



Rob McDaniel  
Helen Restaurant

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Michelle Little: All right. So this is Michelle Little, and I am interviewing Rob McDaniel at his restaurant, Helen, in downtown Birmingham. And today is Monday, December 6-- believe it or not-- 2021. And this is for the Southern Foodways Alliance project on the Central Business District. So Rob, to get started with, will you just tell me a little bit about your childhood, where you grew up, your family.

Rob McDaniel: Sure. So I grew up in North Alabama. I was born in Florence, Alabama, and I grew up about forty-five minutes from there in a little town called Haleyville. Which Haleyville and Winston County, it has a negative connotation because of civil rights, but it was actually the Free State of Winston that were the first to succeed from the Union.

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And so I grew up there, which is about ninety-eight miles from here in Birmingham. So coming to Birmingham was going to the city. And so I always looked at Birmingham as it was a day thing; you left early in the morning, and you came back after dark. But growing up, a small town, Haleyville and Winston County became very big in mobile home manufacturing, and so there was a lot of jobs and a lot of money that supported the county and Haleyville. And that's what my father did. He was in the mobile home business and was the general manager for one of the largest manufactured home companies around. Very small high school. I graduated with ninety-six people, which was really cool. I'm really good friends with a lot of them still.

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And then, once I graduated from high school, moved to Auburn and graduated from Auburn with a degree in hotel, restaurant management, which is really kind of where I started in the restaurant business. I always loved to cook. I loved watching Justin Wilson and cooking shows growing up and things like that, but never really cooked a lot. In high school I didn't cook at a restaurant or anything. My first job was waiting tables just to make extra money, and I kinda fell in love with the restaurant business. And then I moved into the kitchen, and I'll never forget the moment where I was, like, okay, I'm gonna definitely gonna be doing this for a while. I was getting trained on the grill by a friend, and his name was Ennis [sp]. And Ennis was a pretty big, intimidating guy.

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And I was unraveling one night on the grill station, and he stopped me and goes, "Have you ever been shot at?" And I went, "No." And he said, "Well, I have." And he said, "This is not getting shot at." He goes, "This is just food." He said, "We're gonna feed these people, they're gonna go home, we're gonna go home, and everything's gonna be all right. So just calm down and let's cook this food." And I just had this neat peace at that point, and we cooked the food. And I've always carried that story with me, and I haven't seen Ennis in forever. I told that story once at Auburn and somebody in the class that I was telling it to knew him, and he was still in Auburn, but I've since heard that he had moved away. But was a pretty big impact on my career for sure, that statement in itself.

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So once I kinda really enjoyed cooking and I switched jobs to another restaurant in Auburn, switched majors to hotel, restaurant management, and graduated with a bachelors in hotel, restaurant management. And then moved to Vermont to go to culinary school, which was the farthest place that my parents would imagine me being, myself included, but it was also probably one of the best things that I ever did for myself and just for my mindset. It changed me in a good way. And so I knew I wanted to come back to the South, and Birmingham being kind of the place that I wanted to land. I graduated from culinary school and then came back to Haleyville, which my parents still lived there at the time. And I didn't have an internship.

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We had to do two internships, and the second one was your kind of last one. And so I was gonna do that in Alabama, I just didn't know where. So I started setting up interviews at Highlands and at Hot and Hot. Those are really the two places that I set up interviews. And I did interviews at both of those, and just the fit for me at that time was at Hot and Hot. And I worked there for three-and-a-half years, kinda went as high up that ladder as I could, and then kinda stepped down and took on a lesser role at Hot and Hot just as a line cook on the weekends. But I was a personal chef for a family for two years, and then for a year that I was at Hot and Hot, and then I moved on to-- I guess it was more than two years because I worked at Jim 'N Nick's Bar-B-Q for three years after Hot and Hot.

