



Tom Saab  
Bistro Two Eighteen  
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Michelle Little: This is Michelle Little interviewing Tom Saab for the Southern Foodways Alliance, and this is the project on the Central Business District in downtown Birmingham. And today is Thursday, February the 10th of 2022. And we're at Bistro Two Eighteen on 20th Street in downtown Birmingham. So Tom, to get us started, could you tell me about your background, sort of when and where you grew up? You don't have to tell us your age, but just give us a general sense of when you were growing up.

Tom Saab: [Laughter] Well, I'm old.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Tom Saab: I'm a Birmingham native. I spent my formative years out West in the Rockies, late [19]80s and [19]90s climbing and skiing.

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And then I think in about 2004 my wife and I moved back to Birmingham, and I worked a couple jobs here and there. I was a chef at a country club and at the BJCC. And then after a few years I started looking for a location. And I think what inspired me to come to a downtown location was El Barrio and Café Dupont because I saw they were down here doing well so I started looking for spaces downtown. And I would just kind of drive around different hours of the day and look at foot traffic and check out different locations. I wanted to be on either 2nd or 20th because that kind of seems like the happening spots downtown. And so I found this spot. It was for lease. And when I first got here there were drop ceilings in it and indoor/outdoor carpet.

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This is an old historic building. It was built in the 1890s by a gentleman named W.M. Stitt who was a barber. He operated on the ground level, and he built the entire building. It's a three-story building and he built it as a boarding house so there's a lot of history. We have archival photos with horses tied up out front. So after the boarding house and barber shop it became a lot of different iterations over the years. It was a Parisian department store at one time. It was a jewelry store at one time. There's several more that I can't remember but there's been a lot of different businesses in here. So what we tried to do was restore it. We ground the floors and took out the acoustic ceiling and tried to restore it to its historical brick-lined space with eighteen-foot ceilings to try to make it grand.

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After we operated for four years, we took the space next door and made it kind of our casual area. There's a bar area so it's dual concepts. You don't have to wear a coat and tie and sit at a white tablecloth. You can have the same menu on the bar side. And that's pretty much it. It's my last foray into culinary. And I dabbled in all kinds of cuisine over the years and did the Alice Waters thing and nouvelle cuisine and dabbled in Asian and molecular gastronomy and foams and spherification and all that, but then I decided when I wanted to open my own restaurant that I wanted to go back to the classics.

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So it's a French-inspired restaurant but it has a lot of coastal influences. A lot of our guests have second homes on the coast, so we serve a lot of gulf seafood and some New Orleans inspired dishes. Maryland crabcakes are on the menu in the summer. So a lot of coastal influences on our menu, as well. Got a great team here. Lot of long-term employees so we're very grateful for that.

After COVID we came back with health insurance for the staff and we contribute to their health insurance plan, so we want a healthy staff and keep everybody with us for as long as we can. The longer they work here the more productive and informed that they are.

Michelle Little: Sure. And so is there anything about-- when you saw this space the first time, did you already sort of have a vision of what type of restaurant you wanted to create or did anything about this space inform how you developed your restaurant?

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Tom Saab: I did. I was sure I wanted to do French food because almost all the food that we do comes from French techniques. Bistros are-- it's supposed to be the kind of restaurant that you walk in, and you feel like that it's always been there. We're a little more formal than a traditional French bistro. We're not quite as casual but we like to say we bring French cuisine to every palate. So I felt the space-- it just looked like a bistro, worn, the floors are uneven, the bricks shed. We kept the original floors in the space.

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The storefront used to be one of those semicircular storefronts where you could walk in, and it was merchandised on the right or left. And so it was an exterior that had terrazzo and then drugstore tile in the interior of the restaurant. So we restored it all. And then, after a few years, because it was so uneven and kind of worn looking, I brought two or three flooring people in to come in and redo the floors and they all refused. They said they wouldn't redo the floors. So I guess it's got a lot of character. It's an old, old building, well over a hundred years old.

Michelle Little: Yeah. So this exact, where we're sitting right now, so this is the terrazzo?

Tom Saab: Right.

