this curbside thing. I don't

know. Everybody's doing it and it seems like it works. Why don't we do it?" And my dad's looking at me, "Sure, if that's when you wanna do we'll go cook and you go sell it."

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And I'm, like, "All right. Perfect. We'll do that." And so I called my partners. I called two of 'em and I called Vinh, I'm, like, "Vinh, bro, I think I'm gonna open up Tacos curbside. I'm gonna start selling some margaritas with the girls," my bartenders basically. And he was, like, "You know that's crazy, right?" "Yeah, but I have to do it." And he was just, like, "Bro, that's not gonna work. Nobody's downtown. Nobody's in their businesses anymore." It's, like, "Bro, I don't know, man, I just gotta figure it out. I'm broke. All my money is there. I need to sell something." He's, like, "Man, just tell me if you need something, bro. I don't know what to tell you." And I called my other partner, I tell him the same thing. [**I'm** 0:27:49], like, "Are you crazy? No, no. That's not gonna work." And I'm, like, "No, but I need to do it." And he's just, like, "Man if you need something [**I got us**, 0:27:57] just let us know but we can't be there." 'Cause they own other restaurants too so they're handling their own restaurants too.

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And I'm, like, "All right, man. Well, thanks but I'm gonna make this work out." So we end up opening curbside March 26th, I believe, on a Monday. And I just started blowing it hard on my Instagram. And had a friend named Kalen Owings [sp]. She lives in New York now. But she did all my photography, so I had really good content. Got on Pinterest. I started looking up all these funny taco quotes just to build up hype.

Michelle Little: Um-hm.

Jesus Mendez: And I'm, like, hey, guys, I know this is the worst time to open up a concept, but I got tacos if you guys are feeling lonely. Just come by and get some foods at The Pizitz Food Hall. Keep in mind the building's shut down.

Michelle Little: Right.

Jesus Mendez: It's just me, my parents, and two other staff members, my bartenders. And everything is dark. It's like a zombie land basically.

Michelle Little: Wow.

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Jesus Mendez: We open up that day-- I think it was a Tuesday-- and we sell out by 1:30.

Michelle Little: That's awesome.

Jesus Mendez: The community came out and-- like, I wanna cry now.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Jesus Mendez: The community just came out and supported it so dramatically. And I was just, like, what is going on? How did we do this? I told my parents-- my dad, still being my dad, was, like, "Okay. So do we make more chicken?"

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: And I'm, like, "Yeah, Dad, we gotta make more chicken!" And I tell my stepmom. She's, like, this small. She speaks no English. It was hilarious. I'm, like, "Hey, we're doing it. We're making it. People like your food." 'Cause it's her recipes. She's, like, "Do they really?" I'm, like, "Yeah, Mom. They love it!"

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: And she's, like, "Okay. Okay." So she goes off and cooks more stuff. I think we sell out every single day that week and then the next week more people started coming by. And we just rode that thing. We rode the COVID curbside wave until we opened up June 10th.

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And even then, it was still warming. I do got a funny story about Cinco de Mayo if anybody follows me on Instagram from Unos.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Jesus Mendez: So I usually host a Cinco de Mayo party at Pizitz every year, so 2019 was my first year doing it and we did so well. And we actually did tacos outside. My dad was out there just cooking with a skillet, and we sold out then, too.

Michelle Little: Oh, my.

Jesus Mendez: So that was our first, like, we got something going on type of idea. 2020 I'm, like, look, this is a good day to make some money. Let me just throw another Cinco de Mayo party. So I buy a bunch of tequila. I prep, like, forty pounds of chicken. I prep, like, thirty pounds of

steak. In my head I'm forecasting my sales. Like, all right, I'm going to put this staff member here, my employee over here. I'm gonna prep this, I'm gonna prep that. We're gonna make this happen.