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And I was a personal chef through that two years, as well. And so when I left Hot and Hot, I worked at Jim 'N Nick's, opened a couple of stores with them, spent most of my time at the Greystone Store [sp] here in Birmingham, and then I got an offer to move to Lake Martin. And so I went and interviewed for the job down there, and it was pretty much a dream of everything that I've ever thought that I wanted in a restaurant at that time. And so my boss-- the person that ended up being my boss, his name was Roger Holliday, and we rode out in his Suburban to where SpringHouse sits and there was nothing there at that time.

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And he rolled the plans out of the building and said, "This is what we're gonna build. We want you to come and run it. Are you interested?" "Sure." So I interviewed, trying to keep things quiet, and we did. But it was finally time. I turned my notice in at Jim 'N Nick's, I moved to the lake, and I met my wife now, Emily, along that time. And we had been together for a couple of years when I moved to the lake, and she was, like, "You know, I'll give you three years and then we gotta figure something out." And she was working for Jim 'N Nick's and had been for a long time. She worked for Jim 'N Nick's for eleven years. And then she came to SpringHouse on a Valentine's after about four years. And we had dinner at SpringHouse, and people would come up and say nice things.

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And Emily just said, "I can't ask you to leave all this. You've built something and you've made a name for yourself, and it would be selfish of me to ask you to come back to Birmingham and do

something that you know you're not ready for." So we got engaged and got married. She moved to the lake, and Russell Lands graciously figured out a position for her to do. And she ran canoes and bicycles for one summer, and then they realized that she was much more of an asset than somebody to run a rental office, and she started working in the marketing department for a little while. And then she started selling real estate, which ultimately was where she thrived and did really well at. And we were there a total of ten years-- maybe a little over ten years.

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And we got married and went home to the lake. We had our children and went home to the lake. So the lake has a very special place in our hearts and always will. And we have very dear friends there and great memories. But there was always something that was missing, or it began to be that way at about year six, I guess, year seven. And this thought of, okay, if I'm going to open my own restaurant, I'm not getting any younger, I need to start trying to figure this out. Well, I had no idea where to start, and I just kinda thought, okay, well, it's just not time yet. So continued moving right along. Emily is selling real estate. She doesn't want to leave 'cause she's really enjoying her career at that time, and so we just kept on.

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And we bought a house because we had had the kids, we had kinda outgrown-- we had a cabin that we lived in. And so we ended up buying a house so we had more room with the girls, who are four now. But we have twin girls, Rosemary [sp] and Amelia [sp], and very big part of our lives. So March the 14th, 2018, I think it was, was the year-- I had started doing a devotional at

SpringHouse before I started my day, before anybody was there. And I had never prayed to leave SpringHouse, but I was praying for change because I was not getting the gratification out of it that I had been getting for so long.

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And so we had just, for the first time-- this was in March, so in February we had Valentine's Day with-- the pastry chef I had at the time told me he was sick at, like, three o'clock, but everything was done. Come to find out nothing was done. So 7:30 Valentine's night we run out of all desserts. We scrambled as hard as we could to make desserts for the night, but at 7:30 we ran out of every single dessert we had. So I'm feeling pretty low for sure as I go into work the next day to make desserts for that service, 'cause we still don't have a pastry chef. And then my wife calls and says, "Hey, the James Beard long list just came out and you're not on it." And so for the first time in five years, my name was not on that list. So all of a sudden, all these humbling experiences just come crashing down.

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And so I just buried myself in work and continued to do our thing, but I started doing this devotional. And so I opened my Bible, and the verse was Deuteronomy 1:6, and that verse basically said, "You've been on this mountain long enough." And so when I read that, I got chills, just like I do every time I say the story, but I knew at that point it was time for us to move on. I just didn't know how we were gonna do that just yet. And I did have a friend here in Birmingham-- and I say "friend," an acquaintance would probably be a better way to term that at

that point in time-- but had always said, "When you're ready to open your own restaurant, you let me know and I will back it." And so I read that and kinda thought I needed to get some things together.