Michelle Little: And then, you can still sort of see the semicircle.

Tom Saab: Right.

Michelle Little: And then the-- is that tile? Yeah.

Tom Saab: It is. That's drugstore tile.

Michelle Little: Drugstore tile, yeah.

Tom Saab: Yep.

Michelle Little: So you can really see the original footprints.

Tom Saab: Yeah.

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Michelle Little: Yeah. That's amazing!

Tom Saab: It's eighteen-foot ceilings. It's just a beautiful, comfortable, warm building. Dining out is entertainment. It's not always about the food. Sometimes people enjoy beautiful aesthetic spaces, so that's what we were after was to create a beautiful space.

Michelle Little: Okay. And you mentioned the pandemic. Could you talk a little bit about your restaurant's experience during shutdowns and how you kind of grappled with reopening and what the space kind of dictated you could and couldn't do during the pandemic?

Tom Saab: It was difficult for sure. They shut us down on March 16th by the order of Jefferson County Health Department and we brought the staff in and gave them all the food.

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And then, when we got our PPP loan, we paid them. And the idea was to reopen as soon as possible. I think the longer we stayed closed the more difficult it would've been to reopen, 'cause opening the first time wasn't easy, and to have to do it all over again, I was afraid the staff would scatter to the wind. But I think out of twenty-four employees all but two came back.

Michelle Little: That's great.

Tom Saab: Yeah. And we kept them paid and brought them back with healthcare benefits to keep them healthy. So I'm grateful for the staff that we have. A nice tight-knit crew here. And we do our best to be accommodating and hospitable. We train them to hold doors and say, "My pleasure," if someone says thank you, and all of the classic traditional hospitality training that we can possibly do.

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We're only held back by what we don't know, and I'm sure there's plenty we don't know.

[Laughter]

Jessica Chriesman: Would you mind putting your phone on silent?

Tom Saab: Oh, I thought it was.

Michelle Little: Oh, yeah. That's what I'm hearing. [Laughter]

Tom Saab: I'm sorry.

Michelle Little: We didn't remind you. It's our fault.

Tom Saab: I thought I had done that, actually. Okay.

Michelle Little: And you opened another restaurant, right?

Tom Saab: I did. We opened three weeks before we got shut down. It's an Italian restaurant and another classical cuisine. Culinary schools teach you that the grand cuisines are French, German, and Italian and so I don't really want to do German food because I don't like it.

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The Germans did the teaching model for culinary schools, and all culinary schools follow the same format. So the Germans created the teaching model, the French created the recipes. So it's a Northern Italian restaurant. We're chefs, we're nerdy, and so we like haute cuisine. So it's pretty much exclusively Northern Italian cuisine, veal and imported prosciutto and imported cheeses. And we make our own pastas. But going back to the pandemic, we were open for three weeks and then got closed. And we did the same thing there. We didn't get any federal assistance there so we did what we could to maintain our staff. And a couple of weeks after they let us reopen, we did. And it was sparse. There were nights when we served fifteen, twenty guests, but we just kind of stayed with it.

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Then after Delta last summer it boomed, and then Omicron came. [Laughter] But we're ramping back up again. We're hiring and we're thinking that after Omicron it's just gonna boom once again. The only thing that holds us back are things we can't control, external factors. So we're trying to hedge against maybe a downturn in the economy, but other than that we're going full out, planning like Christmas is going to last all summer long. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: I like that, Christmas all summer long. [Laughter] Yeah. So that's Bocca and that's on . . .

Tom Saab: It's on 2nd.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Tom Saab: And 2nd's jumping. There's restaurants all up and down 2nd and we all communicate with each other, especially during the pandemic.

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Very tight-knit group. Via text and email, whether it's Bamboo or EastWest or El Barrio, we communicate with each other. And the downtown business environment has been very welcoming, the other restaurateurs. I think the idea is the more the better. It's become an entertainment district so it's a good thing.

Michelle Little: Absolutely. So what changes in that feel have you seen since you opened Bistro, the early days of being here? Kind of describe the vibe and the energy in this neighborhood since the days when you first opened Bistro.

