

THOMAS ROBEY
Commander's Palace
New Orleans, LA

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[00:03:26]

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Thursday, January 20, 2016. I'm in New Orleans, Louisiana, in the Garden District at Commander's Palace Restaurant. And I'm sitting here with one of the chefs. Could I ask you to introduce yourself by stating your full name and your birth date?

[00:03:47]

Tom Robey: My name is Thomas Edward Robey, Jr. My birth date is February 3, 1968.

[00:03:53]

Sara Roahen: Does anyone actually call you Thomas?

[00:03:55]

Tom Robey: No. My name's Robey. In fact, my official title here is "Robey." That's just what I do.

[00:04:03]

Sara Roahen: Does your family call you Robey, too, or is that your career name?

[00:04:06]

Tom Robey: No, that would be weird, because their name's Robey, too, but most of my family is in New Jersey, so it's not really an issue.

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Sara Roahen: Could you tell me, in your own words, what you do for a living?

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Tom Robey: I help run one of the greatest restaurant institutions that ever existed. I am one of the top sous-chefs for Commander's Palace. On a day-to-day basis, I check food quality, I help staff the restaurant, I help train the staff that cooks the food in the restaurant. I'm also the purchaser, so I purchase the food that the staff that I train and I hire cooks for our guests. A day can be anything from interviewing people to yelling at purveyors to making sure the kitchen has paper towels, you know. Every day is different. I've been here for a lot of days, and I can say safely that no two have ever been the same.

[00:05:00]

Sara Roahen: You said that you're one of the sous-chefs. How many sous-chefs are there?

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Tom Robey: In a perfect world, I think there should be seven on our staff. I think right now we're running with six. We always take sous-chefs from our team and farm them out to our other family restaurants, so the same philosophy, the same flavor profiles, the same training methods go. And we just passed along one of our greatest, Meg Bickford, to Café Adelaide, and no one has been good enough to replace her shoes yet, so we're not

going to just promote somebody or hire somebody just to have another body in here. If they're not going to be one of the cohesive members of the team, we'd rather run short.

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Sara Roahen: When you say, “the other restaurants in the family,” which ones do you mean?

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Tom Robey: Well, the restaurants that we principally control are Commander's, obviously; Café Adelaide in the Loews Hotel; and our newest restaurant, SoBou, in the W Hotel downtown.

[00:06:00]

Sara Roahen: So you're not necessarily talking about Brennan's of Houston.

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Tom Robey: Well, they've called us before and asked for help, but we live in New Orleans. Who wants to live in Houston? And I'm going to get a lot of grief for that statement, but—

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Sara Roahen: I think a lot of people would agree with you.

[00:06:20]

Tom Robey: I think so.

[00:06:23]

Sara Roahen: Let's back up a little bit. Where were you born and where did you grow up?

[00:06:28]

Tom Robey: I grew up in Ocean City, New Jersey. I love to tell people I'm from the South; I'm from South Jersey. Actually, my town is officially below the Mason-Dixon Line because it runs between Pennsylvania and Delaware, so I am from the South. It was a little beach town. It was not "Joisy." It was Jersey. "Joisy" does exist: the guys with the Adidas sweatpants and the IROC Camaros and the oiled-back hair, but that's not where I'm from. Where we're from, it was all beaches and farmland. And I lived there until I moved here to New Orleans in 1989.

[00:07:05]

Sara Roahen: What is your family heritage?

[00:07:08]

Tom Robey: Mostly Irish. My stepmother's family owns the oldest Irish bar in Atlantic City, which is kind of cool. But, yeah, we're just pretty middle of the road.

[00:07:23]

Sara Roahen: So the Irish component to being part of the Brennan family isn't that far off for you.

[00:07:28]

Tom Robey: I don't know if it's gotten me any extra points, you know. [laughs] I have seen a Brennan or two at the Parasol's [Bar & Restaurant] celebration down the street, but—. We'd always see Mr. Dick Brennan. He was very much into the Irish heritage and fellowship.

[00:07:48]

Sara Roahen: You would see him at Parasol's?

[00:07:49]

Tom Robey: Yeah, absolutely. He loved—Mr. Dick loved everything. I can't tell you how many Mardi Gras I'd see him in, like, costume, dragging his grandkids around and getting them big sacks of beads. He really had a love for everything about New Orleans like that.

[00:08:05]

Sara Roahen: So, for the record, can you just tell us what Parasol's means on St. Patrick's Day?

[00:08:10]

Tom Robey: Well, Parasol's is a local bar in a neighborhood—borders a neighborhood called the Irish Channel, which, from my understanding, was just a group of houses. Most of them are smaller houses or they're duplexes, because these were not necessarily very wealthy people. And it was the Irish that helped build the city and helped build the docks and helped, you know, get the streetcar lines down. And Parasol's is a small bar in that neighborhood and every year they have a *huge* celebration for St. Paddy's Day. It usually lasts a couple days. And they have the street cordoned off for a block in each direction. It's just one more reason to party, like we need a reason here in New Orleans. I mean, we could have a parade on January 24 because it only comes once a year, you know. We don't need a lot of excuses.

[00:09:01]

Sara Roahen: This was way down on my list of questions, but since we're on St. Patrick's Day, could you tell me what that's like here? Do you do anything special at the restaurant?

[00:09:11]

Tom Robey: Not so much. We definitely serve a great corned beef and cabbage, which is something we might not normally serve. But, no. No, it's pretty much business as usual here. I mean, we'll have people drop in on their way downtown to Parasol's, because, I mean, Parasol's is literally, what? Four blocks away. But that's—you know,

we like to have fun inside Commander's, but that's not really the style of dining we like to do.

[00:09:38]

Sara Roahen: No, but you do corned beef and cabbage. I don't think I've seen that on the menu—

[00:09:42]

Tom Robey: No, but we definitely—and we serve it to the staff as well.

[00:09:44]

Sara Roahen: Back to your family home: What was your growing-up like? What did your parents do for a living, and who was the cook of your house?

[00:09:55]

Tom Robey: Well, my father was the cook, and it was mainly just my father most of my life, from the time I was like nine. My father was a private investigator. It's funny: you know, he didn't have a lot of time to cook for us. So everybody talks about breakfast for dinner? Well, I didn't know it was breakfast for dinner. I just thought you ate pancakes for dinner. When I first went away to college and they served pancakes in the morning in the dorm, I called him up. I'm like, "What the heck, Dad? You've been cheating us all this time."

It's really kind of amazing. I got into this industry, and I grew up on powdered iced tea and Steak-umms. But in Ocean City where I grew up, you either worked on the beach or in a restaurant, and I just started working restaurants. I got my first dishwashing job when I was twelve, and I have not been unemployed since. There's always been a spatula or a pair of tongs in my hand.

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Sara Roahen: So I guess something about it spoke to you. You didn't go to the beach after you spent some time in the restaurant. Like, you stayed in the restaurants. Were you immediately attracted to the culture of restaurants or the cooking, or what was it?

