



Josh Schaff
Cayo Coco

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Michelle Little: Okay. So today is November 12th of 2021, and this is Michelle Little interviewing Josh Schaff. Am I saying your last name correctly?

Josh Schaff: Perfectly.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Josh Schaff: Yes.

Michelle Little: And this is for the Southern Foodways Alliance project on the Central Business District in downtown Birmingham. So Josh, to get started, will you just introduce yourself and tell me when you were born?

Josh Schaff: Sure. When I was born?

Michelle Little: Um-hm.

Josh Schaff: You know what's funny about this industry is it's something that you don't talk about a lot. When you manage people of all ages, so you just really want age to be an ambiguous thing, and so in this it's gonna be really fun. I was born October 23rd, 1988.

Michelle Little: Okay. We're both October.

Josh Schaff: Yeah.

Michelle Little: I was October 7th.

Josh Schaff: You could either be a Scorpio or a Libra right there, right? That's where the cusp happens.

Michelle Little: Oh, I think so.

Josh Schaff: Yeah.

Michelle Little: We were just talking about zodiac signs. [Laughter]

Josh Schaff: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: Yes, I'm a Libra. Okay. 1988. And where were you born?

Josh Schaff: Marietta, Ohio.

Michelle Little: Ohio?

Josh Schaff: Yeah.

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It's a tiny little town right on the Marietta River, and practically you go shopping in Parkersburg, West Virginia or Marietta they're so close to one another. It's just a matter of crossing the bridge. So it's very easy for people there to say, well, I'm from Parkersburg or I'm from Marietta. But Marietta's a very old town with a lot of history. It's very neat. There was almost a overthrowing of the United States government there in which Thomas Jefferson had to march an army to capture this gentleman named Blennerhasset, but that's a whole other story.

Michelle Little: Wow!

Josh Schaff: Yeah.

Michelle Little: You come from a storied past. [Laughter]

Josh Schaff: Oh, I love history. It's so fun to talk about, to see where we've come from and how far we've gone--

Michelle Little: Right.

Josh Schaff: -- or come, for that matter. Yeah.

Michelle Little: Yeah. So did you grow up in Ohio?

Josh Schaff: I didn't, no. So my parents divorced when I was four, and my mother was from Childersburg, Alabama. So she had a lot of family here, so we came to Alabama and then my father stayed in Parkersburg, even though you could say either, and so I would visit him all the time.

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So I kind of had my most free and best times of my childhood when I wasn't in school, when I was celebrating summer vacation or Christmas vacations up in the Ohio area. And then, schooling and sports happened down here in Alabama.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Josh Schaff: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: And do you have siblings?

Josh Schaff: I do. I have four sisters and a brother between the two families that kept growing.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Josh Schaff: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: And so would y'all all travel together for the summers up to Ohio and back down or . . . ?

Josh Schaff: Well, some of them were stationed in Ohio where my parents remarried, and some of them were stationed here when my parents here remarried. So I just come from a big family. And I think a lot of times divorces can be messy. This was wonderful because both of my families were amicable. Everyone talked. Everybody was happy all the time, and so it was always nice to see both.

Michelle Little: Yeah. That's great.

Josh Schaff: Yeah. Um-hm.

Michelle Little: So then, take me through-- where did you go to school?

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Josh Schaff: So I went to school at Childersburg Middle School and High School, and then about the middle of my tenure at Childersburg, I had just stopped playing baseball, started to have that irritating rotational pain, and I wanted to do something else, so I got into band and started playing saxophone. And when you come from a small city, small area, there's not much to grow into, so we moved to Birmingham where I enrolled in Oak Mountain High School and ended up graduating there in 2006. And they had an incredible band program, jazz band, wind symphony, the marching band which was super fun. We got to march on Auburn's field when we were, what, fourteen years old, and that was really neat. And so it became this really fun pastime that ended up growing into scholarships to UAB and kind of transitioning to that next point in my life.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Josh Schaff: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: Yes. I'm a former marching band-- I was the drum major.

Josh Schaff: The drum major?

Michelle Little: Yes. [Laughter]

Josh Schaff: Wow! You were front and center.

Michelle Little: Um-hm. I loved marching band.

Josh Schaff: Yes.

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They're so fun! I remember the first time I went to JSU and saw the Marching Southerners play and was just blown away. I mean, what, they have four hundred members in the band, and it was just incredible to see.

Michelle Little: Yeah. That's a really fun high school experience.

Josh Schaff: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: So then you went to UAB?

Josh Schaff: I did. I went to UAB. I enrolled in their band under the lead of Sue Samuels, who was incredible. And I would think that at the time no one had more school spirit than her. The Marching Blazers-- go Blazers! We had a great time there. I was enrolled in business there, and in the meantime, I was also in the restaurant industry. Started at Milo's as a line cook, then went

to Johnny Rockets as a server, though I always hid whenever the dancing happened. That was a little too much for me. I couldn't do it. I couldn't. Johnny Rockets was fun. Stayed at The Summit, went to Macaroni Grill.

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There, there was a bit of competitiveness which I loved because there were over sixty servers on their roster and they would rank you based on your per person average of what you sold, based off your reviews that mentioned you by name, and I loved it. It was so fun to be competitive in that environment. And I met some friends, and one of them was involved in a local restaurant called Satterfield's over in Cahaba Heights, which is owned by Becky and Tommy Satterfield. And I went there for dinner one night and I had never seen food like that before. I was so used to this corporate environment of southern-- which it wasn't southern, it was just your basic Italian food, your pastas and your blah, blah, blah that we've all heard of. And then I went to sit at this beautiful granite bar with this mirrored backdrop. All the servers were wearing buttoned up shirts and ties, and they were so attentive. Your water was always filled. Drinks arrived before you thought you needed one. Your silverware was placed meticulously.

