

ALVIN GUIDROZ
Owner – Guidroz Food Center – Lafayette, LA

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Date: January 23, 2009
Location: Guidroz Food Center
Interviewer: Mary Beth Lasseter
Length: 21 minutes
Project: Boudin Trail

[Begin Al Guidroz]

00:00:02

Mary Beth Lasseter: All right; this is Mary Beth Lasseter at Guidroz Food Center here on Friday, January 23, 2009 and could you please tell me who you are and when you were born and what you do for a living?

00:00:12

Alvin Guidroz: Well I'm Alvin Guidroz and I was born June 24, 1955. And when I was three years-old that's when mom and daddy were in the store business, which I grew up here you know all the kids--we all had to grow up into the store. And just been here ever since and my-- my oldest siblings all went to college. And I tried the college thing and matter of fact I'm a musician. I played in the UL Band and stuff and I still play as of today in a local community band. But this has been my life and I'm just fortunate; I married a woman who understood not that business came first but that this store was a part of--a big part of my life you know. And because it's a very demanding job; six days a week and you don't get the holidays, you don't get the--the weekends off, you don't get vacation time, so there's some downsides to this but it's--it's good being in business for yourself, you know just--. Entrepreneurship right?

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MBL: Can you tell me a little bit about your dad and your mother and how they started the store and sort of the history of it?

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AG: Well they did start in 1959 but daddy had been in the store business for years. I think he started when he was 10 or 12 years old actually delivering on a bicycle and stuff like that. But mom and daddy met and wound up marrying and he decided to go in business for himself, so--which they did. Like I said in 1959, and my mother passed away in '94 which is 14 years ago--now going on 15 years, and I'm just glad that I was able to keep the business in the family because you know through--through death and something that's--that's tragic it actually gave my dad a reason to get up in the morning, to get dressed, to come to work. You know the healing process in this business one of the--the nice things about this business is we're servicing fourth or fifth generations now and most of these people--I would say 85-percent of my customers we know by first name or by last name. So it's a very--very close knit family group we have here and over the years again you--you get this--this friendship that builds up within a community, you know respect for everyone. And I think having this store here actually gave my daddy that--that chance to come in here and let's say--customers would say oh Mr. Joe; he said I'm sorry that Miss Joyce passed away or something, so it was a healing process for him, 'cause you know when we grieve you know it's always good, and with the *[Laughs]*--.

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MBL: I almost had a door open into me but it was fine; I slid right back.

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AG: With the--this store--staying in the business, my son actually--my two sons actually stayed and worked for me for some time you know. Like we did; we grew up in it and I think it's--the good thing is my parents showed me--pushed that issue where they showed you how to be able to earn what's yours--what you have is yours. I guess it's that pride that you have and then you

know a lot of that is missing in today's youth and it's--it's just a shame that the parents can't pass you know those--those beliefs and those understandings. And I think it would be a better place, but I'm very fortunate that we're still here and business is thriving. As long as I put in all the hours, I guess it's going to continue that way 'cause I got the keys to open and close.

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MBL: Tell me a little bit about your schedule. What is the day like?

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AG: Well I usually wake up around 4:00 in the mornings and like we all need to do a little physical work and--physical fitness of some sort, so I have a little routine I do in the morning before I get ready for work. But after that 40 minutes or 45 minutes I get dressed and I come to work. I'm usually here about quarter to five and aside from an hour's break in the middle of the day I'm usually home by 7 o'clock that night. So and that's six days a week; but I got good employees, so it's not a question of--it's just the business is that good fortunately for us and if you hire too many people for me to take the time off well then the little bit of profits you make tends to be getting--getting eaten up you know. But it's a good life; it's just as you get older you start looking--you start treasuring that little bit of time that you can have off whether it's a weekend or one day even you know. So the values are there though and I think that's what my dad has showed--shown me over the years. And the thing that I took over 24 years ago and it has done nothing but thrive and grow. We do have a--all our business is on the website on www.boudinlink.com and we've also been a member of the Louisiana Boudin Trail. I don't know if it's in--the same as regarding as with you in Mississippi, huh?