Tom Saab: Well, we used to serve lunch and since office occupancy dropped, we have discontinued lunch. So just seeing the foot traffic on the street and the parking decks not being full has made a big difference.

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But the theater district-- we're one block from the theater district which is the Alabama Theatre and The Lyric. And theater season is huge for us. UAB is also a big supporter and the local

financials downtown. One of the local financial groups came in one time and told me after we first opened that we're on their approved vendor list and I didn't know one existed. Regions especially has been very supportive. And the law firms, business meals. We're very much integrated with the business community downtown. They've been very supportive of us. I'd say the biggest change in the feel downtown is the lack of foot traffic on 20th.

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When I was looking at my new restaurant on 2nd, Bocca, I did the same thing. I'd go down there different times a day, see what foot traffic was like. And I can remember one summer night it looked like Bourbon Street down there. The streets were crowded all the time. Lots of dining options on 2nd. So theater has an impact on 2nd, but it has a huge impact on Bistro. People will come here for dinner and then go to a show, so theater season has been great for us. And we've partnered with the BJCC before for-- I can't remember the name of the program but they come around every year and do shows. And we've partnered with them to do pre-fixe menus. We're kind of hesitant. We don't want to be a pre-theater restaurant because when you do that, you're not really anything else.

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But when there are shows at the theaters, we sell out quickly.

Michelle Little: Yeah. So was dropping lunch a pandemic response or did you drop lunch before?

Tom Saab: I didn't like doing lunch anyway. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: Gotcha. [Laughter]

Tom Saab: Everybody comes in over an hour and a half and they're in a hurry, and it's speed over quality and it didn't generate a whole lot of revenue. People don't drink hundred-dollar bottles of wine at lunch anymore. I don't understand it. I miss those days. There are no more three martini lunches, unfortunately. Maybe they'll come back one day. Maybe we'll become a little less prudish and drink more at lunch.

Michelle Little: I hope so. [Laughter]

Tom Saab: Yeah. I enjoy drinking at lunch. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: Now, you mentioned, earlier we were chatting, that you remember downtown in the-- you remember the Pizitz department store.

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Tom Saab: I do.

Michelle Little: Can you tell me a little bit about your early memories of downtown?

Tom Saab: Well, before the malls opened in the [19]60s this was the place to shop. And I can remember seeing Santa Claus at Loveman's or Pizitz. That's where you went to see Santa when I was a little boy. And there was a whole lot of retail downtown. Birmingham's kind of unique. It's not that old of a city. It's a post-World War II boomtown and so it's very [19]50s industrial. And then, I think when there was urban flight during the [19]60s and [19]70s it kind of eroded the tax base and all these old, abandoned buildings couldn't get torn down, which seemed like not a good thing back then, but now we're enjoying the historic buildings.

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I think tattoo parlors, restaurants, and bars are the first ones to move back in to gentrify a neighborhood. I don't think gentrification is a bad thing in this case. I'm glad downtown's getting gentrified to some extent. But we're still keeping the historic flavor down here.

Michelle Little: Yeah. So do you remember this stretch of the street when you were coming down here? Do you happen to remember walking by this building when you were . . . ?

Tom Saab: I remember when they put in Birmingham Green. It was in 1976, and I was 16 years old. And you can edit this part out, but I'll tell you the story anyway.

Michelle Little: It sounds like it's going to be a good story. I don't want to edit it out.

[Laughter]

Tom Saab: Well, we used to smoke Columbian marijuana.

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And I'd take my Led Zeppelin out and I'd sort all the seeds out and I ended up with a big fat bag of seeds. And so one night in 1976 the sprinklers were on, and you could smell the manure and I just drove down the street and threw the pot seeds out. A couple months later front page of the Birmingham news-- they counted 'em. I don't know, fourteen hundred pot plants were found on-- I was terrified! And I don't know if statute of limitations has expired on that one or not, but I was 16 and I was scared to death. But I remember when they put in Birmingham Green, and some people still refer it to that. Today Birmingham Green is being updated. I think it's a six-million-dollar project, and different parts of the road are closed from time to time but they're redoing the landscaping and the sprinkler system, getting rid of some of the cutouts in front of the restaurants and putting in planters and just making it more pedestrian friendly.

