Marcelle Bienvenu
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Annemarie Nichols: Good afternoon.

[0:00:05.0]

Marcelle Bienvenu: Hello.

[0:00:05.8]

Annemarie Nichols: This is Annemarie Nichols interviewing Marcelle Bienvenu at Nicholls State University, and it is February 28th, 2018, Wednesday, and we are in Thibodaux, Louisiana.

Let's start off and talk a little bit about your early life. Could you tell me a little bit—well, could you introduce yourself for the record, please?

[0:00:26.4]

Marcelle Bienvenu: Yes. This is Marcelle Bienvenu.

[0:00:28.2]

Annemarie Nichols: What do you do? What's your profession?

[0:00:31.0]

Marcelle Bienvenu: I've been here for ten years. I'm a chef instructor at the John Folse Culinary Institute and teach a variety—they kind of rotate us around. I teach Culinary History of the South. I teach a couple of culinary journalism classes. I teach Introduction to International Cuisine, and I teach Vegetables, Fruits, and Farinaceous Products. It's all

just grains, farinaceous products. Sometimes I teach other things, but right now that's what I'm teaching.

[0:01:04.2]

Annemarie Nichols: Awesome. Let's talk a little bit about your early life. Where are you from?

[0:01:09.3]

Marcelle Bienvenu: I was born in St. Martinville, which is near Lafayette, Louisiana, southeast of Lafayette. It's a very small little town, but it was settled by the Indians and the French. It was a French-Indian settlement, trading post. That was in the early 1700s. Then in 1750, the Acadians came from Canada after they were deported. Then there was another influx of French aristocrats when they were fleeing the French Revolution. So it's a wonderful little town with a lot of culture, and for a while it was called La Petite Paris, because the aristocrats lived there. Well, when they came here we had opera houses and everything, but it's a very tiny—it's not—I think we're only about 10,000 people. And it was also the setting for Longfellow's poem "Evangeline."

So I was enthralled when I was a youngster, because it was so historic. And I was taught by the nuns, the Convent of Mercy, and it was right on the bayou, right near the Evangeline Oak. And, of course, the nuns told us all about the little history of all the people that settled there, and I was kind of impressed as a child. I went, "Well, this is kind of cool."

My father's family were in the newspaper business. My grandfather established the *Teche News*—well, it was called the *Weekly Messenger*—in 1886, and since then, it's been my grandfather, my father, and my brother, and so we've always been in the newspaper business. When we were eight years old, we'd go fold. All the paper was folded by hand. It wasn't until I was in high school that we got a folding machine. Of course, he would pay us. He had a cigar box, and when he'd go empty all the newspaper stands, it was all nickels and dimes, and as much as you could grab in your hand, that's how much you got paid. I was always going, "Wait. My older brother has a bigger hand than me, but I did the same amount of work," so it was always just a quibble. Sometimes we were working late and my mother would come with sandwiches, and our hands were full of ink, and we'd eat our sandwiches with white bread, and we'd have these fingerprints of ink. [Whispers] I believe they were trying to kill us.

[0:03:24.7]

But it was really kind of fun because Daddy was always going to football games or to things to cover, and I was named after him, his name was Marcel, and so I was kind of like the little—I was the favorite, and he would take me everywhere. So it was really kind of fun. He was a great storyteller, and he was a Boy Scout leader and big avid sportsman. He was kind of like—who was it that said, "Never let the truth get in the way of a good story," and so he was always embellishing things, and, of course, I was in high school before I realized he did not fight at the Alamo. [Laughter] He was a great storyteller. My brother, who eventually became the editor of the paper, said, "God, I wish I had that gift of gab like Papa did."

I said, "I do." [Laughter]

But it was a wonderful childhood, and my mother's family were all farmers, so they lived in the country. They had cows, so we had fresh milk, we had eggs. They were sugarcane farmers, so they made syrup. We had boucheries twice, two or three times during the winter. So it was the best of both worlds. We lived in town, but on the weekends we went to the country. I learned to can foods, feed the chickens, go pick eggs, how to make butter. So it was idyllic, it really was, and I didn't realize until in—let's see, I guess I was in high school—no, college when I went to work in Washington, D.C., and I went, "Wait. Everybody doesn't live like I do." I almost came home. But it was an ideal life. It was.