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And then I saw him about February of 2019 and told him, I said, "All right. I'm ready." And so we quietly started working on building Helen. I'd already looked at this space, and a friend of mine owns it. We grew up together, went to the church together, he and his brother. They own the company that owns the building, H2 Real Estate. And so I looked at it that first day. It was a rainy February day, I'll never forget. But I walked in the back door, and I just knew that this was the place. But we did our due diligence, and I got a leasing agent, Charlie Norton, who's become a very good friend, and we looked at twenty-two different places all around, but we always came back to this one. And so this was what we decided on.

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And because of the relationship with the landlord, we were able to do things in a manner that most people would-- most landlords would've kicked us to the curb months before we ever signed a lease. But through this process, God continued to give me the strength or faith that everything was gonna be okay. And anytime that I was nervous about something, or I had something big coming up, my devotional that day would give me encouragement. And there was no doubt, to me anyway, that that was faith getting me through those things, that was God giving me the strength and the faith needed to carry on with the process.

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And so we continued and, I'll never forget, my mom was, like, "God's gonna test your faith at some point in time before this whole thing really starts." That was about November of 2019, and then, obviously, COVID is known, but nobody really knows that much about it. And then COVID hits and we just kept going. There was nothing we could do. We had slowed down in, like, July and had decided that getting an SBA loan was the best direction as opposed to just have one financier. And so we did, and that slowed us down. Had it not slowed us down, we would've opened in March of 2020. So again, divine intervention, we didn't open in March. It delayed us, like, six months.

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And so fast-forward to August, which is when we finally were able to open at 50 percent, but we called it soft openings for two weeks, which that turned into, like, six months because we did as many people as we could at 50 percent. But the building being as big as it is, or the space, we were able to still do a fair amount of people, and so that helped us. But because of when we opened and how we opened, we weren't eligible for PPP or restaurant relief. We were able to get some deferment from the SBA and some things like that, and tax credits, but none of the other stuff, which I'm fine with because it added to the challenge.

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But there were also a lot of people out there-- and the more I thought about it and still do when people ask the question-- you know what I mean? There were restaurants that had been open for

decades and that's where the money should've gone and that's where it went. I was opening a business so I shouldn't have-- restaurants that were opening during that I don't believe should've been eligible for that money because they weren't established. They didn't have a staff that they needed to take care of. But the one thing that I have gotten out of that whole-- the pandemic is that we had to stop. And so I was able to spend three months with my kids and my wife that I never would've been able to do had it not been for the pandemic. By no means am I saying that it's been fun to open a business during a pandemic, but I was able to really kinda think about how we were gonna open this business.

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We as an industry have been talking about how we change, how we make it better, how we make it more sustainable for our staff, and then it clicked with us one day that we should take this opportunity to start our business that way, as opposed to-- we've been given an opportunity to operate at 50 percent, not at 100 percent, and so let's take advantage of that. Let's take advantage of this opportunity that we have to try and create a atmosphere that is warm and welcoming to our employees as much as it is to our guests. And so we started small and we kinda built on that.

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We just said, look, if people don't fit into that dynamic, then they don't fit. And we have to stay strong to that, and we have to make sure that we protect that. And that has been what I've found to be my biggest job is protecting that. And I don't cook a whole lot anymore. I miss that. But what I love most about my job now is seeing happy employees come into work and watching

them do their job in a joyful way, and watching people have fun while they're here. And that just-- it's infectious. So if the servers are having a good time and the staff is having a good time our guests are gonna have a good time. There's no way-- well, obviously, we can mess that up, but if everybody's in a good mood it just spreads.

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So we tried to take advantage of that and we're a little over a year and a half, we're at 100 percent capacity, and we're fully staffed, and we have been for quite some time, which I look at as an extreme blessing. And as an owner, you don't get pats on the back or you don't get a bonus check, you don't get the affirmation that you're doing a good job like you do if you're working for somebody else. And this has happened a couple of times, but it means so much when an employee will send an email or a note or something telling you how much they appreciate the atmosphere or the job that they have, or they may just say it.