00:05:04

MBL: I know in Mississippi our--our trail is over the South, so it's similar but not exactly the same.

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AG: And so I do get some actual business from the internet and my oldest brother who is retired now but he does some--he has a website and our products are on there and he ships out a lot. I mean we ship from California--I mean from coast to coast and we even have some shipped some stuff to the Virgin Islands, so I mean we--we get our product out there. And you know we went from everywhere--you kind of diversify; we started with just the boudin but now you have the specialty items and also we make our own seasoning, so I've got companies that buy the seasoning and to give to their customers for Christmas gifts. So it's kind of neat having a Cajun product out there and we've done real well. And I know you've got the full scoop on how to make boudin and you saw how it was--how it was processed and put together and actually cooked. We're fortunate that the boudin sales is probably if you take--if you took out the labor intense, the money you're having to put out there it's probably still one of the better profit items in the store. And without that well then you'd be concerned about the--you know how--how you're going to pay those employees and stuff. But the boudin sales have increased over the years and at one time the boudin only sold in the--in the wintertime because people were so concerned about the--the pork having refrigeration proper--properly and stuff. But now boudin is--is an all around seller, all year around seller and we get people that pick it up to take with them on a flight back home. We get people that ship it out to family members, so it--it's really boomed in. And I mean a little outfit like me that's been moving anywhere from 800 to 1,000 pounds a week, I can only imagine what some of these bigger producers are selling you know.

There's some people in the area that sell--closer to Interstate 10 or something--big thoroughfares, they'll triple or quadruple what I make but they have full crews doing this. We do ours in the course of a day with the employees that we have. So it's worked well for us though.

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MBL: Can you tell me a little bit about the secret to your success? Not all areas of the country have these small specialty stores anymore; lots of them have given way to big grocery box stores. Why do you think that this area of the country is one where you can thrive and--and what do you think makes your business special?

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AG: Well I would like to think that in small stores like this there is no way you're going to be able to offer the special pricing like say the big conglomerates, whether it be the Wal-Marts or the--the Food Savers or whatever--there's no way small stores can compete with that. So you have to rely on two other things which is good service and a good product, 'cause you know eats--food that people consume, they don't mind paying the price for a good product. It's a lot different than a canned good or something that you're going--that you're going to prepare like boudin that we make for a resale because there is no way you know that canned good is going to differ from store to store. They're all going to be the same; so that's pricing. But when you're talking about the quality of a product like the boudin that we make I think it goes with the 50 years we've been in it goes way beyond that you know and it's the cultural thing, because people say well we have to try boudin. We're going to Louisiana; we have to try boudin. And when you see something in--in a big food store that's vacuum packed in a meat case you know that was a commercially made product. And there's no way that they're going to be able to compete with

the quality that a smaller store like us are going to make for the simple fact is--pricing. You're going to go out to a big store and you're going to pay \$3.00 a pound. Well in a small store you're going to pay \$4.00 a pound--somewhere(s) in that average. But there's a difference in night and day; that's like driving a Chevrolet and driving a Cadillac. I mean it's that much difference in the two products. So I would think that's what has been our longevity in this business, and of course you know when you're in a neighborhood store like we are and for the amount of time we're here, the only way you can make it is to have a good understanding with the community, with the neighbors, and of course be well liked. And so the only way you can do that is to give people something good in return, you know. So we definitely make the best quality; I'm not going to cut down on quality. If the pricing goes up I'm going to have to go up on the product. I will not sacrifice quality for the quantity or for the pricing.

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MBL: Can you tell me a little bit about the employees who work here with you to make the boudin including your lowest wage employee [meaning his father, Joseph, who volunteers at the store]?

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AG: Well of course you know any time you're processing foods and cooking and you--you do have all the way from the front wash all the way up to the--to the one who is paying for the product; I would like to think that's something to go to a benefit of the family because the way we have treated people my employees tend to stay with me a minimum of five years, seven years, ten years. I think you met Richard earlier; he's been here 25--26 years. Actually our parents were real close friends so I knew Ricky--you know we knew Ricky--we knew each other

as kids. And so we've always--I guess you get this from your daddy 'cause I get this from when it started; my dad--mom and dad--you always tried to work a small group, a small nucleus of employees. That way everybody makes their hours. If you start bringing in a lot of extra people--the extra people, well all you're doing is taking away from the employees that should be making them 40-plus hours a week. So I have a range of employees of 25 on down to a year and a half and I got a good group of employees right now. Everything works well; we work together as a team, as a group you know, so it's good. We don't specialize in anything. If I got to mop the floor I'll go grab the mop myself and mop the floor.