[0:05:09.1]

Annemarie Nichols: Do you remember your early—what's your earliest memory of cooking?

[0:05:14.5]

Marcelle Bienvenu: Well, as I mentioned, my father was a Boy Scout leader, and he loved cooking outdoors, and he would take his Boy Scouts on trips, and I was fascinated, when I was about six or seven years old, I was fascinated that he could cook over a wood stove and it didn't have the dial, you know. Like, what happens when you have to put it on simmer or high? Of course, his pots was on an arm that could move. So he said, "Ti Black, we're going to put it right here, because this is the simmer." Then where the fire was really hot was where he would fry foods. I just remember thinking, "But this is

magic." And I would sit by his elbow, and he taught me how to clean fish and how to pick crabs.

My mother was a fine cook, but she was much more sophisticated. She always loved dinner parties. They entertained a lot. She also knew the fine art of preserving and making jellies. I'll never forget, she had a pantry that was just lined with pear preserves, fig preserves, she'd put up okra. And I remember in the fifties, she said, "We don't have to do that anymore. We can go to the grocery store and get canned goods."

I went, "Oh, wow." Well, that wasn't really a great thing, but it was interesting, now that I look back, that she thought that, "Now you don't have to do all that hot work and go pick figs, go pick pears, go pick corn," because it was a lot of work. But it sure tasted a lot better than what it was in the cans.

[0:06:53.9]

So I really liked cooking, and it was when I went to Washington, D.C., that I realized, I said, "You know, everybody doesn't eat like we do," so I became curious as to why we eat what we eat here. And lucky me, in the early

[19]70s I was working at the *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans, and this lady came in and she was looking—it was right at deadlines, and the editor was going, "Just take them to coffee." It was a lady who was from—her family was from Baton Rouge, but she worked for Time Life Books in Chicago, and she was trying to find somebody who would take her and a photographer and another researcher out in Cajun Country, and we didn't even know I lived in Cajun Country. That was before Paul Prudhomme said there was such a thing as Cajun Country. And I told them I knew everything there was to know about it, and they could hire me, and they did. [Laughter]

And I was fascinated, because I took everything for granted. And she'd say, "Well, why do they have boucheries?" So I went, "Oh, okay." So I really started learning about it and learning that even within South Louisiana there's different little regions that do different things because they were settled by maybe some Italians, or maybe some Germans, and there was some British people. There was the French, the Spanish. And then I went, well, everybody had their finger in the pot, and what has developed is this cuisine that is so—it's not like any them particularly, but the whole blending of it. I went, "Well, there you go. That's why."

[0:08:35.8]

Well, there was—I have to say this. When we were young, we'd go to New Orleans, so there was the New Orleans food. I mean, there was the classic restaurants, the old restaurants like Antoine's, but you could also go get oysters at the Acme or you could go get a po' boy at the—wherever. So it was exciting to be able to do that, and Daddy really took us everywhere. I remember when he made me eat a soft-shell crab out by the lake, and I went, "I'm not eating a shell."

He said, "You have to eat it. You have to taste it."

After I got out of college, I was living in New Orleans, I was fascinated that I did not know as much as I thought I knew about the cuisine that developed in New Orleans as opposed to what happened in the country. Of course, when Paul Prudhomme came on the scene, I went, "Wait. What is he talking about? There's Cajun cuisine?" But that's when people were kind of—we were very isolated in South Louisiana. I can remember we were little, Mama would say, "Do not eat boiled crawfish in front of people you don't know, because they're going to say we sucking on things," and you know, unh-uh.

But here comes Paul Prudhomme, he says, "Well, let me tell you all about Acadian cuisine." When he really became popular, I was working at Commander's Palace, and I said, "Ella, you can't hire him. People in New Orleans are not going to eat country food."