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Or just seeing someone take ownership of something as simple of cleaning coffee urns. It happened last week, and nobody had asked this person to do it, and they just said, "Hey, I noticed that these were dirty, and they needed to be cleaned." As a business owner, people that are taking ownership of your business and helping you make sure that it runs as well as it-- that means so much. And I'm so thankful for the staff that we have, all of them. There's a lot of great jobs coming towards me, but my wife owns one percent more of this business than I do, and

she's a huge part in making sure that this train keeps moving. Our general manager, Daniel Goslin, he and I worked together at SpringHouse.

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He had moved to Birmingham before Helen had started, but he was with me when we catered an event at the person who ended up being one of my backers or investors, we catered a party together and we were in the car together and I said, "This is probably going to be my last summer at SpringHouse." And he goes, "It's probably gonna be mine, as well." And we had both been there a long time. And he grew up in Alex City, and so he was ready to go. And he moved to Birmingham and worked at different places. And then when we got here, he was ready to come onboard. And so Emily and I bought a house here in Birmingham and we would work out of it. Thankfully, we were able to get our kids in a daycare, and they started daycare, like, two days after we moved into our house, which was amazing.

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And opening this restaurant really kind of helped us in a lot of ways because in our personal lives we were fighting a lot-- well, we were fighting cancer, 'cause Emily's mom had cancer, my father had cancer. Opening this restaurant helped take away a lot of the everyday dealing with that. And so we were working out of our house, this place was under construction, and we'd never really hit any speedbumps with the pandemic. People would continually ask, "Are you still gonna open?" "Sure, we're gonna open." "Well, that's just gonna slow you down." "Actually, no, it hasn't slowed us down."

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I can't say enough about the construction company that we used, Prier Construction. They finished two weeks after they told us they would. Two weeks. And so it was just a great experience all the way around with the team that we had put together from the architect to the interior designer to the leasing agent to the people that designed the kitchen and our contractor. All the pieces just kind of fit together. And one thing that I learned from that is you all know what you're doing, this is your career, so I'm gonna let you guide me through this. I'm not gonna try to do that 'cause I'm gonna mess it up. I can cook, but I don't know how to decorate a restaurant, but I can give you some ideas.

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So we let the team do what they do, and they did an amazing job, and we were just really happy. And we opened August 25th of 2020.

Michelle Little: Yeah. And when you walked me through here the other day, you talked about-- it seems like every piece had a story, and friends of yours-- can you kind of talk through some of-- this portrait, for instance, is a great starting point. [Laughter]

Rob McDaniel: Sure. So the artist, her name is Hannah Hurt [sp]. She's from Macon, Georgia. She was in Charleston. She went to SCAD, I believe, in Charleston. And my sisters were family friends with her and her family and commissioned her to paint this picture of my nanny, or Helen.

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And this is a portrait of one of the last pictures taken of her before she passed. This was at a Christmas. But she always had those pearls on and had her hair done just right. And it's funny, my sister sent a picture to us of eleven years ago. It was a memory that had popped up of my grandmother-- or of Nanny, and she had a red vest on, pearls, hair was fixed, and he had blue jeans on. I mean, she just looked sassy as can be. But I remember that day, and I remember her kind of not being in a great mood until somebody said, "Let's take a picture," or "We want to get a picture." And she automatically-- she perked up and she was just beaming.

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But this is a special picture, for sure, because it brings back a lot of memories of just being with her. But the interior of the restaurant really kind of is more of a reflection of Emily and I than Nanny, and we wanted it to be that way. There's a lot of reflection of what I like to do in my pastime, definitely more so than Emily's, just because there's pictures of fishing and hunting, and there are some wild animals that are on the walls. But a lot of things have memories to 'em and have meaning, and there's a story behind 'em. And so I think that just makes it that much more special and original.

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And one of those feelings that you get when you walk in is that there was a lot of thought put into it, and it's not just another space. I mean, it feels good.

Michelle Little:       And what did the space look like that first time you walked in? What was here?