[00:11:09]

Tom Robey: I don't really know. Well, at first it was just a great way to earn very good money. And if you know a lot of people in restaurants, we're all kind of cut from a different cloth, and maybe I fell into that as well, because I don't think that I'm the most normal person ever. You know, because of the hours and the pressure and just the workload, generally very normal people don't do well. And I just liked it. I love making people happy, love having interaction with the guests.

I actually went to school—my first college was for photography, and then I majored in English. I was going to get a teaching degree and this and that, but every summer I would always go back to cooking. So I just decided to pursue it. I went to culinary school. I attended Johnson & Wales in Providence, Rhode Island.

After that, I immediately started working for Donald Trump. I opened up three restaurants in the Trump's Castle Casino Hotel. And it's union work in Atlantic City, and I'm kind of an opinionated person. I've been known to not hide my comments or my feelings when need be or when I probably should. I was told by my shop steward that I had been scheduled for a flight down the stairs. People used to fall down the stairs in the casino. Because every hotel has like seven extra sets of stairs for fires, so that's where employees hang out on the landings and smoke or whatever, taking their breaks, and people used to fall down the stairs.

So I decided that it was time for me to leave, and through my alumni association at my school, I got the interview for Commander's Palace. I got the job, packed everything that would fit in my car, and came down here. It was kind of funny because my first day here—it wasn't even my first day of work; my first day in town. So I get here, and I pull up to the restaurant, and I go in and there's TV cameras there, just like now, because everybody is so very interested in what we do here at Commander's Palace. And I was walking in the door, looking for the chef, Jamie Shannon, so I could meet him and shake his hand, meet him in person. Quite ironically, Jamie also used to work for Trump. He used to work for the Plaza. So we knew a lot of the same people. So I'm in there, just kind of standing in the middle of the kitchen, and this red-haired lady walks up to me, and she's like, you know, "Can I help you with something?"

I'm like, "Well, I'm Tom Robey." I thought I was—the hotel I worked in, I was the best. I didn't realize there were different leagues. But that was a humbling experience that comes later in the story.

So this lady's like, "What are you doing here?"

I'm like, "Well, I'm Tom Robey. I just got here from New Jersey. I'm here to start work. I'm looking for Jamie Shannon."

And she's like, "Well, have you taken a cook's test?"

I'm said, "I'm not here to take a cook's test. I've been offered a position." And the lady had a cup of coffee in her hand. I said, "By the way, you know, I'd love a cup of coffee too."

And she said, "Well, welcome to Commander's. My name is Dottie Brennan and the coffee is over there."

"Yes, ma'am. Can I get you a cup while I'm going in that direction? Can I get you one?"

But they were doing a story on staff meal, because staff meal is something we take very seriously here. Some of the toughest conversations I've had with Miss Ella have been over the quality of the meals that we put out. Now, we're talking about a couple conversations over the years, because we take staff meal very seriously, you know. In the slower periods, especially like right now, some of the younger waiters, it might be the only food they get today. So we're not exactly serving steak, but whatever we serve, it's hot, it's seasoned, there's always a vegetable, there's always fruit, you know. We try to take care of the staff, because especially if I feed you well and then I catch you with your hand in the soup jar—you know, it's like you've already had a good meal today; leave the food for the guests for the guests.

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Sara Roahen: How many staff meals do you do a day?

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Tom Robey: Two. We basically have two shifts a day. So an hour before—an hour and a half before we open for each shift, we have staff meal. And then they do lineup and then we get the dining rooms and the kitchen ready to go.

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Sara Roahen: Can you give me a specific example? Like, do you remember what staff meal was yesterday?

[00:15:46]

Tom Robey: Sure. Wow. Yesterday. You're going to go that far back?

[00:15:51]

Sara Roahen: A particular day.

[00:15:54]

Tom Robey: We do—it's funny: all the sous-chefs, we all take turns cooking staff meal. We all take a lot of pride in what we do and we all have different styles. I'm known for my meatloaf. We call it "loveloaf." We have one sous-chef, Jazz, whose heritage is Puerto Rican, so anything—if she makes spaghetti sauce, it's four pounds of cilantro into it. Because she's into cilantro, you know. Mr. Barbato, the chef de cuisine, he likes the

classics like I do. He'll do chicken and dumplings. And we love to give each other grief about, you know, "You need a little salt in that," or something.

That's a great question. What did we have yesterday? It was a whole yesterday ago.

[00:16:37]

Sara Roahen: That's okay. Those are some good examples.

[00:16:39]

Tom Robey: Well, yeah, I know, but now it bothers me that I can't—I can't put it together.

[00:16:45]

Sara Roahen: And then I notice—. So we're here before the lunch service, and everybody ate out in the courtyard. Where do you all eat if it's raining or bad weather?

[00:16:53]

Tom Robey: Well, they all kind of crowd underneath the awnings or crowd into the kitchen. We don't want them eating in the dining rooms because, obviously, the mess. The cooks all eat standing up at their stations because we don't generally have time to sit down. And, plus, you sit down and eat something like that, it might tend to slow you down a little bit for the rest of the day, and we generally have things to do.

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Sara Roahen: When do the cooks eat?

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Tom Robey: Oh! We had—Mr. Barbato cooked yesterday. We had chili cheese French fry pie, and it was very outstanding. I'm not sure what the USDA would think about the nutritional value, but it was very good.

[00:17:38]

Sara Roahen: But you had a vegetable and a fruit, too, as well?

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Tom Robey: Well, the jalapeños on top were the vegetable, and there was salad and there was a bowl of fruit, so I guess we had it all together.

[00:17:48]

Sara Roahen: When you say that you've had some tough conversations about staff meal, is it Ella Brennan will be saying, "It needs to be heartier and more filling," or, "Hey, this is costing a lot, you need to figure out—"?

[00:18:01]

Tom Robey: No, cost is never an issue. It would have been about quality. Especially when I first started here, the dessert room was run by one person. Now it's run by three.

Obviously now the desserts are much more complicated, you know, thus making the three people necessary. But used to be the dessert person made help meal every day, so sometimes you only had like half an hour to come up with food for 300 people.

And when Miss Ella and Miss Dottie were with us every day, they would always go through staff meal, you know, just with the employees and try it. And they're just very concerned that we take very good care of our staff and just make it as good as we can. You know, it doesn't take that much more effort to season something or make sure it's hot, or just make it right.

[00:18:53]

Sara Roahen: I'm going to back up again a little bit.

[00:18:56]

Tom Robey: All right.

[00:18:56]

Sara Roahen: Where did you go to college?

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Tom Robey: Johnson & Wales in Providence.

[00:19:00]

Sara Roahen: But when you took the photography classes?

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Tom Robey: Florida Institute of Technology, and then I studied English at Rutgers, Stockton State College. And then, like I said, I took a year off of school and I cooked in Killington, Vermont. I wanted to cook for a full year just to make sure that it wasn't going to disappoint me, or make sure that it was for me. And so after that, I entered Johnson & Wales and finished up in '88.