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Apparently, COVID doesn't exist Cinco de Mayo. It does not. Everybody comes out.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: And I did not know this. We sell out of food again Cinco de Mayo around 12:30, so there was a line already at 10:30 Cinco de Mayo, and I think it was on a Wednesday that year. And my bartenders come back up and they're, like, "Yo, we need to shut it down." I'm, like, "No, no. We can't shut it down. I cannot just promote a party like this and then not have food for people. Let's just close down for four hours just to recover, get all the food all over again." And, like, "Okay, sure." We take about four hours prepping all the chicken, all the meats, all the sauces, all the rice and beans, everything, trying to get in back in order 'cause people were still out here waiting. And here comes 6:15, 6:30 my bartender comes back up to me and she's, like, "Jesus." I'm, like, "Yeah." "You really need to shut it down." And I'm, like, "No, we can't do this." 'Cause I'm in the kitchen. I don't have no clue what's going on out here.

Michelle Little: Um-hm.

Jesus Mendez: She's, like, "No. You don't understand. People are yelling at me for their food."

Michelle Little: Ohh.

Jesus Mendez: I'm, like, "What?!" She's, like, "Yeah, you can't do this."

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I'm, like, "Yeah, I can." Like, "No, no, Chuy, you really can't. There's a line all the way to McWane Center." Keep in mind, our taco spot was right here, by the way. We were sitting outside here. The line for tacos was down that way.

Michelle Little: Oh, my gosh.

Jesus Mendez: And so I'm, like, "No, you're lying." And so I walk out, there's about thirty people on that side waiting for their meals. We have our post right here. There's a line all the way down to the McWane to get tacos.

Michelle Little: Wow!

Jesus Mendez: I come out so happy, just like another Birmingham community thing, like, oh, my God, the city does show up for stuff! They're so supportive.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Jesus Mendez: But at the same time so embarrassed.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: I'm, like, "Guys, thank y'all so much for supporting me and my family, our staff during these crazy times-- wear your mask, you know-- but we're sold out of food. I am so sorry."

0:33:05

I'm going to say about fifty percent of the people clapped. The other fifty percent were really pissed off.

Michelle Little: Ohh.

Jesus Mendez: It's, like, "Boo! What the hell, dude!" Just being people. But either way, I still loved them, 'cause I don't care. How do I prep for that? There's no way to prepare for Cinco de Mayo on COVID. So there's this joke. I'm gonna share it. I don't know who this lady is, by the way. I obviously closed down, we still keep serving margaritas, and this lady texts me around 6:15, 6:30. Keep in mind, my cell phone was the landline at that time so if you wanted to place a to-go order you would call me. I'm sweeping and mopping my floors around 10:30 or 11:00 that night.

0:34:00

Oh, it was on a Tuesday that day. Oh, so it was a taco Tuesday, too. That's crazy.

Michelle Little: Oh, no! [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: And this is when you know, when you read stuff like this, that you really do love people. She messages me-- it's a post though-- she's, like, I'm trying to place an order for tacos [inaudible 0:34:18] but it keeps going straight to voicemail. Okay, as it should. You're calling me at 6:12. That's a busy-- Cinco de Mayo, it's dinner.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Jesus Mendez: Then she texted me back at 9:44. Oh, no, that's when I texted her back. I'm sorry. She texted me back later and she was, like, "If you can't handle the crowds when you post the special maybe you shouldn't have a special at all. I find it ridiculous that you can't even answer a phone on Cinco de Mayo. Congrats on running out of food at six p.m. on the biggest Mexican holiday in The States. Thanks for absolutely nothing." I read it and I just wound up saying, "Thank you."

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: And that was the pinnacle of, like, I love people so much, that they get angry that they can't support you.

Michelle Little: Wow.

0:35:03

That's how I twisted it in my head. Like, I want to buy something from you, but you keep running out of food.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: And after that I just told all my staff, "Man, we're doing something good. Let's just keep this going and let's try and do better each day." But we never really know. It's so hard 'cause this community keeps growing and growing and growing, and new faces, like, I've never seen that guy before. And we got to treat them all the exact same way. And ever since then, we've kind of just been building Unos as a brand. And I show them this. I'm, like, "You're gonna

come across people like this but you still gotta love them. Okay?" And they're, like, "Okay. Okay." "Don't give them attitude. Just refund them their money or give them an extra taco. Just figure it out." And ever since then we've been doing very, very well, being here, seeing what The Pizitz is finally becoming I'm very proud of, 'cause I'm part of it.