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They've put in a flex lane which allows for short-term parking which helps the merchants on the street. I've been a big proponent of just closing it and making it a pedestrian mall, but I think it's probably a little too early for the locals to appreciate a pedestrian mall in downtown Birmingham. But I lived in Boulder and Denver for a while and Pearl Street Mall, 16th Street Mall, they boom and property values skyrocket. And I'd love to see it closed.

Michelle Little: And can you describe for our listeners that maybe aren't from here, can you explain Birmingham Green?

Tom Saab: It's the major artery from Morris Avenue to Linn Park where the courthouse and the county seat are.

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And so from 3rd to Morris it's more retail and restaurants and from 3rd going north it's more financial and law firms. But it's right in the city center. It's Birmingham's badge of honor. And I think they're trying to get it done for the World Games, which is great. A little bit of inconvenience in the meantime but it should look really nice when they're done with it.

Michelle Little: Yeah. It'll make all this parking strife worth it in the end. [Laughter]

Tom Saab: Yeah. Right.

Michelle Little: Now, during the pandemic, they shut down the streets some for Dine in the Streets. Was that something y'all were able to participate in?

Tom Saab: We did. One of the local government officials, Don Lupo, started something called Eat in the Streets and we would do it once or twice a month. And they would close the streets and we'd put tables out in the streets. And it was a lot of fun. People really seemed to enjoy that.

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When the weather's nice you could dine right on 20th Street. And the Alabama ABC Board was helpful in that as well in allowing us to serve alcohol in the contiguous space in front of our building. So local government did everything they could to step up. And REV Birmingham has been good as well. David Fleming and the people that work with him have been doing everything they can to promote business downtown.

Michelle Little: Now, I know you renovated the old Rogue Tavern space, right?

Tom Saab: Yes.

Michelle Little: So that already had a restaurant.

Tom Saab: Yes.

Michelle Little: But now, here there was never a restaurant?

Tom Saab: There was. Right before I moved in. It was called Seafood Dlight.

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And they didn't succeed for various reasons. But it gave me some mechanical, little bit of electrical. When you're investing hundreds of thousands of dollars, you're looking for some cost cutting here and there. And then, the space where our bar is now was a Quiznos. So I didn't get a

lot out of that one, but there was a bathroom and a mop sink and some tile that we maintained. But other than that we gutted it. And it was the same situation, there was a drop ceiling, sheetrock over the brick. I guess people weren't rushing out to get toasted subs so all of them bankrupted nationally. It took me years, though, to get the space for issues of property title. It took a long time to get it all cleared up and then put the two spaces under one title.

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So it was a little bit of a legal-- a lot of legal wrangling to get it cleared. But then once we did, we penetrated the wall in three spaces, one in the back that you can't see, one near the kitchen so that we could deliver food to the bar, and then one so that you can enter from the bar to the main dining room. And we kind of did the same thing over there. We kept the terrazzo in the front and put wood floors in and tried to keep that bistro feel to it.

Michelle Little:       It looks fantastic. Now, what about maintaining a space like this? What is that like?

Tom Saab:       It's like a monthly nightmare. [Laughter] We've had roof leaks and HVAC problems. The brick has to be sealed every few years because there is a lot of dust that comes off of it.

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And the high ceilings make it difficult to heat and cool. So it's not easy. It's kind of like buying an old house. When I was living in Colorado, I bought a house built in the 1940s that was cute and charming, and I never had a free weekend. [Laughter] So a lot of maintenance, a lot of ongoing maintenance, but it's worth it, I think. I think it's charming. I hope our guests do too.

Michelle Little: You can't beat these brick walls and the . . . [Laughter]

Tom Saab: Yeah. So one of our guests one night several years ago was the brick mason at Samford University. And he looked at the brick, and on a modern brick building brick is a veneer. This is structural brick. And he pointed out that every sixth row runs in a perpendicular direction.

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He called it a Dutch bond. So it's some old, old beautiful brick.