Rob McDaniel: There had been nothing here for a couple of years, I think. The upstairs where we are now was kind of like it is now. There was this weird kind of aluminum siding wall right there, and then an old bar area where the wine cellar is. It was a bar at one point in time.

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And the downstairs was completely empty, but the bathrooms were on the opposite side of where they are now, and so we moved the bathrooms over. And we had to add another stairwell on the side coming up. But I also remember in the beginnings my mom would be, like, "I really just want you to find a place that has an area that the girls (our kids) can play and be, because y'all are gonna be spending so much time there." And I was, like, "Mom, if you're not making money on square footage in a restaurant then you're doing it wrong." But as God would have it, Emily's office is very large and there was nothing else we could do with it because there was another short set of steps that went up to it.

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And that's Emily's office, but also there's a couch in there and a television for our kids to hang out when they're here. And they love to come here, as well, and I want them to be here as much as possible. As I've told a lot of people, I don't ever want to be afraid of what my kids may hear or be exposed to inside of this restaurant. It goes back to our values and how we're gonna run the business, and not being negative towards people and keeping that out of here. I want my kids to be able to be here anytime and me not have to worry about what they may hear or see or be exposed to. And so it's a special place.

Michelle Little: And what does it mean to you to be part of this neighborhood in downtown? You said you looked at twenty-two other locations.

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Rob McDaniel: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: Was there any other place that was a top contender? Was it this building or this neighborhood or . . . ?

Rob McDaniel: Just being kind of and feeling downtown. When I lived in Birmingham the first time after graduating from culinary school, and I was working at Hot and Hot, and I lived not far from Five Points which, at that point-- which is where Highlands is-- you didn't really go past Five Points. That was fifteen years ago, and downtown, it was business down here but at night you just didn't hear of people coming down here at night, at least not growing up here and not knowing people that had grown up here, nobody came down here. But I always was, like, man, it would be awesome. There's just so much history down there.

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Their buildings are really neat. It would be awesome to see that revitalized. And people started to do that about the time I got the job offer for SpringHouse. And it was fun to watch those things take place, but it wasn't my time yet. And so spent ten years at SpringHouse and then came here, and we looked at places all over but just always felt-- I don't know, this building always just spoke to me. It was built in the 1920s, and you can follow the brick all the way back to where the offices are and it's almost like a timeline because the brick changes in the additions that were

made to the building over the years. And we have pictures of the building in the 1920s, and I think half of it was called Martha's Luncheonette, and then the other half of it was a bail bonds/pawnshop.

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But there's a Model T parked out in front of it. It was really neat.

Michelle Little: How do you feel like this network of restaurants and bars in this neighborhood kind of-- did they pull together?

Rob McDaniel: Sure. So when we moved here and started Helen, we partnered with Bandit with desserts. And it was funny. I was thinking, like, I gotta hire a pastry chef and that's gonna be hard and it's gonna be expensive. And I was, like, what if we partnered with somebody? And then Kristen Hall called me about that time, and she was, like, "I got this idea."

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And I was, like, "It's funny that you should bring that up because I had the same idea." So we partnered with them, and we've also partnered with Chocolatá with a few things. But just being part of everything that's going on down here right now, there's so much energy and there's just this good vibe. There's a lot of people coming down here right now, even at night. And during the day you've got all the business that's down here. There's a lot more people living down here, which is amazing. It's just fun to be part of the "Magic City" coming alive again. And growing up, I always remember Birmingham being called the "Magic City," but it's magical to be part of that fabric that is making up what's going on right now.

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Michelle Little: And you said growing up you could remember coming downtown?

Rob McDaniel: No. It was mainly, like, we would go to the mall, but Century Plaza, which most people probably don't remember-- there was Century Plaza, there was Brookwood Mall, and then there was The Galleria that was finally built and that was, like, the big mall. And those were the places that we would go. Growing up, I remember going to-- I can't think of the name of it. It was a Chinese restaurant, but it was iconic in Birmingham downtown. But I remember going there. O'Carr's was a place that my parents used to love to go to over in Homewood.