0:36:03

All these new operators like Erica Barrett with SOCU is coming in. The gentleman with Thirstea is coming in. The management that's here taking care of us with Arlington is great. There are great people at Bayer, Libby and Mindy. All of them are very involved here and they care. And whenever I have a complaint or an issue, I'm, like, "Hey, how can we fix this?" And we fix it. The way that, by this time next year, The Pizitz will be what it needs to be. We'll have new concepts everywhere, new faces. I feel like COVID will still be around, but it won't be as impactful as it is, I feel. I don't know. I'm not a scientist.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: And I'm glad to just be part of it. And as I'm here, keep going in the community, as well. We're looking at doing a coffee concept.

0:36:56

We're also doing Adios, which is the way that I sell it and the way that I present it, it's more of a Mexican-inspired cocktail bar. We're not a tequila bar, we're not a mezcal bar, we're not a big flashy colorful lights and Day of the Dead stuff everywhere type bar. No, we're not that. We're

trying to really incorporate and teach people in this community, as well, what Mexico really is about with all of our spices, all of our vegetables, all our fruits, all of our other spirits that we do drink, cognacs, brandies, rums. We do gins, as well. It's not just tequila. And everything that I've learned from Margarita Grill up until here is going to be a big presentation of what that bar program will be. And so we're very excited for that, as well. And that's all I got.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] Now, where did you really learn to bartend?

Jesus Mendez: Margarita Grill. I lied my way to that one, too. I was serving a table and one of the bartenders had a crush on me--I don't blame her-- and she was, like, "Hey, you should come bartend with me."

0:38:05

And I'm, like, "Yeah, why not." And so she brought up my name to management and I think it was my second year there. And the manager there whose name was also Jesus, hence how I got Chuy, was, like, "Do you know how to bartend?" And I'm, like, "Yeah." He said, "Well, okay." And so I go back there. And bartending-- hopefully I don't sound rude for saying this but bartending on that side of town isn't what it is here. A bartender at a Mexican restaurant like me at Margarita Grill at that time would not succeed at Queen's Park. I could work the doubles, I could work five days straight, I wouldn't care, but I didn't know what a French 75 was. I didn't know what an Old Fashioned was.

0:39:01

I didn't even know the right way to make a margarita. I thought margaritas this entire time were just tequila and powdered mix. I thought that's what it was. So working there I developed more communication skills and way more speed. And I was just making a bunch of Jack and Cokes, Coors Light out of the tap, the margarita mix with the tequila and I wasn't even shaking it. I was just giving it out to you, and you were drinking that stuff and you were loving it.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: And there wasn't really much room to build knowledge on that. And selfishly I never thought that bartending was a big deal, as much as I love it now and as much a big deal it is to me now. I was way more focused on management at that time until I got at Cocina Superior. Their bar program was still lacking a little bit, which I caught on later on, but when it was presented to me-- I started off as a server there, as well.

0:40:03

Moved up to bartender literally three months later. They just jumped me right in. And that's when I started seeing French 75s, Weehawken [sp] Old Fashioneds. I started looking at wine bottles, a pinot grigio, a chardonnay, a pinot noir. I was just, like, what is this stuff? I started looking at a whole different market of local beers like Good People. I've never seen a Good People IPA before, but that was the first time where I saw it. And so these new words started popping up in my head, like, what does that mean? And that's really when I started falling in love with tequila. They had a huge tequila selection there so I would just go up there, pick out a bottle and just study it and read it, where did it come from, how long was aged from, what distillery

was it coming from, why are they selling it? All this stuff. And then I realized that I had no clue how to bartend until the Stitts took me in.

0:41:02

When Pardis was trying to figure out what my position was gonna be, 'cause she saw my resume and she really believed in me, she was either gonna put me as a manager-- she staged me for a manager. Failed at that. Then she put me behind the bar for two days and the bartenders there were, like, "Hey, Jesus, Old Fashioned, please." "Oh, shoot. What's in that?" And they'd look at me, "Didn't you apply to be a bartender?" I'm, like, "Yeah." "An Old Fashioned, dude. Come on!" I don't know. Then they'd automatically [snapping fingers] [**no more** 0:41:35]. They don't play that. It's a prestigious bar. You can't just show up and fake it. And then got demoted to wait staff, which is basically the guy that just fills up your water. And I was there for about three months just 'cause I wanted to be in with the Stitts, you know. And then eventually finally passed my test, hence how I got into Chez Fonfon.