Michelle Little: Wow. I wish we could find out who-- maybe we can-- find out who laid the original brick.

Tom Saab: They're long gone.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] Maybe they signed something somewhere in the back. Let's see. We're zipping through things her. And you sort of glossed over your background in the beginning, but could you tell me a little bit about some of the early restaurants you worked in? I mean, who taught you to cook?

Tom Saab: None of them were notable.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] That's fine.

Tom Saab: I worked in a kitchen where the chef called me "shoemaker" for a year straight and every day I'd ask him-- I was a teenager-- "Why you keep calling me shoemaker?" and he wouldn't answer. After a year he finally told me, "'Cause you can't cook."

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So that was part of my training. When I was in Colorado, I actually got some formal training. I went to Johnson & Wales University and tested into an accelerated program, and I was in and out of there in a year. So graduated summa cum laude and helped some of the chefs with curriculum. I just wanted that degree. But it was great learning experience. I learned a lot of technical knowledge that I didn't have before. Restaurants in Birmingham, worked at a steakhouse, I worked at a casual restaurant on Green Springs called Spats a long time ago, worked at a place in Brookwood Village called Ireland's. I don't know if anybody remembers that. My first job was at a restaurant in Century Plaza called The Gallery [sp] restaurant.

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And one of the first people that taught me to cook was a little old lady named Celia [sp] and she taught me how to fry chicken. So I just stayed with it through the years, and it was a good way to make a living and I never went hungry. And then, when I was out West, I worked at a ski resort for a while, Grand Targhee, a few seasons there, a dude ranch, and then I opened a restaurant in the bedroom community outside Jackson Hole. It was called The Painted Apple Ranch Café. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner, pastries, coffees. It was kind of like an early iteration of a Starbucks.

Michelle Little: But you wanted to come back here? You didn't want to stay out West?

Tom Saab: I married a southern belle, and you can't take 'em out of the South.

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Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Tom Saab: So I moved back here from Idaho, Wyoming-- well, I was traveling here and met my wife, fell in love, and told her, I said, "But I don't want to live here." So we decided to move to the Denver/Boulder area because of DIA. You know, quick access in and out of the area. I think we lasted about four years there. I had a great time. Climbed everything in Rocky Mountain National Park. Skied in the winter. And then, one morning we got in a fight. She said, "You keep saying you're gonna sell the house, you keep saying you're gonna sell the house and you don't do it." So I took my bike down to the local Ace Hardware, bought a for sale by owner sign, brought it back, got a sharpie, put a phone number in it, planted it in the yard. I said, "If we don't sell it by the time school starts back, we're staying the winter."

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Sold it in, like, two weeks. I was not happy. Yeah. So we loaded up all our stuff and came back. But I was really happy to get back to Birmingham because my parents were getting older, and all of my family was here, and I missed 'em. And I was getting older as well, and a lot of connections here, a lot of personal connections. So I was happy to be back. I missed a lot of family and friends here. But I also missed a lot from the people I went to school with over the years, and I was pretty much being a ski bum for a little too long.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Tom Saab: So--

Michelle Little: I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Tom Saab: Well, I'm grateful to my wife for bringing me back.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Tom Saab: Yeah.

Michelle Little: So what about growing up, did your parents cook?

Tom Saab: My mother was a great cook. Well, my dad was, too.

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And at family parties we would separate. The men would be in one room and the women were in the kitchen. This was the [19]60s. Very old fashioned. But I was always in the kitchen with my mother because she wanted me to help, and I wanted to help. So she taught me a lot, and my grandmother, as well. And I've enjoyed cooking all my life. I like the tactile feel of it. I like the mouth feel of certain foods. And I loved the smells and I really have enjoyed learning about pairing food and wine, and just flavor profiles of food. It's fun. There's a lot to know. The amount of knowledge is very, very deep. For me when I learn about food I learn about culture.

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Why there's veal in Northern Italy and how the French forage for truffles, and the traditions behind a lot of dishes. It's just fascinating to me. It's an ongoing learning process. It never ends. That's what I like about food is learning about culture, I think.