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And then, more so, when the food came out, I ordered the duck, and it came with apricot gastrique, and it was perfectly sliced, and it had a roasted parsnip purée underneath it. And I had never tasted or saw such care and detail put into something. I was, like, I want to be here. So I was nineteen years old at the time, and I applied for a job, and they gave me-- so here I go from being ranked number two or three continuously at Macaroni Grill feeling like I'm the best at what I do, to being a server assistant at a white tablecloth restaurant and being at the bottom of

the totem pole, and realizing, wow, I didn't really know as much as I should. And that was a really interesting transitional point in life. You start to realize that, keep your mind open, always be learning. You've never reached the peak of a mountain. There's always further to go and if you slow down, you'll fall behind. And so we started there, and at age twenty-one, actually the day after my birthday, they asked me to go behind the bar and be a bartender, and that's kind of what launched, I think, a great career.

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Michelle Little: Yeah. So who were some of your teachers and inspiration there or at previous restaurants?

Josh Schaff: So very early on the executive chef there at the time was Haller Magee and he had come from Jackson, Mississippi, where he had done a lot of other restaurants, but he was eccentric, he was passionate. He led server meetings. He was your typical chef you see on television in the sense of his food's powerful but also his belief in it is powerful. So if you were slacking off not paying attention in a server meeting, he would call you out, ask you where your notes are, ask a question, and you would realize that you better get in line or step off the line because there was nowhere to be left behind. You were gonna get left behind here. So the care and detail he took in the food was amazing, and I realized that I wanted to put that much care and power and passion into what I did behind the bar.

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Now, when I started behind the bar, I was learning drinks like the cosmopolitan and the lemon drop, and I remember-- and I'll never forget the first time that I received a drink ticket for a

Negroni. I'm twenty-one years old. The ticket machine rings up. And I look at it and, to put it in perspective before we go further, the Negroni is a classic Italian bitter stirred cocktail. Think of it as a Manhattan but gin, sweet vermouth, and Campari, which is this very bitter orange liqueur. And it's abrasive. You either will like it or you'll hate it, or you'll realize that-- everyone who loves it will say, well, it takes three times to taste it before you'll like it, or you'll never like it. Well, I made the Negroni, and it was on regular ice. I didn't stir this drink or prepare it in any way, and I dipped a straw in it. And I was, like, not that horrible red liqueur that stays under the bar. And I was, like, this is the worst drink I've ever had. And now I realize, bless whoever ordered the drink and had to drink what I made, because I made it so improper, and they didn't send it back.

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And then, it was so funny after that because it's, like, well, why would someone order this? So you start buying books and you find blogs. At the time, Jeffrey Morgenthaler out of Portland, Oregon was doing this incredible bartending blog, basically teaching people how to take old school and outdated ideas of making things, such as the amaretto sour, and how to make it into an incredible actual craft cocktail. And his amaretto sour is world class. If you ever get a chance to look up Jeffrey Morgenthaler's world's best amaretto sour, it's a masterpiece. Anyone would love it. And so I had to learn from these people. So there was a cocktail week in Portland, Oregon called the Portland Cocktail Week, and you applied and if they accepted you to come there would be masters from all over the world who would congregate here. They rented the Kennedy School, which is this super kind of creepy old elementary school with murals that really make you think about things, like, is this a haunted school?

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Josh Schaff: And it's so neat.

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So some classes were held in this huge boiler room downstairs, and then all the classrooms were occupied. So we would meet at 7:00 a.m. for cocktails and breakfast, and then we would get on the bus. And you can kind of pick what classes and what curriculum you wanted to go with. So if you were a reporter, for instance, and you wanted to learn how to take better pictures of cocktails or food, there was photographers there. If you wanted to learn more about hospitality, you could go in that direction. If you wanted to learn more about rum or say any kind of spirit, or making syrups, there were people here that were leading those. And, yes, after it was over there were lots of wild parties, and the first night I did participate in a couple of them, but then I quickly realized that's not the reason I'm here. I'm here to learn and I'm here to take things-- and at the time Jeffrey Morgenthaler was at this restaurant and bar called the Clyde Common. And I knew I had to make it there to learn from him. And so I went. We made introductions and we ended up getting to know each other. It was fun. Had some incredible drinks.

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And then, on my last night in Portland, I had about an hour and a half before I had to be at the airport and I went to the Clyde Common, which was kind of the afterparty, end of all parties for this event. They're backed up. They're three people deep at the bar, which means three people in a row are standing trying to order drinks. And me in my eccentric state and all of twenty-one years old just yelled, "Morgenthaler!" And he just looked over at me, and it's, like, "It's good to

see you again. I've got time for one drink. Go! Whatever you want." And he put five drinks in front of me. He just went super hard and fast, and it was just so immaculate. And I came back to Birmingham, and I had seen some things now, right? I had learned-- because you can read about things all day long, but until you see them in practice-- seek out your masters. So then I knew I had to start messaging other people and other teachers and go sit in front of them and learn their ways. And on a side note, I'm missing a very important part of this entire story.

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Birmingham at the time, all of the cocktail scene kind of congregated in fine dining, white tablecloth restaurants. There wasn't a cocktail bar in Birmingham yet. And so if you wanted a great drink, you would go and see Angel or Eric at Bettola, or you would go to Octane where Angel started a program there. Or you would go see Steva Casey at Little Savannah or later The Veranda. Or you would go and see Feizal and Luke at Hot and Hot. And so we would kind of jump place to place in order to see the people who were really mastering their craft in Birmingham, 'cause we were all on the same journey. Birmingham had cocktails. They were hidden at the time. And the people who really cared about them, we were having to slowly learn our market and slowly introduce things and so that our market could grow with us. Because it's never about what we wanted to put in front of the guests, it was more so about how can we talk to our guests and introduce them to something better that's still in line with what they wanted.