0:42:01

And then, at Chez Fonfon, to me I was dominating the server scene. I was just really good with people, taking multiple orders, interacting with guests, and they approached me about bartending. And that was the pinnacle of my career with the Stitts. I wanted to be a Frank Stitt bartender because, as far as I know, somebody could correct me, I think I was the second Latino or Mexican-- somebody from Mexico to be in the front of the house in all of their restaurants. Nobody in Fonfon was Mexican in front of the house, nobody at Highlands was Mexican in front

of the house. There was one Mexican at Bottega. I think he's still there. He's super cool. Bottega Dining, I mean. But nobody else. That was it. So to me that was a huge-- I need to be the first Mexican bartender that he's ever had. I want to be the first-- I want to be proud and tell my other Latino friends, I'm, like, yeah, you bartend there but I bartend with this guy.

0:43:05

And at the same time, I want to be, like, "Why don't you come work with me?" "No, we never could." "No, but I'll teach you how, I'll get you in, I'll give you the basics and then you go work with them." 'Cause I wanted to see way more Latinos in this community as well. Which is another topic that we can talk about. But to me I was just so proud. It was such a proud moment. And there was a trainer there called Angel Negron [sp]. Angel knows his stuff. Angel is the type of bartender that will look at a bottle and if he doesn't understand what's going on he'll look for the customer service, call them, and just wait.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: And he'll just wait until they answer and, like, "Hey, what does this mean?" And that's how involved he is about his knowledge in spirits and wine and beverage and stuff like that. And so just listening to him talk and then him pick apart certain things in my head that were blocking me from understanding certain things really got me into bartending. So I owe him some good recognition, as well.

0:44:03

And later on is when I got that call from Arnold to come here. And then, so when I came here, everything that I had kind of sharpened my skills at with the Stitts I just placed it here and it worked.

Michelle Little: That's awesome. And while we're still talking about your time at the Stitts, can you tell the story you told me earlier about . . .

Jesus Mendez: Oh, with "the" Pizitz?

Michelle Little: "The" Pizitz.

Jesus Mendez: Okay. "The" Pizitz.

Michelle Little: I love this story. [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: So it's a busy Saturday afternoon. I had gone out the night before. I actually remember just walking in so sloppy. I don't even think I took a shower. Just very disappointing moment. Please don't get mad at me, Pardis.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: But I walk in, I'm late, and we have this thing in all restaurants, they have a lineup. But with the Stitts we had to line up in one little corner of Fonfon. And what that means is that all the servers and bartenders get in a little circle. The sous-chef comes out and he explains the menu to us.

0:45:04

And then, the manager is there, as well. And basically, it's just like a refresh of what's going on that day. Is the setup on the fish a grouper or a swordfish today? Is it skin on or is not skin on? Hey, we're out of this wine, we're gonna replace it with this new one. Just so we can interact with our guests better. And I'm just there a little bit too laid back that day and all of a sudden here comes in Pardis, which she never really does that often, but she comes in and literally the mood changes everywhere because here comes mama bear. And when I see her, I'm, like, "Oh, shit."

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: So I start fixing my tie, fix my belt, sit in my chair. I just looked like a precious little angel. And so she takes over the lineup. Goes to one server, asks a question, and this girl answers perfectly. And by perfectly, I mean when she asks you what's the setup on the entrée, she wants you to sing it to her, which is what we did at that time.

0:46:02

We told you the most beautiful story of this fish out in the gulf that got caught by a mermaid. I don't know. We had to sing it as perfectly as possible to you. And she looks at me and she's, like, "Jesus, can you please tell me the setup on the pork loin?" I start choking, of course, stuttering and just choking. I'm, like, "Okay. It's oven roasted with some loins from Niman Ranch out of Tennessee?" And she was, like, "Is it from Tennessee?" I'm, like, "Uh, yeah, it's from Tennessee. And then it's oven roasted in rosemary?" And she gives me this look, and that's when I knew that I was done for. And I'm, like, "Thyme?" And then she was, like, "Don't you know the setup?" And I'm, like, "I do, I just got nervous. I'm sorry." And she was, like, "No. You need to know the

setup." Looks at my manager. She gets chewed out. The manager looks at me like she's about to tear me a new one.