Michelle Little: And when did you know you wanted to own your own restaurant? When did you jump from, I want to work in this to I want to own this, I want to do this?

Tom Saab: I guess I got fired enough times I decided to do my own thing. [Laughter] In the [19]80s I was working at a country club-- it was 2008 and the recession hit, and all the members quit, and I was out of a job. So I just got tired of the ups and downs of working for somebody else.

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I liquidated my 401k, which cost me a lot of money the following year, but that's how I got started. And then put down a few years of P&Ls and maintained a good credit rating and then the Small Business Administration allowed me to expand this restaurant. And then, I don't know, five years after the expansion I was able to finance another restaurant and that's how I opened Bocca. Rates are a little high, but I don't have any of my personal assets liened against the restaurants. And then, when the pandemic hit, the SBA stepped up and paid my note for, I don't know, I think nine months. Yeah.

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So the SBA's been good to me. We operate responsibly; pay all our taxes; sober, clean crowd; don't hire illegals. And over a period of time it pays off, just like all my counterparts downtown. Everybody down here is good businesspeople. Haven't met a shady character yet.

Michelle Little:        So do you think you'll ever open a third restaurant or . . . ? [Laughter]

Tom Saab:        Not a restaurant, but we're working on something else, but it takes time. I just like the entertainment business. People leave the restaurants wanting to know where to go at nine, ten o'clock at night. Where do we go to drink, dance? We want to give 'em someplace to go, but it's not easy to find the right spot.

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Michelle Little:        Yeah. It's interesting, Kathy D'Agostino, for instance, was talking about the need for more shops and things for people to do after they eat.

Tom Saab:        Yeah.

Michelle Little: And I love to get everyone's take on what else should be in the Central Business District; what's a good mix of business for a city center?

Tom Saab: Well, I'd like to see retail come back. Maybe when the malls finally take their last breath people will do free-standing retail again. Kathy D'Agostino's a perfect example. It's a food business but it's a retail shop, and their chocolates are amazing! They're really skilled. They're like fairies. They're chocolatiers. I mean, who does that?!

Michelle Little: I know.

Tom Saab: And they've perfected it.

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They do a great job. But bicycle shops, outdoor shops, dress shops, clothing stores, that's what I think we'd all like to see more of in downtown. Forstall Art, who's directly across the street from us, they're a retail shop. They moved here from Homewood. They love it here, and they seem like they're doing really well.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Tom Saab: Can we stop for a second?

Michelle Little: Absolutely. Sure. [Pause] Let's see. We were talking about mix of businesses downtown, return of retail one day hopefully. [Laughter]

Tom Saab: Yeah. Are we recording?

Michelle Little: Yeah. We're back.

Tom Saab: Yeah. I don't know what rents are like now but when we got here it was inexpensive.

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It was off market. The price per square foot was not like The Summit, for instance, or The Galleria. And then, when you operate downtown, and you've got your own space you're not really under any restrictions. If you go to a strip mall then they want you to be open six or seven days a week and there's CAM fees, common area maintenance for parking lots and landscaping. And downtown we get free landscaping. We're on 20th Street and they're redoing Birmingham Green and I don't pay any fees for it. Fees and licenses from the city are a little high. The county is dysfunctional. You can leave that in or not.

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You get character when you're downtown that you don't get in a strip mall somewhere. So that's the good part of being downtown, its uniqueness.

Michelle Little: Absolutely. So when you came here seven-- seven years ago?

Tom Saab: It's been nine years now.

Michelle Little: Nine years ago.

Tom Saab: Yeah.

Michelle Little: So this was a lower price point than, say, opening something at The Summit even just nine years ago?

Tom Saab: Yes.

Michelle Little: Okay. 'Cause, like, twenty years ago I would say, sure, absolutely. But that's interesting that even just nine years ago, so much has changed that . . .

Tom Saab: Oh, yeah.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Tom Saab: Downtown is still affordable. If you're thinking about opening a business come.

[Laughter] The more the better.

Michelle Little: Exactly.

Jessica Chriesman: Could you pull that down?