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But I grew up in a small town, so we didn't spend the night in the city very often. And food was not-- that was one of those things-- we didn't go out to eat nice dinners a lot of times. That's just not what we did. We cooked at home a lot, which I really appreciated growing up. We had a garden and that's how my dad grew up. And so both my parents-- my dad would cook breakfast a lot, and I never forget the day I came home, and he had cooked rutabagas and the house smelled so bad, and he goes, "That's what's for dinner, that and cornbread." And I was, like, man, I can't do this. And I don't think I ate that night. But turns out I love rutabagas now. But yeah, I was not exposed to restaurants in Birmingham that often, especially at dinnertime. It was a lunch most of the time.

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Michelle Little: And what are some of your other early food memories?

Rob McDaniel: Well, this restaurant is based on a food memory. And so I didn't know what a food memory was until I went to culinary school, and then, in our creative writing class that we had there, we talked about food memories and what a food memory was and what it meant to us. And so I thought about just memory of going to my grandparents' house and parking our car, getting out, walking past their blue Chrysler into the back door, and just the smell of the carport, the smell of the laundry room as you walked past that, the hallway, how stiff the carpet was, just 'cause my nanny kept it so clean.

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And the lines in the carpet in the living room, which you didn't go into unless there was company there. But the smell of her cooking steaks on that grill and seeing her over that grill cooking is the food memory that spawned all of this. And that was the passion and the love and all the things that went into creating this restaurant because of that memory. [Rain sounds]

Q2: Getting rain.

Michelle Little: Yeah, yeah. We can definitely hear the rain.

Rob McDaniel: Yes.

Michelle Little: We have rainfall. [Laughter]

Rob McDaniel: Yes.

Michelle Little: Okay. Yeah. So tell me a little bit more about-- was this your mother's mother or your father's mother?

Rob McDaniel: It was my mother's mother.

Michelle Little: Okay.

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Rob McDaniel: And both of my grandmothers influenced me in different ways as far as how I cooked, but Nanny and Granddaddy lived right outside of Oneonta, which is in a little community called Rosa. But they had built this ranch-style home, and she had the grill built inside the house, which was just amazing. And my grandfather would brag about how he bought the steaks on a red-tag sale, how he got a great deal on 'em. And the whole thing, I can close my eyes and smell it and see it and feel it. And so it's just very special to me. And I don't think that was the question that you asked me. I'm sorry. I may have jumped around. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: No, that's fine. [Laughter] That's great.

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That's so unusual that she had the grill built into the house, right?

Rob McDaniel: Yeah. You don't see that very often, and I don't know what-- I should've asked my mom and see if she even knows why she wanted to do that. But it was there, and she had the little charcoal thing hanging on the wall that she would stick in there to light the charcoal, and she used Kingsford charcoal. And the grill had this cast iron door on the front of it that had a damper on it that you could turn to let oxygen in or let air in. And she would have a little yellow mustard bottle with water in it to knock the flames down. And she would cook over

there on that grill, and it was just always-- she would have one foot up on the hearth and the other on the ground.

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Yeah, I mean, it's just very nostalgic.

Michelle Little: I remember you telling me a little bit about the grill you've-- tell me about that, the grill that you've installed in this restaurant.

Rob McDaniel: Cooking with fire has become very mainstream, and I didn't necessarily want to be known as a restaurant that was that. And I also didn't want to be a steakhouse. We tried to wrap our arms around "steakhouse," and we did that for about a week, and I said it multiple times every day. And every time I'd say it, I was, like, that's just not what we are. We're not a steakhouse. And so we landed on contemporary southern grill. But yeah, the grill, it's got three different cooking phases to it.

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One is for cooking the steaks on, the middle is for various different things, some of which we haven't even tapped into yet, and then the left-hand side has turned into a full coal-fed flat top or plancha. So we cook our fish on there, and a lot of vegetables on there. And then, we have a smoker, as well, that we utilize a lot for overnight, like beef short ribs and things like that. And we smoke chicken. So the fire very much plays a role in what we do, and I think that, it is, it's very primitive, so it is the way that we've chosen to try to cook most of our food. And I don't smell it, but everybody talks about the smell of the restaurant.