0:47:02

And the lineup is over and then she takes me to the office. My manager is, like, "Hey, man. You can't do that. How do you not know the setup on the pork loin? It's a staple on the menu. You've been here six months now, four months now. What's going on?" I'm, like, "I'm so sorry. I just choked. I got nervous." She's, like, "I get that, but you can't do that 'cause you never know who's going to walk in, if it's the senator, if it's the single mom going to the McWane Center, or if it's Pardis, or if it's anybody you gotta sing." And I'm, like, "Okay, okay, okay." Either way I'm on the hot seat the rest of the day. And all of a sudden here comes in Mr. Jonathan Pizitz, very tall older gentleman, white hair. I remember he was wearing a white shirt, a brown suit, and blue shoes. You [can't not 0:47:53] miss him. And he walks in I believe with his wife and another couple, and they sit at a very corner of the bar at Fonfon at a section near the windows.

0:48:04

And it's my table. And so Ashley comes by, and she was, like, "Hey, this is Jonathan Pizitz." And I'm, like, "Okay." She was, like, "VIP service. He likes his servings like this, like that."

[Pause in recording]

Michelle Little: Okay.

Jesus Mendez: Yeah. [inaudible 0:48:25]

Michelle Little: Do you remember where you-- I love that you remember what he was wearing. That's amazing! [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: Yes. I remember he comes in; I remember what he ordered, too, and they got a bottle of wine. And so they sit down, and I go introduce myself. Ashley comes up and she tells me, "Hey, this is those Pizitz," blah, blah, blah, gives me the entire spiel. "You need to be very attentive with this. He doesn't like this so don't say this." It's just their VIP list. The list still exists. There are certain people that like certain things, and that's just part of the hospitality culture at the Stitts.

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And then it creates the full experience for you when you walk in. So I'm looking at all the notes. I'm, like, damn. Okay. All right. Well, I'm gonna go and just be myself like I've always been since day one at Margarita Grill, just like me. I've never believed that I have to change my personality for anybody. And so I go, give them the entire spiel, "Good evening. My name is Jesus. Let me know if you need anything. The fish of the day is this. The special of the day is this. Set up is this," blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Everything as I normally sing it. But the entire time Jonathan is not even saying a word to me. He's just looking at me with these eyes of, like, who are you type of eyes. And I'm looking at him back, like, what are you looking at, dude? And then he would just point at the menu and tell me what he wants. And I remember he had gotten the trout amandine, which is like a skin-on trout.

0:50:03

The fish is coming from somewhere from South Carolina-- I remember that--

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: -- with some green beans and potatoes. And I don't think he liked the almonds on there. Anyways, I remember that's what he got and then his wife got something else. They had shared a bottle of white and a bottle of red. And I would just do my spiel, just talking to them. And I just keep trying to break him. At that point it became like a challenge 'cause, like, why is he not talking to me? So it's already gonna bother me a little bit. Like, "Mr. Pizitz--" 'cause I knew that was his name-- "can I get you this or that?" "Just gave me the whole-- like, get out of my face type of situation. I'm, like, damn, dude.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: And so towards the end of his service for his table he starts getting dessert, gets coffee. I remember that. I'm in the back of Fonfon getting some silverware ready, I forgot what I was doing, and I see him get up.

0:51:00

Grabs his napkin, lays it down, and he walks towards the entrance and starts talking to my manager. And I'm just, like, I swear I just went over there, and he doesn't need anything. What is going on? I'm, like, man, I can't have another F-up right now. I'm already in the hot seat for this pork loin. This is not a good look. And then they both look at me and then he points at me. And I look back at him now and I'm, like, oh, yeah, I'm done for. And I'm just, like, what's going on?

So I go over there and I'm, like, "Mr. Pizitz, everything okay?" He looks at me and just nods, like, the whole yes, and then they keep on going with their day. I give them their checks-- split checks, by the way. I remember that. They pay out and signed it off, Jonathan Pizitz, and paid with an Amex. I remember that. And I finish out the rest of my night. End of the night, Ashley, the manager at that time, comes up to me and she's, like, "Hey, I need to talk to you." So we go back into the little office again where I got chewed out earlier.