Tom Saab: Yes.

Michelle Little: Oh, yeah. Was that causing some feedback?

Jessica Chriesman: It was. It's fine, but a little bit.

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Michelle Little: Well, we have covered almost all of my questions, but is there anything that you want people to know about you or your business or your thoughts on this neighborhood, is there anything we haven't covered that you want to talk about?

Tom Saab: Downtown's fun. There's a rebirth going on for downtown Birmingham. The city and county are very involved. The local businesspeople, everybody's engaged. It's just a fun, unique, not vanilla place to be. I like it down here. If I do a third project it'll be in downtown Birmingham.

Michelle Little: Good. What do you think triggered this current movement? What do you think kicked all this off?

Tom Saab: I have no idea.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Tom Saab: I really don't know. [Laughter]

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I think maybe for me it was I saw the success of the first two restaurants that were down here before me and that was Café Dupont and El Barrio. My wife and I dined at El Barrio I think within the first two or three weeks it was open and it was, like, wow, this place is really cool! And it's busy. People are driving-- I'd say nine years ago downtown was like a destination place to go. It wasn't an area where you would go to and there were lots of bars and restaurants. You had to come down here just for El Barrio or Café Dupont. And by the way, when we opened down here, Chris Dupont called me and said, "Welcome to the neighborhood. If there's anything you need let me know," and that was really nice. 'Cause we're direct competition but he welcomed us.

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And he and I have had a close relationship ever since. So if you can't get into my restaurant, go to his. If you can't get into his, come to mine. We send each other business all the time. We talk weekly. He's just a great guy. And the guys at El Barrio and Paramount, as well. Just friendly, good neighborhood feel. It's got a real neighborhood feel to it. Since residential has come to downtown Birmingham a lot of empty nesters are here and a lot of people that work at UAB, so

there's a real downtown community here. A real-- what am I trying to say?-- a real neighborhood feel with the residents down here. Yeah.

Michelle Little: And so are a lot of your visitors at night for dinner, are they-- how many locals versus people coming in from out of town do you think?

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Tom Saab: We try to identify the local loft dwellers downtown. Theater brings them here. UAB graduation brings them here. UAB business meals, law firms, banks. It's pretty convenient. We get a good bit of travelers too, people passing through. And I think a lot of us have established a reputation. And so people just use Google to find out where good places are to eat downtown. Hotels have been a big help. There are three hotels within two or three blocks, so we work with the concierges at the hotels so that's helpful.

0:42:04

Sometimes the hotels don't always want their guests to leave but we do the best to drag them out of their rooms and down the street. [Laughter] So it's real walkable. You can valet at a hotel and walk here. One thing we felt pretty strongly about downtown, especially when we first opened, was having a valet, offering valet service. I think some people nine years ago, some of our guests were a little scared to come downtown for various reasons. I even had somebody call me on the phone to book a reservation and ask me if it was safe, "Is it safe there?" I know. Well, the suburbs have done that to us.

Michelle Little: Where do y'all valet-- where do you park the cars? I always wondered that. [Laughter]

0:43:01

Tom Saab: We rent a lot.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Tom Saab: We pay a fee, and the lot is monitored and lighted with video surveillance and big halogen lights. And it keeps your car safe.

Michelle Little: I've just always wondered where you find the-- I see these valets downtown and I'm, where do they go? [Laughter]

Tom Saab: I don't know what everyone else does but we rent a surface lot. And sometimes we'll park them on 20th Street, but there's not enough room so we have to use the surface lot. Parking is free downtown after five o'clock, as well. You don't have to feed the meter. And that's something the city has done to promote business downtown after five.

Michelle Little: Yeah, that helps a lot. Well, I've just always been curious about that. [Laughter] Random thing to end on.

Tom Saab: That's okay.

Michelle Little: Yeah, that's all the questions I have.

0:44:01

Can you think of anything?

Jessica Chriesman: Don't think so.

Tom Saab: Okay.

Michelle Little: Thank you so much for spending time with us today.

Tom Saab: Edit it pretty.

Michelle Little: Okay. [Laughter]

0:44:12

[End]