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MBL: Can you tell me a little bit about your dad's work here?

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AG: About my dad's what--I'm sorry?

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MBL: About your dad's work here and how he has retired but continues to come in.

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AG: Yeah; dad still comes in every day and--six days a week and fortunately he has been my--my rock and the--the one I can depend on. Like I was telling you earlier about the hours that I put in and sometimes it gets a little bit--it gets to be a little bit much, so he'll come in once or twice a week--three times a week possibly and he'll only work three hours in the afternoon. But that three hours I can leave here and I can go take my shoes off and let my hair down and--and

relax a little bit. So we're very fortunate my dad is still--he's 81 years-old; he'll be 82 in October and it's--it's been a wonderful thing to be able to work side-by-side with my dad all these years and actually--we actually get along, as long as I guess I do what he tells me to do [*Laughs*] we still get along.

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MBL: What do you see for the next generation of this store?

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AG: Well that was kind of a tricky situation there. I had--my youngest son, 26 years old now and he was the one that I was grooming to take my place like my dad groomed me to take his place. And he did come here after he served in Iraq for a year and a half. And he came here and worked for me and he is a natural. He's got exactly what it takes; you talk to him it will be like talking to me or talking to my dad. That's--we're almost like clones you know which is a good thing to be in this business. But he has--he's a natural ability but he decided he--they got married--he got married and had a set of twins and he decided he wanted to try another career so he left me and he went to the oil field and it has been two years now--well going on three years and he's happy where he's at and we all get along well. As far as the future, I don't know what's going to happen; you know you never know because I'm only 54, but do I have another 10 years of good health where I can still do this? I don't have a per se manager to run everything; it's either me or my dad closing for me. It's either me or my dad taking my place and at 81 I guess that time is getting a little shorter, so I need to be looking at different things to do and--so I don't know quite where that's going to go at. But I know in talking to my son I try--not convincing him but letting him know what the future holds--held here; I mean I think there's enough--

enough life left in this business to go another 20--25 years. So I would like to see it stay that way and hopefully I'm a part of it. I can still be a part of it you know.

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MBL: Are there any young people in the neighborhood that have expressed an interest in running the--?

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AG: No, not really; this--this is--it's a tough business and like I said it's very demanding. The--the workforce has kind of changed. As far as being dedicated to a job and being loyal to a job, you know people will leave for a 50-cents an hour more raise. They'll leave at a drop of a hat. So you don't have--you don't have that--that amount of people like--like you did in the--in the '30s and the '40s in the harder times; you know now money is--looks like so easy to come by or get--get jobs whether they--they pay better or not it's still that 50-cents an hour, they'll leave you. So the employees I do have I try to pay well and I try to abide by their--not abide by them, but try to be thinking of--of them as--as a person--not just an employee. They're not just a number. So you know everybody has got their own lives to live and everybody has got their own things--things that happen in life. So if--if you need to go somewhere(s) I'm going to work out with the other employees so that you can go somewhere(s), or if you're sick or doctor's appointment; so you know it's--it's a little different when you're running a small business versus a big business--multi-million dollar business where you have 50--60 employees, people to cover those open areas, you know.

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MBL: Can you tell me a little bit about boudin; how do you cook it, how do you eat it, and how often do you enjoy it?