0:52:02

And she was just, like, "Jesus, earlier today you just really messed up. You dropped the ball dramatically." She was, like, "I know, I thought we were over this already. But . . . but you royally picked up that ball now." I'm, like, "What do you mean?" She's, like, "You recovered. Jonathan Pizitz, in all the years that he's been coming in here, has never complimented a server in his entire life. And you, good sir--" [Laughter] That's what she told me! "You got his approval. He likes you." "The same guy who didn't say anything to me?" She's, like, "Yeah." Little did I [not know 0:52:41] that-- to me, I'm a huge universe believer-- that that was my first affirmation of a Pizitz to set up for my future here.

0:52:58

And then actually, if I remember correctly, I had already been notified about The Louis Bar before, 'cause The Louis Bar was, like, around August when Bayer started talking with me and Arnold, and I took it over in October, so this happened sometime in September. It was just, like, yeah, this is for me.

Michelle Little: Wow.

Jesus Mendez: And that was the first Pizitz that low key gave me an affirmation, even though he didn't know who I was or what I was doing or whatever. But I guess to have a Pizitz like me-- and that was that.

Michelle Little: A good sign. [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: Yeah, it was a good sign. I hope he's good. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: So when you came to The Louis Bar it was already up and running. Tell me a little bit more about your role coming in with that.

Jesus Mendez: Coming in. I don't know if I can disclose that information [inaudible 0:53:53]. So The Pizitz started off as one particular concept, multicultural food hall, which is the idea.

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Every stall was taken up. And at that time it was a hospitality group out of New York City that owned and operated The Louis, which is their cocktail bar, Choza, which was their taco concept where Nola Ice is right now, and Fero, which was their Italian fine dining. They were based out of New York City. I learned from their mistakes because I was just able to look back and retract out everything that they failed at without me being present. And I think Bayer started realizing what was going on with these operators that they had done a contract with when they closed Choza out of nowhere. I don't even think it was here for a year. They just closed it. And then

another red flag, I think it was Fero, their Italian concept, they just locked the doors and fired everybody.

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Up until recently I still had employees from the past asking me for their W-2s. I'm, like, "Dude, we're not the same owners. I'm so sorry. I can't help you." "Well, where can I find them?" "Dude, I don't know. I guess in New York. If you want your W-2, go up there." They closed their doors and I guess that was another red flag. And I'm not very sure what's going on with that group at all as a whole. And then I think that's when Bayer started realizing what was going on and they needed a new management partner. So on paper I'm a managing partner with Bayer Properties.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Jesus Mendez: And instead of sourcing somebody not local they found Arnold and Arnold recommended me 'cause we're both local and we know what we're doing, I feel like. I feel like we know what we're doing. And we had just one interview at their corporate office and Bayer liked me and they were, like, "All right. Well, this is what we've gotta do. This is what's wrong and these are the numbers I need to increase.

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And we just kinda need you to go in there and fix it for us 'cause they don't know how to run a bar." And with my resume being one of the bartenders for Frank Stitt, I guess looked pretty well in their eyes, so why not. And I think we had one last official legal meeting and it was on a

Thursday. It was a busy Thursday afternoon. And I walk into The Louis Bar, and I ask for their manager at that time. Her name was Lauren [sp]. I'm, like, "Lauren, can I talk to you?" She's, like, "Yeah." "I'm sorry to break this to you but legally I'm new ownership, I'm new management of the new bar. I'm the new dishwasher, I'm everything. I would love to have you if you want to work with me. But everything that you know does not exist anymore." So I don't know how she took that. I'm pretty sure you would take that, like, what the hell is going on? And I offered my hand for her to come work with me. Didn't take it, which is fine.