Of course, Ella Brennan is the smartest person in the world. She says, "Yeah, but we're just going to combine it."

I went, "But, Ella, Cajuns cook gumbo with chicken on a bone with skin."

She said, "Well, you can take it off the bone."

I said, "Well, there you go." [Laughter]

[0:10:22.5]

And when Paul came to Commander's, I went, "How are they going to bring this together?"

And, of course, Paul was so creative, and he used to always say, "You've got to make everybody's taste buds do a dance in their mouth."

I went, "Oh, okay."

I remember the first dish he brought to Ella's house, and I went, "I never saw that when I was little." He had made like a pirogue out of a mirliton. He had scooped it out and made like a little boat, which he battered and fried, and then inside the little pirogue was fried oysters and fried shrimp with a Hollandaise sauce flavored with tasso. And I went, "I never had that." But he was creative. Nobody knew what tasso was. Nobody knew what andouille was. I mean, I said, "Ella, I don't think this is going to work." Of course, she knew what she was talking about.

And I think, if you— Have you ever read *The United States of Arugula*? It's a fabulous book, and it talks about how things started to change in the sixties and seventies with Julia Child and James Beard and Paul and I guess Bobby Flay later. I think there was just this evolution—not a revolution—of American food, and I think, again, it took the good bites from maybe the South and maybe the Midwest or maybe California, [Alice] Waters. So it was kind of an explosion of things coming from all over the country, coming together to make something different again.

[0:12:07.0]

Ella Brennan was very good about saying, "You know, we can't stay the same thing. We want to keep our culture and our traditions, but people get tired of the same old same old, and we have to learn how to develop people's taste buds." So she was an incredible mentor, and she taught me how to think about food, how to think why our cuisine is so interesting. We'd sit in the afternoon. When she called for me to go work for her, I went, "Ella, I'm not going to work at a restaurant. Y'all are open all the time and on weekends" – I was twenty-five years old— "and holidays."

She said, "Oh, no, no, honey, I would never make you work those hours."

I said, "Okay." Well, she lied. I got there and I was working on Saturdays, Sundays. I was off on Mondays. But, of course, she was also of the belief that I worked the front door. I had to get up at 5:00 in the morning sometimes to wait for deliveries. She made me work in catering. I used to have to take end-of-the-month inventory. I had to go count silverware. I'm going, "You see, I don't think I want to do this."

But after two years, she sent me to Houston as assistant general manager, and I just never made friends with Houston, so after about three years, I came back.

It was just— Somebody called me about her the other day, and I said, you know, her family, the Brennans, had this innate ability to know how to make their customers happy. One time it was storming, raining, and it was on a Sunday night, and on Sundays it was usually the locals that would come from the neighborhood. So there was the judge from—you know. She says, "Marcelle, go to my house and go in the big bathroom and get all the white fluffy towels."

I went, "Oh, okay."

She says, "When all the little ladies get seated, go put that by their feet so they can dry their little feet off."

And I went, "Oh, okay." I said, "Well, how can people be so gracious?" And she didn't do that so that she could make points. She really was concerned about her customers, and she taught me a lot about charm. I said, "That's the most charming thing to do that."

[0:14:25.5]

Each of them taught me something. Her sister, Adelaide, who's this beautiful redhead, she was always dripping in emeralds, and sometimes she'd work with me on the door on Sunday nights because she knew a lot of the locals. One night, one of the servers—she was our only female server at the time—there was a step, like a little ramp that went down to the big dining room, and she had a Baked Alaska and it slipped off the tray on top of this man, and it was on fire. I went, "Oh, no!" So I got my towel, my napkin. Well, Miss Adelaide ran away. I went, "Where did she go?"

So we got him, and the guy was just precious. He said, "Oh, this'll be a story I can tell forever." After that, after we got him cleaned up, and, of course, they had to go get another Baked Alaska for Judge so-and-so's daughter or whatever, her birthday.