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Sara Roahen: And then you went and worked for the Trump restaurants. Did you ever meet Donald Trump?

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Tom Robey: Oh, yeah.

[00:19:40]

Sara Roahen: He was around?

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Tom Robey: He was actually very nice. He would come back, shake everybody's hand, ask if we had everything, if the equipment was right. He was a very nice person.

[00:19:51]

Sara Roahen: What were your—like at what level were you in those restaurants?

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Tom Robey: I was just a lead cook. I was never management, but I was just part of a team in the hotel that would go into the new outlets and open them up. You know, get them up and running and train the other team; then move to another one. That's back when Trump was booming. I mean, the Taj Mahal was finished while I was there. We had a big addition on the harbor side of the casino because that's when he had the "Trump Princess," [a yacht] so he had to have a little complex for that.

Atlantic City is basically one island over from where I grew up. So, I mean, it was kind of in my backyard, and it was amazing to see that whole area just get so flush with money. But now every city up and down the seaboard has an Indian casino in it, and it's really taken a toll on Atlantic City. Because, I mean, three casinos was probably good, and then they built seven and then they built ten, and, you know, you can only spread that money around so much. Especially like with Trump, he had one very successful casino, then he had another very successful casino, and then he built the Taj Mahal, which was bigger than any three casinos. Well, where are the VIPs from the first two casinos—are they going to want to stay in the old casino? No, they all want to hang out in the new casino. So he kind of cut his own throat. But I guess he just never thought there was going to be an end, you know.

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Sara Roahen: Right. I read an article recently about what's happening in Atlantic City.

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Tom Robey: It's bad. There's a lot of people that—we've actually—we've tried recruiting. I understand if you're in your forties and if you've got a four-bedroom house and kids, to not want to pick up and move down to New Orleans. But for every forty-year-old that's working in the hotels, there's plenty of twenty-five-, twenty-six-year-olds. The economy in Atlantic City is not coming back. There's just no way to replace all those jobs that they created. So we've done a lot of advertising up there trying to find staff because we're always looking for skilled staff, and we haven't had a tremendous amount of response. But it's on them.

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Sara Roahen: How do you—I mean, that's really interesting to me. How do you recruit? Like through culinary schools or through newspaper ads? Or what do you do?

[00:22:10]

Tom Robey: Well, just like everybody else in the world, we use Craigslist now, but we are very involved with culinary schools. Every time one of the local schools has a job fair, we're always there. As Chef travels, if he goes to New York for a James Beard event, he'll take an extra day while the flight's already paid for and go over to the CIA and do a little face time, you know. When the Super Bowl was in Arizona, we went to Scottsdale Culinary Institute. We're constantly networking with people.

It's funny, because it's very difficult right now to find staffing, for a few reasons. (A), every time a restaurant opens up in New Orleans, they're looking at my staff for management positions, you know. They want our culture. They want our flavor profile. They want the way we do business because we do business better than anybody. This could very well just be a school or it could be a case study for a culinary program, you know, because I don't think anybody does a better job with the food, with the flavors, with the guests than we do. Which is why we are who we are.

But the other thing that's hurting us right now is—and there was even something on the news about it this morning—is the price of rent. When Tory and Chris and I—we all started within a year or two of each other—when we all started, eighty percent of the kitchen was not from New Orleans. They were all guys that packed up their cars and moved to New Orleans to work at Commander's Palace, like me. Well, when you're that invested, you're going to work harder, you're going to maybe put up with more stress, because nobody wants to pack their car and go home a loser.

It's become so very expensive to live around here, and you can only pay people so much. And we pay far better than we used to and better than most of the restaurants in town, but when I first moved here, I had an apartment down the street on Coliseum—2020 Coliseum—and it was basically a living room with like an alcove for a bedroom. It wasn't really a studio. It was almost a studio. And it was \$325 a month. That same apartment was on Craigslist the other day for \$1,200. And I don't care if they lined it with mink, it's still 400 square feet.

So now eighty percent of our staff is from in-town, and when you're living with your parents, maybe you don't feel the need to work so hard, you know, because there's a

lot easier jobs out there than here. When I interview people, the first thing I tell them: “Commander’s Palace is a very difficult place to work.” I’ll say it seven times in the interview, because I don’t want to waste their time and I don’t want to waste my time, because it *is* a very difficult place to work. But it’s not impossible, and it’s unbelievably rewarding. It’s just a matter of what you want to do. As I get older, I don’t want to sound like the old guy that throws the kids off my lawn, but, you know, “Get off my lawn.” The work ethic isn’t nearly what it used to be. So, yeah, we try very hard to—I mean, if we could have gotten one or two really good people from Atlantic City—. But they didn’t want to do it, so.

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Sara Roahen: In what way is it a difficult place to work?

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Tom Robey: It’s an unbelievably demanding place to work. There is no stopping here. There’s no—like I said, you didn’t see any cooks sitting down eating staff meal, and today’s very slow. We got to go. We got to go. When you walk in the door, you hit the ground running. Every cook, the first thing they do is they make a list. Every cook there in the kitchen right now has a list in front of him hanging where the ticket rails go. You’ve got to stay organized. Because we are a total scratch kitchen. There’s just a tremendous amount of knife work and prep work to be done for every shift, and everything needs to be done fresh. We don’t make stuff for a week. That’s just not our

style. The can opener in the restaurant is for tomato paste for the stocks, you know. We don't just make the cheesecake; we make the cream cheese.

So, I mean, there's just a tremendous amount of workload, but, I mean, it's that workload that makes you stronger, and that's why most of the best restaurants in this town are run by veterans who were successful at Commander's Palace. I tell people, "If you can survive here as a line cook for two years and be very successful, nothing's ever going to bother you again, because nobody's going to ask more than we do." But it's in the pushing that makes people better, you know. Complacency just doesn't accomplish anything.

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Sara Roahen: What was the position that you applied for when you got the job here?

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Tom Robey: I was hired as a line cook. I got down here—the week I got here was the week Emeril left; Jamie was promoted, and so Jamie immediately got married and went on his honeymoon. So they started me off actually in production, and it's what we do too. The line is so difficult, you start somebody at a lower experience level than you feel they have so they can figure out where the salt is and how we do business and, you know, just how the systems work. So they stuffed me in the back room slicing mushrooms for eight hours.

I finally went to the executive sous-chef, Tracy Topping, and I'm like, "This is stupid. I was the best guy in my hotel of 200 cooks. I want your hardest station and I want it right now."

And he said, "Okay." Like I said, I'm kind of opinionated and mouthy. He said, "Okay, joker. Here's p.m. sauté." P.M. sauté at that point had four dishes, and they were running this really stupid special. It was Champagne-poached crabmeat, lemon butter, wild mushroom rice. Really very simple. And he looks at me, he goes, "You know, if I were you, I'd have about seventy pounds of crabmeat picked for tonight."

And I went, "Yeah, whatever," you know? "You're just try to break the new guy's stones." And I think I had like fifteen or sixteen pounds, and by quarter to seven, I was a crabmeat-picking fool.