0:57:03

I understand her. And walking into The Louis Bar never even before ever walking in period I didn't know where my beers were, I didn't know what my beer types, I didn't know anything about this program. And so my biggest challenge that day was running that bar by myself and with one employee who was a bar back. She had just started there a week before. The three other bartenders quit on me. So me just walking into a new environment with no clue. It's mine now but I don't know how to handle this baby whatsoever. This baby's already running around doing its own things. How do you grab it make it calm down and make it cute? That was very fun. I didn't sleep for about three months 'cause I really had to figure out what was wrong with this program, and that's when I settled it down to an airport bar.

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I had to change the staff 'cause the staff was horrible at that time. I had to retrain them. I had to change the entire bar program 'cause a lot of things didn't make sense. There was a cocktail on

there with Jägermeister, Dr. Pepper, and some grenadine. Who in the right world would drink that period?

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: Oh, it was for [inaudible 0:58:20]. I'm sorry. I'm pretty sure it tasted good, but nobody here wants that. So you had to create cocktails that people in this community want, not the things that you like. There were, like, four different glasses of sauvignon blanc, which made no sense to me. You only need one. There were, like, six IPAs. You only need two, maybe three, and let one be a hazy. I don't know. And that was really it. My biggest challenge was just that, coming into that, and just reprogramming it. And then a year later Bayer came back around, and they were really impressed with our numbers, they were happy with me 'cause I was creating events.

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A new set of regulars were coming in. And I think me and The Pizitz Food Hall really connected well when COVID happened 'cause I cared so much for this building that I was, like, we cannot become irrelevant. How well can I do with Unos Tacos and The Louis Bar to still be a presence in the community? And I think we all just kind of realized that we could still work together and do great things here.

Michelle Little: Yeah. And then, tell me a little bit more about when you decided to open the taco place and what was the process of, I want to open a food stall here and just creating that space and that menu?

Jesus Mendez: I think for me it had gone back to that post that I did in 2017, 2016, that I was gonna open up a tequila bar and I was gonna open up a taco shop.

Michelle Little: Um-hm.

Jesus Mendez: I like to set realistic goals for me and that was one.

1:00:03

And I think when that stall opened up for business-- it was empty, of course, but I could see the potential for it-- it just made sense. The concept in itself, the food concept is actually created out of my parents' backyard. So my stepmom and my father just love to cook. There's just something so different of going into a small little Mexican home, having some homemade tortillas, some homemade salsas, a carne asada in the backyard with the freezing temperature. It's raining or it's snowing. There's still a steak cooking outside for some odd reason. Little Mexican music in the background. Some soccer playing on TV. And we're drinking coffee at ten at night. I don't know why. There's just something so warming about that.

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And I think just falling in love with just that environment and then the food complementing everything, and then it being so consistent. 'Cause I would bring my friends; I would bring

people that I was dating at that time or my business partners. And then when I realized that everybody was loving it and they were asking, "Hey, when are we having the next family popup?" like, I think I have something. And I think the Cinco de Mayo 2019 popup for Unos Tacos did so well that's when I realized that I could create a restaurant concept out of it. I took what I learned-- 'cause I worked at Taco Mama for a while-- I took what I learned from their back of the house kitchen operation, and I placed it into Unos. So that's why when you go and order, my kids will take your order, they will modify, they will do whatever you want with it, you pay, and literally in less than two minutes you get your meal.

1:02:03

Michelle Little: Um-hm.

Jesus Mendez: You don't see that at a taco truck. You don't see that at a Mexican restaurant period, but you see it at concepts likes Moe's, Chipotle, Taco Mama, all these things. I really wanted to grab a family recipe and make it brandable because my entrepreneurship is kind of taking me there now. I'm proud of the brand, especially 'cause it's my parents. I've always wanted to do something with my parents, as well with my dad specifically. And it's something that I feel I could potentially franchise or license out into the future. But until that time comes, I'll just kinda sit on it here. And it's doing very, very well here. My friend Cory Anchors with Hey Buddy did my branding. And I decided to call it Unos Tacos because in Spanish or in Mexico, especially when you're out late at night, or even here when you're out late at night, you come out

of the bar and, like, oh, [in Spanish 1:03:03] unos tacos, which means let's go get some tacos, so it translates to some, some tacos but it's actually a Mexican slang saying "unos tacos."