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Well, wouldn't you know that we all became friends and then decided to take a trip to Nashville together to kind of check out their market. Because back in 2013 or [20]12-- it would've been 2012 or [20]13-- Nashville was very close. They had a rocking cocktail market, just like Atlanta

did. And we went and our first stop was The Patterson House. Some of us left but most of us didn't, because they're owned-- I can't remember her last name, but her name was Miranda. She was the head bartender at The Patterson House. And at the time, learning how to shake a cocktail properly or stir a drink properly was still very rudimentary here in Birmingham. And you almost were mocked if you were doing it that way because who else was taking such precision? Are you a showboat? Are you Tom Cruise? Like, what are you doing over here? And I watched her line up six drinks in a row, slam the tins, pick them up, shake them, knock them loose, strain all these drinks and knock them out, and then go again and again and again.

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And I realized, I'm watching a bar athlete. I have never seen somebody perform like that. And she honestly changed my life, and I think a few of the other bartenders who were with me at the time's lives too. Because we came back to Birmingham, and we wanted to grow up to be Miranda. We wanted to knock those drinks out and really just kill this thing. So forgive me for not remembering your last name if you listen to this, but you inspired me.

Michelle Little: Maybe we can find her--

Josh Schaff: Maybe so.

Michelle Little: --and let her know. [Laughter] So is it kind of this line of, you know, you're educating yourself and your customer base, as well?

Josh Schaff: Absolutely. Imagine taking something as simple as the whiskey sour-- for years, if you were in any other bar, they would pick up the bottle of whiskey out of their well and then they would add sour mix, and maybe they would then decide, if they were fancy, to top it with

some Sprite and throw in a fake red cherry, and then, that was your drink. And there's nothing wrong with that.

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There's an amazing history of how cocktails evolved to where they were to the renaissance that we had experienced a few years ago to where we are now. But taking a market that had never seen anything else and telling them that you're going to put an egg white in their whiskey sour or any sour to begin with, well, that's a lot. That's a lot to ask from them. That's teaching them that, hey, these eggs are clean. You're not gonna get salmonella. That's primarily on the eggshell. Yeah, there's a risk. There's a risk in getting out and walking to your car in the morning and driving to work. I think you're gonna be safe. We taste every drink we make, and I haven't been sick in ten years from that, so let's move forward. And then they taste it, and they get the quality bourbon, because we're no longer using these artificially colored \$9 per bottle bourbons, we're using good bourbon that's made in Kentucky, aged for a minimum of two years. Then you have fresh-squeezed lemon juice, not sour mix. But we've balanced this tartness with a little bit of simple syrup that we've reduced down behind the bar.

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You've added a dash of bitters, maybe Angostura, maybe something else, for some foundational pillars, a little cinnamon, clove, allspice, nutmeg, and you've shaken it hard enough-- the egg white's in there, as well. I forgot to mention that. Now, the egg white has no flavor. It's neutral. But when you shake it properly, it creates texture. So now the drink has hit all these marks. And in our palate that we taste five things, this thing has hit-- the weight of the alcohol, the liquor, which is why we order cocktails; the tartness of the lemon; the sweetness which is just there to

balance the tartness of the lemon and add texture, as well; bitters add a foundational pillar. It's like making spaghetti. Yes, you can just put tomato sauce, but adding oregano, thyme, rosemary, whatever, garlic, all of these things add a base to that, and that's what bitters are for us. They add a foundational base. Then take that, add the egg white, and you get a textural experience. So you pick this glass up to your mouth, you smell, and you have this nice aroma of tart lemon. Maybe you express orange peel. And you bring it to your lips, you drink, it's frothy, it's velvety, it has weight, and you swallow. And you're, like, I've never had a whiskey sour like that in my life!

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And that was kind of the experience that we wanted to bring people into was you may not like it; you may love it. Try us one time. If you don't like it, we'll get rid of it and throw it away. And all of this idea kind of led into eventually some of these bartenders that I previously talked about coming together to open The Collins Bar, Birmingham's first cocktail bar.

Michelle Little: Okay. Was that your next move from Satterfield's?

Josh Schaff: It was. So a gentleman I previously mentioned, Feizal Valli, who kind of was one of the most experienced of us all in bar design and interior design, and he was just so smart when it came to these things. He could really build an environment. And he and I were talking, and I went and saw him when he was putting the bar together at The Collins, you know, hammer and nails, working on it. And I was, like, I have to be here. This is the next step.

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So I told him, I said, "Wednesdays are my off days. I have to come here and work for you." And he said, oh, yeah. I'd love to have you here, paraphrasing. And we started doing it. And it was a

very slow start. At the time, there was only really El Barrio on 2nd Avenue North other than us. So nights were kind of slow, the weather permitting. I mean, we were a very slow bar. Also on day one all of us had submitted cocktails to Feizal to have a cocktail menu. We were all bar managers at other bars. And Feizal, day one, kind of looked at that and threw it away the morning of and said, "You know what? Maybe we should just talk to people, see what they like, and just build their drinks because we all know how to make cocktails." And that simple notion evolved into us being this very juggernaut of a bar where the experience went further than you come in here and you order what we tell you to on this menu. It became a very personal experience.

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People came in and they just shared details about what they like or don't like in their drink that would come out. Maybe they don't like the first one, or maybe they don't love the first one that came out if we read them correctly. But you know what? The next one that comes out, if we talk to them again and ask them what was wrong with the first one, or what would you have changed, or how would you have made it better? The next one's gonna come out delicious, because previously talking about the whiskey sour, yes, I can make one recipe and it can be balanced. However, what if you prefer it to be more boozy or more tart or more sweet? And this is an individual preference that I wouldn't learn until I talk to you. And to me, that's what made The Collins Bar so great is, along with the experience that Feizal had curated with the environment and the wonderful ownership of Andrew Collins, that allowed us to do something so neat. Here you had bartenders who were talking to the guests and really getting to know them. And that's

ultimately why we all got into this business was that experience, the hospitality, and being able to help make a moment special for someone.