And the philosophy back then was a little different than now. Sous-chefs would rather yell at you than help, where we do that differently now because we grew up in that environment. We decided we were never going to do business like that. So it used to be a very, very stressful place. You'd have to get here an hour and a half early just to make sure you had spoons and pots and stuff, and the guys that got here early stashed the stuff from the other people. It was very cutthroat. But, then again, that's when the restaurant had a stack of résumés of people that were willing to walk in the door and do it. And also, like I said, that's what makes you stronger, you know.

It's funny, when you try to train the new cooks now, it's like, "All right, you're working broiler. The salt goes here."

And, you know, they, "Why are you going to tell me where to put the salt?"

It's like, "Well, I'm not trying to power-trip on you, and I'm not trying to, like, change your life, but, you know what? I've tried the salt over here and I've tried the salt over here and I've tried it over here, and I find it works easiest if it's right here." You know, because you want the cooks to have a good night, because if they have a bad night, then we're on their station, you know, and we certainly have other things we need to be doing. And you can't coddle them or they won't become strong.

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Sara Roahen: When you moved down here, had you been to New Orleans before?

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Tom Robey: Never. Never even heard of Commander's Palace.

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Sara Roahen: Had you learned to cook anything in the New Orleans culinary canon in culinary school?

[00:30:02]

Tom Robey: In culinary school, you glaze over things, but no. But, I mean, cooking is cooking, you know. Give me a great breakfast cook and I can have him cooking veal in a week, because it's the same concept: hot pan, good oil, clean station, organized. It's all the same stuff. But, like I said, I always considered myself fairly good at it because I'd

been doing it for a long time. So I fell into the Commander's mentality very quickly, and that's why I survived and that's why I'm still here.

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Sara Roahen: Had you heard of Emeril or Paul Prudhomme?

[00:30:43]

Tom Robey: Certainly Paul Prudhomme. Emeril's star wasn't that big then. That little thing called The Food Network didn't exist yet. I mean, obviously, when they approached me for the phone interviews and stuff, I did research on Commander's Palace and found out what a legacy it was. But, no, truly never been here; just packed up everything and wanted to see how—I thought I was just going to spend a year or two. You know, put a notch on my résumé and then maybe go somewhere else.

But I fell in love with the place. This place is addicting. You come in every day and you look at the count sheet, and you're like—it's a full-contact sport every day: us against the clock, get it done, get it done, get it done right, get it done well. And there's no place like this. We call Commander's "the monster," because it is. It's a big blue-and-white breathing monster, and we help make it go.

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Sara Roahen: I didn't get a chance to talk about Jamie Shannon with anyone else that we've interviewed, and I'd really love to hear about him as a person and as a chef. And I

know you not only worked under him, but I understand you were close friends. Can you talk about your relationship and your working relationship?

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Tom Robey: I can talk about it a little bit, because I'm going to get upset. I'm getting upset already. All of us in this industry, like I said, have a twist one way or the other, and you get a group of guys at our skill level and there's a lot of twists. Well, Jamie was the great wolf. He was the guy that kept us together as a pack, you know. Nobody loved life like Jamie did. Nobody loved fishing like Jamie did, or barreling around Uptown on his Harley.

The rule used to be your hair could be long, as long as it wasn't as long as Chef's, because Jamie had a pretty good ponytail going on. He was an extremely vibrant person, and he held this place together and he changed the place, you know. I know everybody says that the Emeril years were what made us famous, but when I first started here, everything was cooked in big twenty-four-inch pans, ten orders at a time. [demonstrates] Jamie changed all that. We threw all the big pans away. Everything was going to be more à la minute. Everything was going to be closer.

I mean, god, when I first started here, we used a thousand pounds of butter and a thousand quarts of cream a week. Everything was sticky, gloppy. The veg of the night, every night, was the same sliced squash. It just—the old Commander's wouldn't even survive in today's marketplace. But then again, like I said—or I don't know if we said it on camera, but twenty-five years ago when we were made famous, there was no competition. There was no Emeril's, there was no Bayona, there was no Brigtsen's. You

know, all these great restaurants doing great things. It's like playing tennis. The better your competition is, the better you better become or you're not going to be competition anymore.

Jamie really, really changed the focus of the restaurant to better food. We chopped the menu in half. I mean, p.m. broiler used to have nine entrées on it. It was a ridiculous amount of workload, and it just wasn't as nice. Now every station has two or three entrées. That's it, but they're more intricate plates. There's stuff that's fired to order, you know. You're not holding stuff in steam tables. And it was Jamie that did all that.

It was Jamie that started working with a lot of the farmers and a lot of the fishermen and going out and doing the research and learning why this oyster is better than that one. It was Jamie you'd see at three o'clock in the morning at Tipitina's dancing to the Radiators, you know. He was our leader. He put us all on the path. And there's a lot of people in town that can thank their career to Jamie Shannon.

It was a sad thing that happened to him, especially somebody so big and vibrant, and when they started cutting him up, it just—. If he hadn't had a wife and a family, he wouldn't have gone out like that, you know. If he'd had his druthers, he would have taken that Harley and found himself a nice scenic cliff, because he didn't want to go out in pieces. I don't think he deserved that, but he was doing it for his family, and you can only respect that.

[00:35:36]

Sara Roahen: Because he had cancer.

[00:35:39]

Tom Robey: He had cancer in his hips, so they started taking parts of his legs and thinking that [he was] going to survive. And because of who he was, you know, they wanted to—he got access to some of the better doctors and some of the better clinics or whatever. But, I mean, he always hated doctors. And by the end of the week, he was always in pain. We're all in pain by the end of the week, you know. It's a tough job. It's a full-contact sport.

It was when he was on book tour, all that flying—. Because he's a big guy. He was at least six-foot-four. And spending all that time in the airline seats *really* started bothering his lower back, and that's when they found it. When they found it, it was really too late, so.

[00:36:31]

Sara Roahen: He was so young. I mean, he was like forty or something.

[00:36:33]

Tom Robey: He was forty years old.

[00:36:37]

Sara Roahen: Well, I feel badly making you talk about that, but I think—I really appreciate it because I think that we hear about—. You know, just as someone who lives in New Orleans and pays attention to restaurant stories, we hear about how much he was

loved here and how influential he was, but I don't have a great grasp of the specifics, and that really helps, like, paint a picture of the specifics. He was just a pioneer in spirit.

That's how he had it in him to change things at such a young age?

[00:37:12]

Tom Robey: Well, not only was he a pioneering spirit; he was very in tune with the industry. As much time as he spent outdoors he spent behind a desk reading a book, you know. He was around when the whole Food Network thing got going and when chefs started networking more nationally, and the whole James Beard thing started becoming more important to restaurants, you know. I don't think—twenty-five years ago people hardly knew James Beard existed, and the whole Foundation and the prominence that it can bring a restaurant.