1:03:11

You don't even care where they're from, you just want some tacos. So we had a bunch of different names but that's the one that just stuck, it made more sense for me. And we branded it up, we put it up, and there she is. My parents work with me every single day. Now we're over staffed, which is a good thing, and so I have a lot of extra help in there for them. But before they were here at six o'clock in the morning leaving at five in the afternoon making sure that all the rice, all the beans, all the sauces, all the chicken, everything was cut, prepared and made, and ready for the next day. And especially during a time like this pandemic where we're gradually getting busier and busier and busier, we could never figure out our proper margins or the right things to prep. We just had to really stick with it.

1:04:01

And now we've kind of plateaued. Now we've figured out what we are. They're still there every single day. A lot of people in the community come by and, like, "Hey, we love your food. Great job," or "Beautiful concept." I'm, like, "Honestly, it's not even me. This is all my parents." My mom loves to cook and I'm glad that I can finally showcase that among the community and my friends and family. My dad loves to hustle as much as I do and he's in there right now making rice-- I hope he's still in there; he better be-- making rice. [Laughter] Me and him get in arguments all the time because I've got that business mindset. I'm, like, "We have to do this, we

have to measure that." And he's just, like, "No, we just gotta toss it all in together." "No, we can't do that!" [Laughter] And so we bump heads but in a good way. And so it's a very loving family operation.

Michelle Little: And do all the food stalls-- is there a community amongst all of the different stalls? Do y'all share any equipment or what is that relationship like?

1:05:03

Jesus Mendez: People call me the mayor of The Pizitz. I like it and I don't like it, because people ultimately come to me with their problems and I'm looking at them, like, dude, you don't work for me, or how is this my problem? But I get it and so I just oversee it because I'm the one usually with the answers. I'm, like, yeah, I'll go fix it. If somebody spilled something you go and see me sweeping or mopping it up because I can't find a porter or something like that. Just something simple, small things. Here as a community we've gotten way better especially after the pandemic. I think we all figured out that if we want to survive together, we have to communicate with each other from small things, like, "Hey, I'm closing tomorrow. Are you gonna close tomorrow?" Like as for a holiday or something.

Michelle Little: Um-hm.

Jesus Mendez: And I'll be, like, "Yes," or "No." And then they'll ask me, "Why aren't you closing?" "Well, because look at my sales. My sales were this and this and this. My foot traffic was this, this, and this."

1:06:04

It's, like, "You know what? Thanks. I'm gonna open up, too." Or another stall will be, like, "Hey, I'm having an event. Can you keep the bar open for this and that?" "Yeah, of course." 'Cause it's not about me. It's not about The Louis. It's not about Unos Tacos. It's really about every single operator that's in here. If they're above me or below me or with me, I need everybody to be open and rocking it through with each other because if they're doing great then I'm doing great. It just means that it's more people in here for The Pizitz. So like I said, before me I don't think it was like that but now, I get along with everybody. I make them change even when I don't want to give them change and stuff like that or picking up messes that don't belong to me, but I still pick it up. So yeah, we're all good, we're all friends, we all talk to each other.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] All right. Let's see. I know we're bumping up on an hour.

1:07:01

Is there anything we haven't covered that you really want in this interview? I just want this to be your story, so is there anything I haven't asked you that you want to talk about?

Jesus Mendez: I don't think so.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Jesus Mendez: I don't think so. I don't know.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Jesus Mendez: Yeah. So ultimately just I found my place here. It's like it's a big family. And I look forward to growing in The Pizitz as well and bringing in more concepts and overseeing as much as possible. And mainly it's also growing in the community. It sounds kind of crazy, but I want to one day be a big name like Frank or Dupont, or just when people come to the city being, like, "Oh, well where should we go?" And you're, like, "Oh, we should go here, here, and here. Why? Oh, well, I know the owner, or I know his managers, or I know his family."

1:08:01

That's why I want to be the reason, not because, oh, he's got great drinks, or they have a bunch of beer. No, none of that. I just want the reason why you come to my place is because you know me, or we're connected somehow, or we had an experience like this in the past.

Michelle Little: Um-hm.

Jesus Mendez: So those are my actual long-term goals for here in the community.

Michelle Little: Yeah. I love that. Well, thank you so much for sharing your story.

Jesus Mendez: Thank you.

[End]