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Michelle Little: Yeah. And it's so relaxing to order at The Collins to me 'cause I'm not having to, like, stress about whether I'm ordering the right thing on the menu, just to talk to the bartender and they figure it out. It was just always such a relief to me! [Laughter]

Josh Schaff: Well, you went into the bar knowing what you already wanted. You don't have to wonder about what we have. We'll figure that out.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Josh Schaff: You just had to come in and be, like, I'm really craving, like, something light, refreshing, herbal; or light, refreshing, strawberry. Or, you know, could you just make me something? I don't care what it is. Well, did you want something refreshing or more on the stirred and sipable side? You know, there's a lot of ways to go about it, and you could roll the dice as vaguely as you wanted to there.

Michelle Little: Um-hm. Yeah, I love it. So then, tell me your next steps and how-- this was your next step.

Josh Schaff: Yeah.

Michelle Little: So tell me the story of how Cayo Coco . . .

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Josh Schaff: So a lot of things all-- wow. This industry is always changing. If you blink, you'll miss something. If you're going to one place and you think you're always gonna see the same person you're not because we're always going to be floating around and pursuing our passion. I like to say, and a lot of other people say, we didn't really get into this business to become rich, we got into it because we love it. And with Collins Bar, we progressed, we moved forward. Feizal left to open The Atomic, which what a juggernaut of a bar that became. And then Andrew came to me-- Andrew Collins-- and said, "You're next. You're gonna lead this bar." And I said, "Well, okay. I don't know if I'm ready but let's see." And immediately we had to evolve and sidestep, and take ownership, because we couldn't just keep with the same concept other than, of course, the custom drinks. So we added an ice program. We met with a local ice maker who was an ice artist who did carvings, and we started buying these crystal-clear blocks of ice.

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And we would chainsaw them outside with an electric chainsaw that was lubricated with a food-safe oil, and then we would take the squares and we would take a chisel and we would chisel the edges and then around them, and then eventually we would have these perfectly clear ice spheres, which had, again, not been done in Birmingham before. So if you came in for a pour of something on the rocks, or you came in for an old fashioned, we were sending these out and you'd be, like, I asked for ice and, like, stick your finger in there. It's like a jewel in this glass. And that was really neat. We added ice shavers. We expanded our liquor inventory to have all of these exotic amaros, amaris, liqueurs, bitters, house-made syrups from fresh ingredients. And it just kept getting more and more involved to where eventually we had liqueurs that we were doing which-- here's a Thai tea liqueur or here's a jasmine tea, and we started balancing drinks.

So if you came in and you ordered light liquor, refreshing, we could do something that inspired Key West.

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And we would pick a spirit, maybe white rum, we would put a jasmine liqueur, key lime, maybe a tincture of something else, and send it out to you. Our spicy margaritas became uniform because we learned of this Mexican trinity, which is guajillo, arbol, and one other pepper, but we'll move on. And so when I made drinks, I no longer had to muddle fresh peppers and wonder, how spicy is this pepper today? Instead, we could just dash it in there and the drink would be perfectly spicy, as spicy as we needed it to, and we gained control over that. We had a lot of fun. I think we won best bar in Birmingham four years running, and the team that came in and out were just so interested. We would always meet and hang out and go out to eat. At 11:00 a.m. every Tuesday and Thursday we were carving ice, and it was just all these team-building things. And we were a pretty inseparable group. And then I realized that-- what's the next step?

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I had been there probably about five-and-a-half years at this point, and it was really time for us to discuss what's next. I was getting antsy. And I started thinking about what our top-selling drinks were. And, of course, the old fashioned, which is the cocktail, is our number one selling drink, but our number two was vodka fruity sweet, not too sweet. We heard that phrase more than you'll ever believe, and I'm sure anyone who's listening to this who's ever worked in a bar will agree with me, that phrase never gets old-- well, maybe. But it's just the thing we hear the most. So I said, well, you know, that's kind of all rum drinks. And I loved rum. Satterfield's I really got deep into wine. And rum, coming from sugar cane, which is in a separate species of grass, and it takes

on the terroir and the land mass. And then, the people who are making it have a major influence in how the spirit is ultimately gonna taste. If we talk about whiskey, it's all about the barrel aging.

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All of the distillate is typically the same unless you change the recipe up, like whether you're a wheated or a rye, but another story. But when you get into rum, the master distillers are still master distillers, and they're actually running these stills and pulling rum out at different levels of the column in order to get these special esters and conjoiners, which are essentially flavors. So I'm sure you've had a strawberry candy before, or here's a better example, you've smelled a spirit like bourbon or rum and you've been, like, oh, yeah, vanilla, or some other-- it doesn't actually have vanilla in it. That's one of the esters that comes from either barrel aging or one of the distillates. Jamaican rum you'll typically get a lot of banana in some of those. And they're not throwing bananas in this. This is just them pulling the spirit out during distillation at certain points. And it was just so fascinating and remarkable. And the idea that you could taste around the world while sitting on one stool in front of a bar was pretty great. So we didn't even know if we were gonna do food at first.

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Andrew and I sat and talked. I said, I have this great idea. We should do a rum bar. There's not one in Birmingham yet. Here's what it would be like. And he was so about it. He was so into it. And we had some ideas on what we wanted to call it. I was very much so enamored with the idea of the daquiri and Cuba, and there's a bar there called La Floridita, which they've been there for a hundred years. Hemingway, Fitzgerald, all the greats drank there back in this age of art deco

when the world was toned sepia. And they would basically-- [phone ringing] -- do we need to pause?

Michelle Little: Do you need to answer it?

Josh Schaff: No, I don't.

A2: I would like to start when the ringing stops.