Jamie, he just he loved people, and the guy truly loved to cook. I can remember many days off where we'd sit around, we'd start cracking beers about four o'clock, and, you know, next thing you know, it's going through the cupboards. "What have we got? What can we put together with this? Got some fish in the freezer." You know, just doing whatever, just for the love of cooking and the love of eating and the love of having fun.

I mean, Jamie loved live music. He loved Mardi Gras and Jazz Fest. He would always do demos at Jazz Fest on the last Sunday, and I was with him. I did a lot of traveling. I was Jamie's gun for a long time. When you do a demo, you can bring in anything you want in the fairgrounds [at Jazz Fest], because, you know, you've got your food and your pots and your pans. The Allman Brothers was the headliner, and Jamie, we'd always do the first demo at like nine o'clock so we were done. So I remember this

one time we brought in this big forty-eight-quart red cooler full of Budweiser. Jazz Fest is sponsored by Miller, so you're not supposed to.

So we did our demo and we were making our way to where all the people at the—back then we used to hang out at Le Bon Temps Roulé on Magazine Street. We hung there so much, I actually bought a house 117 steps away. So we were heading toward where all the Bon Temps people were hanging out at the Ray-Ban stage. I had this big cooler on my shoulder and I'm drinking a Budweiser, and this kid comes up, and he goes, "Dude, dude! How'd you get the Budweiser in here?"

I looked around, I said, "Dude, I came here three days ago and I buried it."

And he's like, "Oh, my god! That's such a good idea!"

I was like, "You idiot." [laughs]

But, I mean, Jamie loved—Jamie was from South Jersey, which is kind of funny. Like I said, we never knew each other before I got here, but then it was kind of like we'd known each other for years. I mean, we went to school with some people that were related to each other.

But he loved New Orleans like few people have. He really, really was a great guy, and, like I said, he put us on our path. As much as Jamie changed things from Emeril, I think Tory's done the same thing with Jamie's cuisine and taken it even to a better level, and I'm sure if we can ever find some younger person to step up, they might change what we've done, you know. But that's the evolution of Commander's. We're not the same. I love the downtown battleship restaurants—and you know what I'm referring to. But there's—

[00:40:51]

Sara Roahen: I don't know. Can you—

[00:40:52]

Tom Robey: I don't know who's going to see this thing. I might need to look for a job someday, you know. [laughs] But the big, you know, large-capacity restaurants that have been there for a long, long time, you can take one of their menus from twenty years ago and one of their menus now and see a lot of similarities. Here, the only thing that hasn't changed is the turtle soup and the bread pudding soufflé, and that's what—we call those “career changers.” If you run out of either one of those on your shift, it's not going to be a good day.

But aside from that, this restaurant is radically different from where it was. It's radically different from where it was ten years ago. And we hope ten years from now, if we're all still in the game swingin', it's going to be radically different from now. And that's why we're Commander's Palace, and that's why we're always number one, and that's why, you know, we don't bow down to anybody.

[00:41:48]

Sara Roahen: You and Tory, who's now the executive chef, and Chris—

[00:41:54]

Tom Robey: Barbato.

[00:41:55]

Sara Roahen: —you all were here with Jamie at the same time, right?

[00:41:58]

Tom Robey: Uh-huh, absolutely, absolutely. So wonder why we're all so good, you know? And like I said, Tory, who loved Jamie dearly—I mean, Jamie handpicked him when Jamie knew that it wasn't going to go well. Like I said, Tory has picked up and gone farther than Jamie did. As much as the food improved when Jamie took over, it's way better now.

And it gets tougher these days to source ingredients and find things that you can—the Brennans are very involved in the pricing of the restaurant. For as great as this restaurant is, there's little restaurants on Magazine Street that are far more expensive than us. And that's the Brennans. So that makes it more challenging as proteins get more expensive, you know. I mean, twenty years ago, everything was full of crabmeat, because crabmeat was \$8 a pound. Well, crabmeat's not \$8 a pound anymore. So what can you sell to still be cutting-edge, to still be something that people haven't seen before, but something that you can sell at a more reasonable price?

Thanksgiving—. I'm going to share a little bit of numbers, and, I don't know, I've already had my review this year. I'll be fine. Our Thanksgiving dinner—and let me preface with this. One of the coolest things about Commander's is you can call today for a table next year for Thanksgiving and have an out-of-state area code, and they won't give you a table. Thanksgiving's for us. Thanksgiving's for the people that live in the city, and it's the same families year after year, and it's their nephews and cousins. We

save all of our holidays for our locals, and our locals repay us by being very loyal. And like in the summertime when restaurants slow down, we certainly slow down but we never stop. And that's because we do so well with the local community.

So, Thanksgiving turkey, stupid turkey. Our turkey plate was \$36. I priced it and I fought tooth and nail to get it increased. There were so many restaurants in town that were selling turkey for \$60. You know, for a three-course meal. Well, because we're Commander's Palace, we're not just serving some dumb old frozen turkey. We ordered our turkeys when they were chicks, we were able to see them grow, and our turkeys were harvested—I think that's a good word, right? That's fairly calm. Our turkeys were harvested the week before Thanksgiving. We are probably one of the only restaurants in America that serve truly fresh turkey at four times the cost of frozen turkey. I mean, we didn't make a dime on Thanksgiving, but ours was the best and we made a lot of locals happy. If they come on Thanksgiving, maybe they'll come a couple more times a year, and that's the way the Brennans feel about it. So it is very challenging now to meet the price point and still give the guest something better than they're going to have anywhere else, and that's where the skill comes in.

[00:45:33]

Sara Roahen: I don't know if you read—well, a week or two ago there was a restaurant review in “The New York Times” that made a lot of waves—

[00:45:43]

Tom Robey: Per Se.

[00:45:43]

Sara Roahen: Per Se. It was not a positive review, and then the local restaurant writer wrote a sort of commentary about how New Orleans doesn’t have those type of “penthouse restaurants.”

[00:45:58]

Tom Robey: Yeah. I didn’t like that term “penthouse restaurant.” But we actually do. There’s a few of the newer, newer guys in town that have little forty-seat restaurants that are extremely expensive.

[00:46:15]

Sara Roahen: But that’s not where Commander’s—

[00:46:21]

Tom Robey: That’s not where we want to be. That’s not how we consider ourselves.

[00:46:24]

Sara Roahen: Reputation-wise you kind of are, but how you’re talking about, it’s important to—it seems important to keep things—. I mean, it’s still fine dining, but in that realm, like kind of affordable, like locals could come.

[00:46:39]

Tom Robey: Right, I agree, and that's part of the challenge, you know. And, again, that's why we like to think that we're the best.

[00:46:55]

Sara Roahen: Can you talk about first impressions of Ella and Dottie, who were still part of the day-to-day operations of the restaurant when you first started?

[00:47:05]

Tom Robey: They're gone now. We had some—

[00:47:11]

Sara Roahen: Interlopers.

[00:47:11]

Tom Robey: Yeah, interlopers. It's funny. I was giving a tour yesterday to some people from Birmingham, and some other table just got up and started following us around. It's like [demonstrates].