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They can smell that there's smoke in the restaurant. And I'm just used to it and don't smell it. But people also say they can smell it on the street, which I think is awesome, as well. Which all of those things were part of what we wanted to see happen because it adds to what we are as a restaurant. It adds to that feel when you walk in the door. If you smell that and you have that warm, fuzzy feeling, that's what we are trying to make sure that we had when people walked in the door. And then, that grill is kind of the energy of the room downstairs, the kitchen downstairs for sure is the energy of that space. And then, up here it's more so the bar gives the energy for this room.

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And I knew that we were going to have to definitely-- because of the experience I had at SpringHouse, which is a multilevel restaurant, and it was difficult to have people wanting to sit upstairs and not be downstairs. They felt like they were going to miss out on something. And I didn't want that here, so we had to be sure that we created these equally fun spaces. And so I think we've accomplished that. I see reservation notes where people say, "We want to sit upstairs." Our larger tables are up here. We made it a conscious decision to stand by and stick with our table size policy. We have one table that will accommodate eight people, and then a handful of others that will accommodate six people. And then it's four tops and two tops.

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And we did that from experience of just large groups of people. I love 'em, but you don't get that same experience that we want to give everybody. And not only that, it can take away from somebody else's experience if you have a big group. We do have a private dining room and you can fit twenty-four people in there, and we can do that. And we've figured out how to do that where it doesn't affect other people and their dining experience. But we did that for a very good reason, and that's just to make sure that people have a good experience. And we've had some weird, difficult conversations of, "Why can't we just pull these two tables together?" But we've always had those, and we just kinda-- this is just how we're doing it.

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And I don't hear those conversations as often anymore, and so I think it's just one of those, people learn that this is how many people we can go there with, or we can get the private dining room, or do this or do that. And I think that it's just part of the experience, as well.

Q2: Could we get room tone while it's raining a little harder?

Michelle Little: Oh, you're right. That's a good call. Yeah, let's do that. [Pause] All right. I got some [more 0:46:58]. Do you feel good?

Q2: Let me get just a little.

Michelle Little: Okay.

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Okay. Let's see. Now, how did creating the vision-- for instance, was it difficult to install that type of grill in such an old building?

Rob McDaniel: It had to come in before-- logistics could have been a nightmare because of the pandemic, but everything kinda happened the way that it was supposed to. But I say that because the grill was one of the first pieces of equipment to come because it was so big, and it had to get installed before we could really build. It's not going anywhere without tearing the bar downstairs out, so it's there for a while.

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But that was the only really challenge there as, once it was there, it's there. But the day that it showed up I knew that we were getting close, so that was an exciting day.

Michelle Little: And then, this large of a bar, any other logistics with trying to manipulate a 1920s building into what you want your restaurant to be?

Rob McDaniel: It was really-- the brick and shotgun, those were the two things, I wanted to have as much exposed brick as possible. But that's also a blessing and a curse because it sloughs off everywhere and so we have to constantly clean, 'cause it just forms dust. But we didn't really have to do crazy stuff.

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We had to do some reinforcements here and there, brace the roof to put all the stuff on top. And we added a wall over here that you can't see, it's on the other side of the wine cellar, that the

hood vents come through, so it took up a little bit of the square footage there. But really, we didn't do a lot to the building. The floors downstairs are concrete, and we left them that way. We didn't do anything to 'em, and they're cleaned. And then we put hardware floors up here, but that was really about it. The millwork behind the bars was a little bit challenging because of the brick and the way the contour would change, and so they kinda had to be creative the way that they did that.