Michelle Little: Yeah. We'll just kind of wait for them to give up on talking to you.

[Laughter]

Josh Schaff: I'm sorry.

Michelle Little: I'm so sorry. No, that's fine.

Josh Schaff: No.

Michelle Little: People want to know when they--

Josh Schaff: It's amazing. They start calling at 11:00 a.m. We don't open until 4:00.

Michelle Little: Yeah. Right.

Josh Schaff: Leave a voicemail, please.

Michelle Little: They're very excited.

A2: No one's here. [Laughter]

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Josh Schaff: Yeah. Am I talking too much, or is this exactly what you wanted?

Michelle Little: No, no. This is great.

Josh Schaff: Okay. Great.

Michelle Little: This is great.

Josh Schaff: Okay. So this bar-- to resume. We were talking about the La Floridita. This bar would have blenders behind the bar. They would make these tart cocktails with Cuban rum.

Which the Cubans invented this technique, and I think particularly it was Bacardi, of aging the rum in barrels, which would always add color, right? Well, then they would take that rum and

they would charcoal-filter it to remove the color. And yes, it removed some of the flavor, too, but it smoothed it out ultimately. This wasn't at a time when we had majorly refined machines to do

this, so this was groundbreaking. And it made the daquiri taste all the more smooth and elegant.

And to the people coming to Cuba-- I know when we think of Cuba now we think of all the old cars that are being repaired and the culture, but they have a lot of internal issues brought on by their government.

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And the people are and have always had a rich history and a rich culture. I've had some amazing

conversations here at Cayo Coco with some people who have shared stories with me that have moved me and taken me to new places because this wasn't opened from a man who has even

visited Cuba. This was opened by a man who had read about it extensively, who had

romanticized about it. And I think a lot of times that's a very different vision than of what

someone who has actually experienced it had. But I knew that in order to do this bar, we had to

have some kind of foundational pillar, we had to have an idea of drinking to better times and

better things. And when you read about some of these amazing artists from Cuba, when they were little girls or little boys, and walking down the street and approaching street vendors and having watermelon ice shaved for them and put into a cup and going home. Or looking into these hotels, such as the Hotel Nacional, or the La Floridita bar, or Sloppy Joe's-- which that's a funny story.

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But all these beautiful places, they saw brass and they saw luxury and lights that they wanted to one day hopefully be a part of to grow to be better. And in that same light, I wanted Cayo to be this romanticized version in its décor. So we met with Jeremy and Anna Erdreich, wonderful team with Metropolitan. Anna is this amazing interior designer, Jeremy an incredible architect. And we sat and we told them our vision. We wanted this to be a bar of many cultures and many things. We wanted it to make food from all around the world. Any place in the world that made rum, well, it's fair game for us to make food from it. And we also knew being in the South that-- we didn't know who our chef would be right off the bat, but it would probably have some southern influence in it, too. And that was a really fun discussion, but I said, "You know, Anna, I really love the color of teal. I think that the teal and the brass in combination . . ."

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And I told her the stories of the children that I'd read, of getting those watermelon sorbets, and I just told them everything. And they came back with this design. And they had found a picture of a bar in Cuba that we don't know the name of it that had this beautiful, curved brass-lit bar all the way to the ceiling with just bottles all the way to the ceiling. And we wanted to mimic that in our design. So our chandeliers and our sconces and our antiques mirrors in the dining room and our

brass-lined black wooden tables all mimic the art deco age of maybe Cuba in its peak at that time. But it's always easiest-- and there's been many movies, even by Wes Anderson and others-- looking back and saying, well the past is always better than the present. But that's just 'cause we romanticize about it, but that's what Tiki was built on.

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Tiki was built off of a gentleman who traveled to all the islands in the world and collected these exotic idols and then brought them back into a desert, and then opened a bar nowhere near the ocean. And when you stepped into it you stepped into another piece of time. And whether it was real or not, you were there and you had a vision for what that environment was, and you knew what Tiki was as a person 'cause you discovered it yourself. And I think now as the world gets smaller and smaller with film and media and the internet, it's important to still inspire through design, and I can't thank Anna and Jeremy enough for their help in this place because I just think that this is such a beautiful place. And when I come here, I feel like I've come home. But I'm getting backtracked. To go further into why we did this, we did this because it was a good idea and because I love rum, and because both of those things combined, Andrew and I were, like, well, we're gonna do one of the neatest places in town.

Michelle Little: Yeah, and it is. So talk to me a little bit about selecting the location.

Josh Schaff: So selecting the location was very difficult.

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Andrew has been a staple downtown his whole life. His father opened the Lyric Hot Dog and Andrew took it over, I think, when he was fifteen years old. And he was open for over fifty

years, right? So over there he was already always downtown. People would see him for breakfast and lunch. It's amazing sometimes to go out with him and just how many people recognize him from days of past where they may have stepped into his hot dog restaurant. And the Lyric was so much more than that, but his hot dogs were amazing. And we still serve those over at The Collins Bar on select days. But we wanted to be on 1st or 2nd Avenue North. We love this area. We love watching it grow into what it has over the past ten years. And we looked at some locations. The current building where Aviné is at the time was being developed. We looked over there. We looked at a location over there across from Paramount.

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And then we toured Founders Station. Now, before it was named Founders Station this was a pretty old law office. And so when we walked through it was just old, dusty libraries and offices that were kinda frozen in time as people were transitioning out of here. They had, in fact, though, blown down a lot of these walls so you could just see forward. And at the time, Orchestra, who were the owners, led us downstairs into the basement that is now The Pilcrow, which is such a cool place. And I'm 6 foot 5. That basement was 4-foot tall.

Michelle Little: Um-hm. [Laughter]

Josh Schaff: So I'm ducking over, walking through this musty, old building's basement. And they're, like, oh, yeah, and the bar's gonna go over here, and this is . . . And I'm, like, wow, I think I have vision, but I just can't see it. [Laughter] And also, Andrew, do we really want to open two bars at the exact same time? No, we do not.