Ella and Dottie were, and are, just so very impressive. The way they carry themselves; the opinions they have on food. They used to have two stools in the kitchen. One said "Ella," one said "Dottie," and it was right by the entrance to the bar, so it would be like the end of the kitchen where they could look on to the hotline. And not only do they sit there and greet their guests, you know, as they came by, but they would watch us cook. And, you know, you season a fish on two sides, a steak has six sides. You season

it, you season it. If they didn't observe you following the practices that they wanted done, they would pull you off the line and discuss it with you. And so if you're so in the weeds that you're not seasoning right, but then you get pulled off the line and, you know, have a two-minute discussion, the orders are still coming in and pickups are still being given out, so now you're more in the weeds. So, you know, it's just those kind of things that make you do it right the first time, because you don't want to get caught doing it.

They would come down the line and taste everything every day, and, as I said, they would make sure that the help meal was great every day—or family meal—because it was important to them. Everything's important to them. Is the coffee hot enough? Is there dust on the copper pan that hasn't come off that shelf for thirty years because everybody's scared to use it? There are no details that fall through.

[00:49:09]

Sara Roahen: What was that like when you first came? That's a unique dynamic.

[00:49:15]

Tom Robey: It's intimidating. It's unbelievably intimidating to have the owner of the restaurant get up on the line and just started poking spoons into stuff. It's extremely intimidating and it—well, it makes you respect them, because they're real. I mean, they came up in this world as restaurateurs and they built an empire in one generation that's probably never been seen anywhere else in America. I don't know of any restaurant family or restaurant group that grew so fast, so quickly. But not just quickly but so well.

Every restaurant they built from the next was better and better and better and better. It's just amazing.

I mean, Ella is constantly reading. She never stops reading, and she sends over little Xeroxes or books with Post-it notes stuffed all in it. And you'll find it in your mailbox, and God help you if you don't read it, because you're getting a call in a day or two to discuss the contents of that article. And that article, she didn't give it to everybody; she gave that article to *you* because she thought that was something that could benefit *you*. Because she knows us all so well. I mean, we work for a family.

Twenty years ago when I was a.m. sous-chef, three of my cooks lived together, and they went out one night and, you know, did what cooks do: got probably a little tipsy. And it was the first cold night they turned on their space heater, and there was a fire, and they had a security door and they couldn't get out. Firemen were on the one side pulling the door. The one guy was a big as me pushing on the door. And one of them burned to death and one of their girlfriends burned to death, and the other two were critically injured in Charity Hospital.

I get the call at four o'clock in the morning. I'm to be here at six, and these were literally three of my four line cooks that were working that morning. And I'm just standing in the restaurant, I'm like, "What am I supposed to do?" So I go next door, and the kitchen light is always on, and the ladies were having coffee. I said, "Miss Ella, half my staff just got burned up in a fire. What am I going to do?"

And she looked at me and she got me a cup of coffee, and she said, "Well, the first thing you're going to do is you're going to get on the phone and you're going to get

in touch with some of the people who work at night, and you're going to open my restaurant. That's the first thing you're going to do." She's like, "Where are they at?"

I said, "Well, they're all in Charity Hospital."

She said, "No, they need to be in the Burn Center in Baton Rouge."

And I said, "Well, you know, they just started. They don't have any insurance."

Her and Dottie both pull out their—you know something's up when they both pull out their phonebooks. They're sitting on both ends and they start calling around. And they got in touch with the right officials and the right people, and "No, they don't have insurance. No, we're not paying for it either." It's like, "You're going to be in my restaurant next Saturday night, there's going to be a helicopter on the roof of that hospital, and they're going to go to the Burn Center in Baton Rouge." And they did.

And then the next day, they flew in all the families, you know, and put them up. Then we had people come and talk, let everybody vent out what's going on. And then they organized a benefit at Tipitina's with some of the more well-known music people in town to raise money for the guys that were still alive. And one of those guys controls three of the best restaurants in town right now.

You work for a family here, you know. It's not the Hyatt. It's not the Marriott. We don't carry clipboards. We come in and we bust our ass every day for this restaurant because we all love it so much, and that's the story of Commander's Palace.

[00:53:46]

Sara Roahen: Thanks. You have mailboxes?

[00:53:49]

Tom Robey: Well, little cubbyhole things, yeah. They're constantly putting stuff in there; calling over, "What's going on?" I spent some time at Ella's desk—Ella's table—the other night. You know, brought her food. "Sit down. What's going on in the restaurant?" She doesn't get over here as much as she used to or as much as she'd probably like to.

But anyway, it's Ti's show now. And just like we changed stuff from Jamie, who changed stuff from Emeril, Ti is taking the great philosophy her mother gave her and taking it to a whole other level, and the restaurant moves on. And nobody's going to stop us and nobody's even going to come close to us, you know.

[00:54:35]

Sara Roahen: Before we started filming, we talked about—so Ella and Dottie live right next door.

[00:54:41]

Tom Robey: They do.

[00:54:41]

Sara Roahen: And the Commander's kitchen is still their kitchen.

[00:54:45]

Tom Robey: Absolutely.

[00:54:46]

Sara Roahen: How does that work?

[00:54:47]

Tom Robey: The phone rings, and thank goodness for caller ID, because it'll say "Ella." [laughs] And, "Yes, ma'am." Well, sometimes they want stuff off the menu. A lot of times they want to try new things off the menu so they can give their input. Sometimes they want a redfish sandwich. Miss Ella loves scrambled eggs with bananas in them, but don't overcook it. Those eggs have to be like half-raw on the hot plate as they go over there so that they're not dry, or God help you.

When the ladies call, one of us three generally cook for it, for no other reason than we don't want any follow-up phone call, because we know what the ladies like. Ella, she doesn't like—don't make the carrots crunchy. It doesn't matter if the rest of the world is into al dente carrots, there ain't no crunchy carrots for Miss Ella. And the [*Unintelligible*] has got to be seasoned right, just like it always has been.

But, yeah, you can take trays of hors d'oeuvres over there or you can take five slices of bacon and an old-fashioned—whatever the ladies want. And we're proud to get to take something over there. Actually that's a great time for us all to have one-on-one time with them, you know, because they do stay very dialed in to what goes on here.

[00:56:11]

Sara Roahen: I know that they—because we were filming there when the meeting happened at three o'clock in the courtyard here, so we kind of saw that, and they talked about how much they enjoyed being able to see that every day. Can you talk about what that is at three o'clock?

[00:56:23]

Tom Robey: Yeah. Well, it's three o'clock and then eight o'clock as well. So basically when the cooks get here, they pull out all the stuff they need and then we all sit down. We talk about, if there's parties that day, what the parties are; what extra work needs to be done. We use that time just to address anything. You know, talk about—that's a good time to pass along some of the philosophy. We get up on a soapbox and we address a subject one day. Find out what needs to be done. Like right now in all the meetings—it's Chris Barbato over there. Can you catch him on camera? I believe he just made an obscene gesture.