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But everything else really just-- we didn't manipulate it a lot because we just loved the way that it felt. We loved the feel of it. And then, knowing the wine room would be there, and then you'd have this curved glass wall downstairs that our friend made, John Howell [sp]-- and he built the wine room and he built that curved wall downstairs and the art rail and the foot rails at the bars. But that curved wall downstairs really, when you walk in-- and even the windows downstairs, it being open, you walk by and you see the restaurant full and just this-- there's an energy that comes out of the building, I feel like, as well. But definitely when you walk in the front door and you got that big curved-glass wall, and you can see everybody having a good time.

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And you automatically just kinda want to part of that. So yeah, we didn't want to manipulate the building that much. We wanted to keep it so that it felt like it was an older building and it kinda had this-- kind of like it was supposed to be here. We didn't want to change it to where it felt like it wasn't supposed to be here. And I wanted to embrace the fact that it was a 1920s building in

Birmingham, and the history behind that. When we first opened, they tore the street up in front of us and they pulled up old railroad timbers from where the railroad would come down, and old bricks. And we have some of those old bricks that were ten feet underneath the surface of the street out there.

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It's just neat stuff, and it's just part of being down here, just having that feeling of being part of that fabric that is making the Magic City magic again.

Michelle Little: I love it! And I know we're almost out of time, but are there any other-- you mentioned that great story of Ennis when you were working-- are there any other people that really mentored you along the way that shaped who you are and how you run your restaurant now?

Rob McDaniel: Yeah. Everybody that I've ever met in this industry along the way has shaped it in some way, and still to this day. I want to try to have people that are better at this than I am that are here. That helps me continue to grow. That helps this business.

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I don't make people call me chef because I want people to feel comfortable and not intimidated by coming in to work here, and I feel like that that allows them to give us their best work when they're not feeling like, oh, my gosh, if I make a mistake, I'm gonna get yelled at. Instead we try to harbor those mistakes and learn from them. And make it a point to make sure that people understand that it's okay to make a mistake, and we want you to make mistakes, 'cause that

means you're pushing yourself outside of your boundaries. If you're continuing to make the same mistake, then let's figure out why that is and correct that. And so everybody I've tried to pull something from.

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So any one particular person I can't-- I had a sous-chef when I did an internship at Criolla's, and he was the only Frenchman that I've ever worked for. But I went to Criolla's to work for Johnny Earles, and he owned Criolla's, a restaurant that was down in Seaside for decades, and then it closed not long ago. It actually closed in 2008, I believe, 'cause SpringHouse opened in 2008 and they closed right around that time. But there was a sous-chef there that kind of ran everything, and Johnny had started working on his real estate license. His son was at an age where he was playing sports so he was being more active in his son's life, which is something that I can definitely relate to and appreciate more now than I did then.

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But also that experience would not have been what it was if it had not been for-- Philippe [sp] was his name. But he taught me how to be calm in the storm, and how to just continue to march on. That's one thing that-- even if your pastry chef walks out or leaves at three o'clock and you have two hundred and fifty reservations, the door is still gonna open at 5:30, it doesn't matter, so you gotta figure it out. And that Valentine's, now, I'll never forget that Valentine's, but also it was a learning experience.

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So everybody that I've crossed paths with, I think I've tried to take a little bit of something from them; people that I've spent a large amount of time with or had time to spend and pick up things from them. So yeah, I've just tried to always be that way over the years.

Michelle Little: All right. Well, thank you. Was there anything I didn't ask that you wanted to talk about?

Rob McDaniel: I don't think so. I think the biggest thing for me and our success here and our ability to do what we did when we did it is a platform for me to tell my story of faith more than anything.

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Because you think about what we went through to get to this point and how we're still married and we're all still plugging right along. And every time I've ever been asked to talk about the restaurant and the experience, I've included the faith part of it because I do believe that it's a platform that God has given me that I should be using. And I'm not perfect, nobody's perfect, but we try to create an atmosphere that reflects our beliefs, as well. And we want people to feel comfortable when they're here, everyone, but our employees more than anything.

Michelle Little: Well, thank you.

Rob McDaniel: Absolutely. Thank y'all.

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[End]