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And so luckily, we didn't move forward with that, we picked this location just in-- there were some problems with this location, right? The staircase and elevators to this are right in the middle of our restaurant, so the bar would be extremely clearly divided from the dining room. And the more I thought about it I was, like, that's not a bad thing. Let's have two environments, two separate experiences within the same location. And Locke ended up being our general contractors and they did a wonderful job. And with the lead of Anna and Jeremy, and me and Andrew, it really came together into something special.

Michelle Little: Yeah. So when you came to see it, tell me about the first time you saw the space. What was in this room right here, do you remember?

Josh Schaff: I do. We entered through some doors, and we just saw disarray. We were walking through law offices and bookcases.

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And the only thing that made it make sense is luckily we had some blueprints, some as-built drawings and what they were going to transition that into with the divide of the spaces. And that's when we could really clearly make the decision, this is the spot. Because just walking in here it was pretty hard to see. Papers everywhere, printers, old books on bookshelves. I mean, it was a smell, right? Yeah, there was an old book musty smell. And I know some people really love that and love going to libraries, but this was in a state of disarray. Let's not romanticize about what this was. This was a place that desperately needed a touch. It desperately needed a touch. And what an incredible building it's become.

Michelle Little: Yeah, it's gorgeous. So did you walk through the upper floors of the building, or you were just down here looking around?

Josh Schaff: We didn't. We were hard hatted up with vests and just walking through the lower levels and trying to get a tour.

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We were taken into the basement where we saw, luckily, no proof of ghosts or ghouls, but instead-- and maybe I bumped my head. It's hard to remember. Probably so because of the memory, the issue there. But, yeah, it was a really neat time. Later on they actually asked us to do a little cocktail hour to talk about all the future tenants that could be in this building, so we brought a mobile bar out here from The Collins Bar and made drinks over across the parking lot against that wall, and just mojitos to invite people into what we were going to bring as Cayo Coco. 'Cause I want to say we were the first tenants in this building, but I could be proved wrong there, but I feel pretty strongly we were. And we were excited. It took a while. Construction always does. And it took longer than anticipated. But when we finally got this off the ground and opened the doors-- and we had thought of everything. We knew how this business was gonna run.

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It's amazing how often you forget that every place will be different, that it will never be the same and you know nothing. Like, the flow in the business and operation, the restaurant and operation, the bar and operation will teach you what it actually is and what it does.

Michelle Little: Yeah. Just talking about building this up, from what I understand they had to raise this floor, is that right?

Josh Schaff: They did, yeah.

Michelle Little: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Josh Schaff: Our first drawings of this had all of us-- like, right now we're sitting in the bar area, which is polished concrete wrapped around all the brass and teal couches and such. And going up this ramp here into our dining room you would walk into a space that has twelve tables, very intimate with its chandeliers. Well, that wasn't always going to be the case. So originally, this entire location was on this poured concrete, and so it was still going to wrap around, because as you see walled off here, we have the elevator and staircase for the upstairs residence.

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Outdoor access, but it still cuts our space into essentially a horseshoe, right? [Phone ringing]

Michelle Little: Another phone call. [Laughter] They're wanting to reserve dinner with you tonight.

Josh Schaff: They are.

Michelle Little: Really. And a nice cocktail.

A2: Um-hm.

Josh Schaff: And so this location is built as a horseshoe because of that. And when it was all going to be flat, we were going to actually open the kitchen up and have a beautiful chef's counter that wrapped around it so you could sit at the chef's counter, order food, watch the fun,

energetic operation, maybe have some small bites come out to you from the chefs. And we were so excited about it. Well, when they had to build this bar out downstairs, The Pilcrow that I had walked through and dismal, they had to raise the ceiling and completely finish that.

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And I think that what they did in Cayo Coco was a lot-- turning that basement into this super-cool Pilcrow is way neater to me. 'Cause that really not only took some vision and particularly of Joe Phelps to be, like, yeah, this is gonna be the place where I do my tequila bar, but also just the aesthetic challenges of raising the roof. So they raised the roof and it made us have this ramp here. And so, once we had the ramp, well, we had to change things around. And so that's when we went with just your more traditional dining room, a closed-off kitchen, and the bar area.

Michelle Little: Okay. Was there anything else you had to completely re-envision as you were building this out?

Josh Schaff: There was, but this is a little bit more of a frustrating way.

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We had this fear right off the bat that we had picked the wrong location because we have this room right here, which it's part of the horseshoe. It's part of the inlet where the elevator and stairs are, but there is a massive hydraulic pump in there for the original elevator that's in this building. And when that elevator kicks on, that pump is loud. I mean, it just is deafening in the space. And so, when we were building this out and that would kick on, I was looking at Andrew, I was, like, that's not gonna work. This is a restaurant. That's gonna be louder than the bar being busy all the way out. And luckily, our sound and AV engineers knew of this material called Rockwool which

essentially is a sound-deadening material used in panels in great theaters and recording studios, and they take it by taking rocks and essentially shredding them and weaving them into fabric, which is really neat. And so we lined the entire room with this material, and now when it kicks on you can't even hear it. It's just a soft hum.

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And so it was such a relief 'cause we were terrified, like, it's not gonna-- how jarring, right? Like, how jarring to have this loud elevator kick on in the middle of service. But I think that I was reading or talking to someone who was telling me that this may be one of the first elevators in a commercial building in Birmingham.

Michelle Little: That's what I'm reading right now.

Josh Schaff: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: I mean, I've confirmed that through one source, yeah. But the builder was just really ahead of his time, apparently, in 1887.

Josh Schaff: 1887.

Michelle Little: Um-hm, yeah. [Laughter]

Josh Schaff: How neat. How incredibly neat.