[00:57:09]

Sara Roahen: That's the sous-chef.

[00:57:13]

Tom Robey: Really the only obscene thing today is going to be the meal he cooks for the staff, because he's not very good.

[00:57:19]

Sara Roahen: He's right here now.

[00:57:21]

Tom Robey: Yeah. Oh, I don't care about him. We're more like a husband and wife than anybody. We spend all day together just arguing about everything.

But like right now, you know, at the meetings you address Mardi Gras, which I love. "There's going to be parades. You've got to be here, make a plan. Know where you're going to park, know what you're going to do. Don't pee in the streets." We lose more cooks to public urination at Mardi Gras than a lot of things. It's like you—

[00:57:55]

Sara Roahen: Because you get arrested.

[00:57:56]

Tom Robey: Because you get arrested, yeah. "Don't talk back to the police," you know. Especially the people that aren't from here. So we just take that time every day just to pass on information and talk about new foods or talk about the new restaurant down the street that the cook should try or, you know, just anything. Anything we need to talk to them about. Then the cooks break up and the sous-chefs will sit there and just make a sub-game-plan for the day. And then we go get our day on.

[00:58:28]

Sara Roahen: Is it ever optional? Is it ever like, "We are way too in the weeds today"?

[00:58:32]

Tom Robey: No. If it's that bad, we'll all huddle up together around the chef's table, you know, so that we're not that—. It forces it to go a little bit faster, but, no, you don't ever not have a meeting. Ever.

[00:58:46]

Sara Roahen: Was Dick senior working there—

[00:58:51]

Tom Robey: He was.

[00:58:52]

Sara Roahen: —when you first got here?

[00:58:53]

Tom Robey: He was. Mm-hmm. He was a great individual. You talk about another guy that loved to live life. Mr. Dick was—I don't know. I was here probably three years. I was still a cook, I was on the a.m. back line, it was Christmas lunches, and I stuck my foot into a Lexan of reduced stock. It's like napalm. Took a couple layers of skin off. But it's Christmas lunches. You know, 400—well, lots of people a day. Lots of people.

My best friend, who was cooking at that time—he's since gotten smart and gotten out of the business—was in town visiting me, so he came to work with me and he was

my feet. He would hop around and get stuff for me, and I would make my plates and he would help me get them out. And at the end of the day, Mr. Dick came over and shook his hand and thanked him very much.

Three years later, my friend Jody came in for brunch, and Mr. Dick picked him out of the crowd and went up and shook his hand. That's a restaurateur, you know.

[01:00:09]

Sara Roahen: That's amazing.

[01:00:10]

Tom Robey: Yeah. Mr. Dick—there's some really good Mr. Dick stories out there, but, you know, that would have to be for another day.

[01:00:20]

Sara Roahen: We did get a chance to interview his wife, which was great.

I'm not trying to get you to give up any family secrets, but I am just curious. What was the dynamic with—I mean, Ella and Dottie are such forces of nature, you know, and most of the stories revolve around them. What was the dynamic between, like, them and Mr. Dick? Like, did he have a different role?

[01:00:45]

Tom Robey: No. They were all—there always used to be a Brennan on duty. There was always a Brennan in the restaurant to deal with issues, to talk to people, to check

everything in the kitchen. Mr. Dick was a maniac about walking down the line with a set of spoons, and he tried every sauce, everything, on every station every day.

We used to not do bread pudding soufflés at lunch. We used to just do what we called a Creole bread pudding. It was a traditional bread pudding. It was like four inches deep; took like five hours to cook. It's like when you were [on] desserts, you had to put it in right away. Mr. Dick liked raisins on top the bread pudding. Miss Ella didn't like raisins on top the bread pudding. So the first thing you did when you were on desserts was you tried to find out who the Brennan on duty was and make the bread pudding. And sometimes they were both here, and you were just screwed. They would both stand in the room, "Bread pudding."

"What do you want me to do? Can we pick one and go with it, please?"

But, no, Mr. Dick was great. He really was. When the families shifted around, we missed having him around. And, you know, they shifted around for a lot of reasons that did not involve animosity. I think they all had pet projects they wanted to do. We did Foodies [Kitchen]. That was when Dickie—that's when they built the steakhouse, you know. I think they just wanted to organize things before one of them passed, and just have everything set.

We're still great friends with all the guys that work for Dickie and work for Ralph because for no other reason: Where did they all start out? They all started out here. Imagine that. So we trade cooks. We borrow things if need be. There is—you know, it's just like we didn't separate. It's just they did it for the paperwork, I guess.

[01:03:00]

Sara Roahen: Why does the bread pudding take five hours to cook?

[01:03:04]

Tom Robey: Because it was so deep, and you want to cook it really slow, and you want it to be perfect smooth custard and not scrambled. It's just because it was so big, and to make sure the custard was great, you cooked it in a full water bath, which slowed it down, too. It used to be like that much true custard and then the bread, so when you cut into it with a spoon, you made a cylinder—you had this beautiful—. I mean, Creole bread pudding was fabulous. We dinosaurs talk about it from time to time, that we'd love to bring it back. But now the public is so engrained on the bread pudding soufflé, there's no point in having both. And, quite honestly, it was a lot of eggs and cream. It's probably—I'd hate to think what it would cost to produce these days.

[01:03:53]

Sara Roahen: I'd like to try that.

[01:03:55]

Tom Robey: It's really—we still do it on—. Well, we talk about our locals. Trinity, one of the local schools, has their Ring Day here, and it's one of the desserts we've done for their Ring Day menu forever. So we still make it, and we all go in there and devour it. It's delicious.

[01:04:15]

Sara Roahen: Do you have—I mean, I know you have to do—you have specific tasks, you have a specific job. But is there a station in the kitchen or—that you particularly like that's sort of Robey's specialty?

[01:04:32]

Tom Robey: Well, Mr. Barbato would argue with me on this—

[01:04:35]

Sara Roahen: Well, he's not here.

[01:04:36]

Tom Robey: —because he thinks he's the best expediter in this restaurant, but I *know* I'm the best expediter in this restaurant. We call it “driving the bus.” The kitchen is always expedited by a sous-chef. And most restaurants expedite from the outside of the line, with the tickets in front of them, and they grab the plates from the window and put them on a tray and send it out. Well, we're far too busy for that. So we pick up eight to ten tables at a time.

[Begin File 2]

[00:00:02]

Tom Robey: Well, I hope this is what you're looking for.

[00:00:04]

Sara Roahen: It's better than what I was looking for. If you make me cry again, I don't know what I'm going to do.

[00:00:08]

Tom Robey: I'm a crier.

[00:00:09]

Sara Roahen: [laughs] I am too. I do not take any—I don't need any help. But, you know, I appreciate your opening up like that. It's great stuff.