So I went and I found Adelaide at the bar, and I went, "She's a smart lady." She always had a big glass of what I thought was water. So I said, "I want to have one what she's having." I thought it was going to be water. It was gin. I went, "Well, no wonder she's so charming. She's had a big old thing of gin all night, and I had water." They were all just the most hilarious, fun people. Coming from a small town, I was just in awe of that. So I've been very fortunate. I've worked with some of the best.

She was the one that said, "You know, Marcelle, maybe you're not cut out for restaurant. Maybe you should write about it."

And I went, "Oh, hmm." Although in college, I had three degrees—I didn't want to get out of school—political science, history, and English. I had more hours and I had taken everything, everything over there.

[0:16:18.0]

So I gave some thought to writing, and at the *Times-Picayune* they said, "You can't write in the first person."

I said, "Well, I don't know how to write in the—I can't do it objectively."

So they said, "Okay, we're going to let you do it for a month and see what happens," and it was well received. It was mostly talking about people and families and why they eat what they eat. So I did that for over thirty-three years. It was kind of fun being able to tell people how I viewed our food and our customs and our traditions and why food is so important to people in South Louisiana.

After [Hurricane] Katrina, my food editor calls from the *Picayune*, she says, "We have to go to Houma to be able to put out the paper, but I'll call you when we get back to the office in New Orleans." Well, she did, and she said, "Marcelle, there's hardly any electricity but I'm getting text messages and I'm getting emails and all this about people who lost their recipes and their cookbooks."

I went, "Oh, I forgot, oh [mumbling imperceptibly]."

[0:17:28.9]

So we started—well, she really did—she called it Exchange Alley. So people would call in and say, "I want the recipe from," blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, "and I lost all my recipes."

Well, somebody that— maybe she lived in someplace else said, "Well, I have that recipe." So we'd put them in touch, and it became a big project. It was really a community project. They would call and say, "We want Tante Nana's okra."

I'd say, "I don't know Tante Nana, but I have something that's similar." The wonderful thing was that the people requesting it ranged from eighty-year-olds to twenty-five-year-olds. So it was kind of a cross—the twenty-five-year-olds had different requests than the older people, who were much more traditional.

We eventually made it into a cookbook, and it was nominated for a James Beard Award. And we didn't win, but I said, you know, it was an incredible exercise in research.

She said, "Well, we could get things out of the library of the *Times-Picayune*." So anything that had ever been published in there we could access through the Louisiana State Library System. But if it wasn't, then you had to go say, "Okay, we have to find

the recipe for the milk punches," or whatever, "at the Sazerac Bar in New Orleans during the [19]60s or the [19]50s."

So it became a—just when we'd think we were through, ten more little things would come, and I'd go, "Oh, I don't want to go look for the mother of one Saints football player who made some kind of chicken-and-sausage spaghetti. We don't even know the name of the football player." I said, "I'm not doing that."

[0:19:24.4]

I think it's probably a real jewel because it brought— in the cookbook we have a lot of old standards, as well as things that came from restaurants that are no longer there, and it kind of also tells the story of the people in New Orleans. I said, "You know, if Katrina happened in Utah, nobody'd care." I mean, I don't know what they eat in Utah. But it was so important for people in New Orleans to have comfort, and food was their comfort, and we started kind of finding out this from other people. Most of the people who had to rebuild wanted their kitchen first and then a bathroom. I went, "Oh, well." It's because they wanted comfort. It used to make me cry because they were so—a lot of the restaurants were closed. They couldn't go to the supermarkets. It was just this really incredible time for them to try to find comfort and peace and know their neighbors. And that was a story that I was very lucky, in a way, to be around that kind of environment. Not lucky that we had the storm, but anyway.

I'm kind of rambling on. You tell me to stop, and I'll stop. [Laughter]

[0:20:40.9]

Annemarie Nichols: No, it's all great stuff. I want to back up a little bit and ask you where did you go to college and then how did you get involved and meet Ella Brennan.