Michelle Little: Yeah. So what's it like operating in a building like this day to day? What kind of quirks and fun surprises?

Josh Schaff: Fun surprises, right. So I think any time that you're in a city you worry about things like pests in a building that's been built for over a hundred years.

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And I have to say that the construction company-- which I'm not sure if Locke did this entire building or if they were in partnership with some other guys or some other tenants used different companies-- we have no pests. We have no weird smells that happen. It's wonderful! We're able to keep this place spick-and-span and clean, and operating it daily is always kind of a fun adventure. I meet people all the time. While we were setting up today for this interview a gentleman came in asking about working in our kitchen. And sometimes it's just as simple as a gentleman walking by on our patio and sitting down and enjoying himself, like, sipping on a coffee that he may have got from The Essential down the street. Or maybe a dad and his two children sitting down in some of our seats before we open and having peanuts from the Alabama Peanut Company, which is a staple of Morris Avenue.

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Downtown is lively, it's bustling. Birmingham, people are always saying we're on the cusp of something greater. I love this city because we're not too packed yet, right? It's still very easy to travel around and walk around and find these eclectic hole-in-the-walls. And people who have envisioned taking a space, an old architectural building, and maybe putting their own spin on it and seeing what was there and what it's become. And that vision came from romanticizing an idea, which is where we came from here at Cayo.

Michelle Little: And how did this space shape how you-all moved through the pandemic and are continuing to move through the pandemic?

Josh Schaff: Wow. You know, never in a lifetime could anyone expect to have done that, right? And then we all had to do it. How awful and scary was it when we were looking up at the televisions and they were saying they are shutting down our city?

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They're shutting down other cities. I mean, Italy was one of the first to put in massive lockdowns where you had to wait for your schedule to go to the grocery store or leave your house, and only certain things were allowed, and it was terrifying. And more and more every day we realized it was getting closer to home. And we just kept doing our thing. You know, we kept operations up and we slowly started watching people drift off, reservation counts go down. And then to watch them come on the-- them being our public health advisor-- come on and say we're gonna close all restaurants and bars and gyms until further notice. Until the numbers start to dwindle, we advise you to stay home. A lot of people have to wait until they're much older to retire and get out of work, and then I found myself suddenly not out of a job, but we had a business that couldn't operate.

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And now, here's the fear of, what do we do about our staff that we love and that have put so much into the place that we love and built? A lot of people at the time did the GoFundMe. We started one, as well, and was able to get them a little bit. But once it was divided it up, it wasn't anything. It was maybe one trip to the grocery store. I hope that helped. And then, there luckily was the unemployment stipends which I know assisted a lot of people in doing a lot better for themselves. We were very anxious to reopen because everyone's landlord and building owner is

very different. With ours, they unfortunately did not forgive the rent. They allowed us to postpone it. But being in a central area, you can imagine that's a very high number to achieve.

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And then, even when we reopened, by the time we applied for most of the things to help keep the business afloat, they were already expired. They had already been drawn out immediately. So we basically were very lucky to just have everything work out for us. And coming back, it was wild. We had to shift who we were as a concept every week. One week we were making family meals to go. The next week we were trying to change our menu to be food that would be really nice to bring home, because a lot of the things-- like, say you take home the mofongo balls that require so many fun sauces and things to go with them to bring them out, it's not really a great thing to travel with. In the to-go box you'd look down and you'd have several plastic ramekins filled with all these sauces, and then you would have these delicious smashed plantains that, if you're not eating them fresh, they dry out. Fish is something that should always be eaten right as soon as it's cooked. Taking it home you lose so much of its quality.

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You bring home a steak that's medium rare, it's probably gonna be medium well by the time it gets to your house if it was still cooking in your to-go box. So we shifted, we changed, we alternated schedules to try to give everyone who worked here a fair chance to make money. The entire management staff took salary pay cuts in order to keep the business afloat because we were having meetings with our bookkeeper and it's, like, in order to make this place not make a profit but to stay afloat, to pay rent, to sustain, this is what it took. The only thing that got us through this were two things, first, persevering based off all of the work that we had put into this

to not have it fail. If we made it through this pandemic, then we'd be in the next times, baby.

We'd be in the roaring twenties again and everything would come back.

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Or it was for the sake of-- and also for the sake of our staff, but also because everyone else was going through it too. We weren't alone. And because of that, there was a lot of great resources to see how other people were pivoting. Pivoting I think is a great word here. We had to continue to pivot in order to keep the business afloat. And here we are, the pandemic has slowed, there's still, of course, a very big risk out there, but I think a lot of people know of the safety precautions. It's pretty ingrained in everybody. If you catch this virus, ten days before you come back to work in order to limit its spread. We've had several instances-- our office is full of take-at-home tests because if there's ever a risk or a chance, we want to make sure that we're mitigating it long before it becomes a problem. And knock on wood, things have been going pretty well for us. We still have our staff masked up and that's simply because I think that it allows for a view of safety, a view of care.

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And I know there's many opinions on this topic, and without getting political, we're just going to continue to make what we think are the best decisions in order to battle this so that we don't have to deal with it again. Because if there became another shutdown, anyone who has already made it through, I bet you would see eighty percent of them just closing, because we can't do it again.

We've expended all of our resources to keep ourselves open. And at this point, we just have to do the best we can, take it day by day.

Michelle Little: Um-hm. How did outdoor dining play into the way y'all maneuvered?

Josh Schaff: Outdoor dining worked. We opened for lunch, which we hadn't done before, and we'd had no interest in doing because our storage is very small here. You have to build your building with the space that you have.

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There's no expanding in these hundred-year-old buildings. So we get in deliveries daily of our food and what we have is what we have. So if we opened for lunch and dinner there'd just be no way to store everything. But sales were so low during the pandemic that we opened for lunch and dinner, and it was no problem. We were able to integrate a online ordering system where people could pull up and we could bring the food to their cars gloved up, masked up, all the things. The outdoor dining was hopping. We had a really good time with it.