[00:00:21]

Tom Robey: Well, I could have my own restaurant in this town any day I wanted one. Actually, I left for five years and had a restaurant in Birmingham, Alabama, and whipped everybody's ass. And it's a pretty good food town. And people ask us all the time—and Barbato is the same. Barbato has been the chef for several restaurants in this town. People at the bar—there's like three restaurant bars in town where all us stinky people that work will go at the end of the night. We all lie about the numbers. Well, *they* all lie about the numbers. They try to impress us with their little cover counts, and we're not having it.

You know, why don't we have our own restaurant? Well, like my restaurant in Birmingham, it was a great restaurant, and I won every award that I could get. And, you know, business plan started to sour. And it's like, would you rather be the president of a

third-world country or the colonel of a superpower? As an exec sous here, not only monetarily is it pretty darn good, but, you know, four weeks' vacation. We might work fifteen hours in a day, but you always get two days off; they're always in a row. And, besides, if you're at eight hours, what's ten? If you're at ten, what's—and if you need to work that long anyway, it means it's a really busy day, so it usually goes by pretty quickly.

But I see myself as a chef of a restaurant, or at least a section of it. So does Chris. And the other one you haven't met, but he doesn't talk much—he wouldn't really be worth talking to—is Jason Wells. Because this place is so monstrously big and they've got Chef traveling so much, you know.

[00:02:20]

Sara Roahen: What were the years when you left and went to Birmingham?

[00:02:24]

Tom Robey: It was about four years ago I got back. I don't know. This is, what, 2000—

[00:02:37]

Sara Roahen: After Katrina?

[00:02:38]

Tom Robey: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, like two or three years after Katrina.

[00:02:43]

Sara Roahen: And you were gone about four years?

[00:02:45]

Tom Robey: Well, five years exactly. But still that's not included in the twenty-two.

[00:02:52]

Sara Roahen: Well, I haven't asked you: How long have you worked here?

[00:02:55]

Tom Robey: September 27, 1989.

[00:02:58]

Sara Roahen: Minus five years.

[00:03:00]

Tom Robey: Correct. I think I've touched about nine million plates for the Brennans, whether I've put it on a tray or picked up a piece of cheesecake or threw some parsley on it. It's been a long road. And the change that I've seen in the place—you know, it's always a different place. It's not like—you know, that's one of the things that I hated about Trump, one of the things that made me leave, was it was union. And we love unions; just don't come here. It was all about seniority. So like in the Italian room, it

was kind of funny. His name was Frank; worked in the Italian room. But he had top seniority. His seniority was so strong that he could tell the chef what days off he was having next week. It was ridiculous how strong the union was. It bred mediocrity, because you were only promoted through time. You were never promoted through merit. Which is why I had a big mouth and, you know, blah, blah, blah.

So he had so much seniority on his station that he could never leave his station. So the guy is going to work the same station in the same restaurant possibly for the rest of his life. I mean, it sounds like torture, especially when you consider hotels. None of them change the menu that often. So, I mean, how long is it until you just start having a couple beers before work and you still do the job just as well? Then a couple of beers and a couple of shots. And the next thing you know, you're at camp. Nobody wants to go to camp.

[00:04:44]

Sara Roahen: Are you ever here early enough on Mardi Gras Day to see what happens?

[00:04:50]

Tom Robey: Yeah.

[00:04:51]

Sara Roahen: Can you talk about that a little? We didn't get a chance to talk about that yet.

[00:04:54]

Tom Robey: Yeah. Every Mardi Gras Day—well usually there's always a culinary in here, because we have to break all the stuff out. Pete Fountain and his Half-Fast steppers along the parade route come in here, and they—well, we feed them and we drink them, and we take care of them. For years it was meatloaf sandwiches. And I remember on Lundi Gras, because we all want to go party, but the last thing we do before we leave is we got to make 200 meatloaf sandwiches. It was always kind of annoying. So they come in, and we have sandwiches and we have Danish and coffee and Bloody Marys and milk punch, and they just come here and they just hang out. Because I think we're like halfway along the route.

Every year the group gets a little smaller, you know. Like when Mr. Dick was here, we used to celebrate—we used to celebrate St. Paddy's Day more strongly. He would have all his buddies, and I remember it being a sixty-top for a long time. And then it was a forty-top, and then it was a twenty-top, and then it was, "I guess I'll just see y'all down the street."

[00:06:14]

Sara Roahen: Pete Fountain is like—I don't even know how old he is, but he's at least in his eighties, I think.

[00:06:19]

Tom Robey: Yeah, oh, easily.

[00:06:21]

Sara Roahen: He's a clarinet player.

[00:06:22]

Tom Robey: He doesn't walk anymore. They drive him, which is good.

[00:06:27]

Sara Roahen: And what time are they here eating their meatloaf and drinking their Bloody Marys?

[00:06:30]

Tom Robey: Well, I got to be here at five, probably. I think probably around the eight o'clock hour. I'm sure it varies a little bit when you have big groups of people and there's alcohol involved. Trying to get them all to move in one direction, you know, but—

[00:06:48]

Sara Roahen: It's an early day, Mardi Gras Day.

[00:06:49]

Tom Robey: Oh, it's very early. Which is good, because, like, whoever gets stuck doing it, does it and they still get out in time to go enjoy themselves.

[00:07:01]

Sara Roahen: You know, I was curious. Before we started rolling, you mentioned a couple things I just want to touch on. Oh, the heart healthy program. You were the—

[00:07:12]

Tom Robey: We're not going to talk about that.

[00:07:14]

Sara Roahen: No? You don't want to talk—

[00:07:14]

Tom Robey: No, we're not going to talk about that.

[00:07:15]

Sara Roahen: Okay. That's fine. Let me just ask a wrap-up question.

[00:07:18]

Tom Robey: Let me just say that it's very important to eat healthy. It's very important. Vegetables are good.

[00:07:27]

Sara Roahen: To wrap up—

[00:07:28]

Tom Robey: Okay.

[00:07:30]

Sara Roahen: —what would you say are the greatest challenges, I guess we can say, in your current position in your job here, and also the greatest reward?

[00:07:41]

Tom Robey: The greatest challenge *and* the greatest reward is staffing. Finding qualified, dedicated candidates and watching them grow and mentoring them and passing on every trick I've learned in the book to make them as strong as they can be. And the greatest reward is when they leave and they go on to great things, and they see you one day and they say, "You know, it was you that put me on this path." Just like I would say to Jamie if I could talk to him right now. But he's watching us. He laughs at us when we're real busy, but—pardon me. That is the greatest reward: building people and watching them grow and making a future for them, and so then they do the same. And next thing you know, you've got a society or a family of great culinarians. That's the best thing.

[00:08:44]

Sara Roahen: You're not very old, but you are an elder.

[00:08:47]

Tom Robey: I'm pretty old. I'm a dinosaur. When Human Resources call you to see if somebody used to work here, you've been here too long.

[00:08:55]

Sara Roahen: Well, I really appreciate your having given us your time and stories.

[00:09:00]

Tom Robey: All right. Well, it was good being here. Thank you so much.

[00:09:02]

Sara Roahen: Yeah, thank you.

[00:09:05]

Tom Robey: And that's a wrap.

[End of interview]