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AG: Well of course I process boudin a minimum of twice a week and I usually taste it every time 'cause I want to make sure the taste is to my liking or what—we're--used to processing. But I don't eat a whole lot of it because it is--things like that are a little high in cholesterol and that's--that's one of the things that I--I inherited from my parents. But you did see the processing going on where you do have to cook rice--or one of the first things in the morning when I get here on a boudin day, of course I'll start cooking the rice. I'll start cooking the meat and that takes about five hours to--to complete those. And then you have to start processing it and putting everything together, mixing it like you saw in the mixer, putting it into the stuffer, stuffing it, you know so there's so many stages. There's so many steps; I mean you--and then we didn't even talk about the washing of the pots and the washing of--'cause all these things that we'll use they all need to be washed. They all need to be cleaned; they all need to be sanitized so that when you come back and use it Tuesday--the next day you know--. So boudin is very labor intense, very time-consuming but again it's--it's one of the more profitable items in this type of business, so you can--you can use it as a draw for other products in your store 'cause you know you're going to get the traffic coming in you know.

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MBL: In addition to the meats that you cut, what other specialty meats do you make here other than the boudin?

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AG: Well of course we do make--what goes hand-in-hand with boudin; we do make our homemade hogs head cheese which I think you already--you actually got a chance to see that also, which is basically the same meat as boudin but without the liver, a little bit--little bit more spicier than boudin is and so you take--and it should actually be named daube glace. In French daube is a roast; glace is cold, so if you took--if you cooked a pork roast this weekend, the leftovers you had--you took the leftovers with the gravy and put it in the refrigerator. When you came back the next day it's going to be gelled so that's where the hog head cheese is. We put it back into the--into the juice after it's ground and then it makes--it makes a mold, a form. So it gels hard; so again that's one of the traditional--we don't use hog's head. **[Laughs]** You know we use the same meat as boudin which is just pork meat with no liver. But we also do the--anywhere(s) from stuffed pork chops to stuffed chickens to boneless turkey, boneless turkey; we do fried turkeys for the holidays. I mean we have diversified so many places you know and it's because of the people wanting the product and if you don't have the product they'll go somewhere(s) else and get it. And of course we do cracklings every day and I don't know if you're familiar with what cracklings is--if you could imagine the product that they use to make bacon which is the belly of a pig. And if you seen bacon you have the--the skin, the rind, and then you have a layer of fat and then you have some streaks of meat. Well we take it and instead of it being smoked, we take it raw, and we cut it up in cubes and we fry it and you render it down and it makes what we call cracklings and we like to think of it as Cajun potato chips. It's--it's well seasoned and you--you eat it like--you know there's a little chunk, so you--you just pop it in your mouth and you eat them almost like popcorn would be but--exceptionally good. I don't know if you've ever tried--but you need to try cracklings at least one time while you're here.

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What other items? I mean there's--there's so many things that we--that you get calls for. We do fresh sausage also; we do a mixed, we do a pure pork, we do a jalapeno, we do a chicken, so we have all these different varieties of sausage. At one time all we did was the mixed, mild, and hot but then people started coming in and asking well ya'll don't have jalapeno sausage? So you start making jalapeno sausage and then they come in and say you don't have chicken sausage? And then we start making chicken sausage, so you wind up with four or five different brands, a--a product like that--that people want. Of course we're still into--we're one of the very few left by the way that still breaks down beef that we buy and--and front quarters and hind quarters, you know actually from the slaughterhouse once--once it's--the animal is dressed out. They send them to me and we actually take the front quarters and hind quarters and cut them up to make steaks, make chops, and there's not too many stores like this that do that anymore. That's kind of a dying art mainly because the big stores now all buy boxed beef. You can get it broken down--you can get it--it's a little more expensive but you don't have to have a man standing there with a knife and you don't even have to have a man knowing what he's doing, as long as you show him cut from here or there. The way we do it you still have to figure out that--that beef--you can have a loss, you can have--so you know it's--it's pretty neat to be able to still do it that way you know the old time way.

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MBL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you would like to share about your family or the business?

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AG: Well I think you've covered just about everything. Again we're--I like to think that we're on our fourth generation and after the 50 years and hopefully we'll be here the next time you want to make another interview, we'd like to still be here and be able to talk to you and maybe I'll have my son here back with me at that time. We just got to see how the--how the ball rolls you know.

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MBL: I would like that very much. Thank you so much for sharing your time with me today.

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AG: Thank you, ma'am.

00:21:01

[End Al Guidroz]