Michelle Little: Yeah. Oh, do you need to pause for this?

Josh Schaff: Yes.

[Pause for unrelated conversation]

Michelle Little: Okay. Let me get us rolling again. Yes, outdoor dining has been delightful during--

Josh Schaff: Um-hm. [Phone ringing]

Michelle Little: Oh, and there we go. [Laughter]

Josh Schaff: It's a bustling restaurant, you know. We're gonna get phone calls and service calls and deliveries.

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Michelle Little: I know. Especially coming up--

Josh Schaff: On a Friday night.

Michelle Little: --at lunchtime on Friday.

Josh Schaff: Yeah.

Michelle Little: Well, let me ask one more-- so what do you think, things that you've pivoted to and incorporated during the pandemic, how do you think that shapes the way Cayo Coco moves forward?

Josh Schaff: That's a great question. I think we've learned a lot about things that we may have never tried that would work or didn't work, and it certainly influenced our menus. Our menus are now digital via QR code, which is something that I'm sure you've seen in a lot of restaurants, not only in Birmingham but around the country. And you know what? I love it. I think it's better. I know there's something about branding and there's something about putting a piece of paper in the hand of your guest, but at the same time, we were going through four ink cartridges a week, we were going through so much paper, and if we can waste less, and even if it's something as miniscule as a menu, that's awesome.

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And the second thing is it's very frustrating. So say that you come into a restaurant on a Friday night, and they close at 10:00 p.m., and you get there at 9:30. Well, a lot of things may have sold out or changed. Maybe the fish has moved on from grouper to red snapper. Maybe we no longer have empanadas 'cause they're our most popular item. And so you've looked at our menu and you

have your eyes set on both of those things. Now we can go into our computer, and we can change what the menu is. And no matter who is in here, you're always getting the most up-to-date list of our offerings. I think it's fantastic! So that has definitely been a plus. And of course, there are guests who would still prefer a paper menu. Of course we still print them for them, but instead of us printing seventy to eighty menus nightly, now instead it's more like four. And I think it's a wonderful thing. We're buying ink cartridges once a month instead of four a week.

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It all helps. Outside of that, I think that there's a lot more care and appreciation for us watching our health and making sure we stay healthy, that we don't have to come to work if we don't feel well in any ways. And I'm maybe speaking out of side of what Cayo Coco is, but I know that a lot of the servers, bartenders, managers that I talk to who run other restaurants, it's no longer this, oh, you're ill, you've put us in a way; we're disappointed in you for not coming in. It's, take care of yourself, and not just physically. Take mental days if you're feeling anxiety or stress or just need a day to get away from the work environment. Because we'll figure it out, because we came from having a very small staff during a pandemic to a larger staff, and we know that we can handle whatever happens. And luckily, I think that the guest also understands that things aren't the same anymore, and a lot of people are doing the best they can.

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And while we have had hiring struggles, some people have had tremendous hiring struggles to which they've had to close for days because they can't get enough people to work the stations that it takes to put their product out. And it's unfortunate. But maybe in the great scheme of things, this is going to help reshape the way that we as Americans view labor and view labor laws and

view the way that we support wages and the way that we support the people who are coming to work in these industries.

Michelle Little: Absolutely. And then, final thoughts on just this neighborhood, the Central Business District, the energy of it coming out of the pandemic and moving forward, how are you feeling?

Josh Schaff: So my wife works at a marketing agency downtown, Big Communications, and they're over on 2nd Avenue. And they've been pretty much remote this entire time, working from home.

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And in the same regard, most businesses are. I don't think Shipt has really returned to work yet. I know Landing's mostly off site. These are some major companies that are directly near us. And so what I think is going to make a major change is people returning to work, the return of the happy hour, the return of-- yeah, essentially that. When people come back to work, it's going to change everything, I think, for the better. We're going to have a better flow of business early on because the flow of business has changed. When we open at 4:00 and food at 5:00, we're still not seeing-- we're seeing a massive crowd at dinnertime, and then we'll go late night, but the people aren't downtown already to come and hit that happy hour point. And this is at both of our locations, and other locations that I've seen, as well. You go into a bar these days at 4:00 or 5:00 for a little bit of a glass of wine or a snack with a coworker, it's gonna be pretty empty and you're gonna have the place to yourself.

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And that will change as people return to work, as the pandemic continues to decline. And as far as working in the Central Business District downtown, I love this area. It always has something neat. There's a lot of construction going on, and it is definitely a blight, however, you just have to kind of believe that it will be better when it's all finished up and keep on holding onto that belief.

Michelle Little: Yeah. I know y'all have got the street construction going on right now.

Has that--

Josh Schaff: Before that it was the hotel construction and before that there was more . . .

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Josh Schaff: Yeah, it's never ending. And we just have to continue to pivot and continue to keep social media apprised of the best way to get to our restaurant. And don't mind this horrible twenty-foot hole. They're replacing hundred-year-old conduit that's under the ground, and it just is something that has to happen. In a city, we're all in this together in some way or another.

Michelle Little: Yeah. Part of being a part of the city.

Josh Schaff: Part of being part of the city.

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Michelle Little: Well, is there anything we did not talk about that you want people to know about you, about Cayo Coco?

Josh Schaff: You know, I'm sure later there's gonna be something I wish I had said, but I've loved this interview. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today.

Michelle Little: Thank you for taking the time! I appreciate you sharing your story.

Josh Schaff: Of course. It's been a very fun one to be part of it in a ever-evolving bar and restaurant scene in downtown Birmingham, and I can't wait to see where we are in ten years because everything changes so fast. And I hope that I'm still a part of it here when that happens.

Michelle Little: I hope so, too. All right.

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[End]