[0:20:51.3]

Marcelle Bienvenu: I went to USL, which is now SUL, University of Southwestern Louisiana, which is now University of Louisiana in Lafayette. That was in the [19]60s. And when I graduated, my father said, "You have a worthless degree"— in liberal arts. Because I didn't want to be a teacher, I didn't want to be a nurse, I didn't—you know. It was kind of a process of elimination. So he said, "Well, you've got thirty days to figure out what you're going to do."

And I went, "Ooh."

So he said, "Why don't you go, put your résumé in—"

I said, "What résumé?" [Laughter]

"—at the *Times-Picayune*."

So I did. Unfortunately, at the time I was married to my first husband that we don't talk about too much, and so my name was Marcelle B. —Bienvenu— Wright. Marcelle B. Wright. It was wrong. Talk about wrong. But when I started at the *Times-Picayune* that was my name. That's what I wrote under.

After about six months, I guess, the editor—I can't remember his name. Anyway, he called. He said, "I want to see you in my office."

I said, "Okay."

He said, "Why didn't you tell me you were 'Blackie' Bienvenu's daughter?" And I went— He says, "You know, we covered the flood of [19]27 together."

I said, "I know. We have a picture of you and Papa on the roof of this little filling station in St. Martinville."

So he said, "Well, look. Let's get rid of that Wright part. Let's go back and just use 'Marcelle Bienvenu.'"

I said, "Okay." And he gave me a little raise and all that.

When I went there—I can't believe I had the nerve to do this, but, of course, students today, I guess—I said, "I don't do murders and I don't do fires."

He said, "Well, what do you want to write about?"

I said, "More like happy things, like the Swan Boat at City Park."

"Oh, okay." [Laughter] And that was fine. I really didn't write about food. [0:22:41.7]

But when I went to work for Ella in the [19]70s, she and I met when I was working on the Time Life book because we had to take pictures at Brennan's in the Quarter, and we just got to be fast friends. She was always delightful, and we got to be buddies, and that's when she said, "Why don't you come work at Commander's."

And I went, "Ella, I'm not working at these restaurants. Nuh-uh."

And I told you she said, "I won't make you work bad hours." Well, she lied. After about a month, I was working the worst hours I've ever thought of.

She really was the one that said, "Why don't you just write about it," because she and I, we used to, in the afternoon when I'd get off about 5:30 or 6:00, she'd say, "Let's go have a Sazerac and sit in the courtyard in the patio," and we'd chitchat. Then, of course, when Paul came on, he would sit with us and we'd talk about—but she wanted to know all about Cajun food and I wanted to know all about New Orleans food, so it was a

good little gathering. We could all talk about it. Paul was great, because Paul, even though he was from Opelousas, and I'm from St. Martinville, which is only, like, maybe 40 miles apart, the way they cooked was different from the way we cooked.

On the first day of class here, I always ask the kids, "What's your favorite food when you were little?" And when they tell me what it is, I can tell them where they from, because the little kids from down the bayou, they always had weenie spaghetti. Kids from, like, Lafayette, they'll always say something like rice dressing or gumbo or something. Then if you live west of Lafayette, it's a whole 'nother world out there. Then along the river, they have this thing about white beans. They'll have white beans and rice with fried catfish. When I saw that, I went, "Nuh-uh." I always had potato salad with my fried fish. Then I saw people putting white beans on their jambalaya, and I went, "Hmm."

[0:24:41.6]

Then the little guy next door was fussing about that one time, so he came, he said, "Marcelle, you know the town Gonzales is where the jambalaya festival is. What else is in Gonzales? Blue Runner beans." During the Depression and during the war, Blue Runner would give the local people beans and stuff to eat. He said, "That's why they put the white beans on their jambalaya."

I went, "Well, who would have known that?" [Laughter]

Anyway, I've gotten off of the road you wanted me to stay on. [Laughter]

[0:25:19.2]

Annemarie Nichols: No, that's great. I have another question, too, because you keep bringing up this dichotomy between Cajun food and Creole food and the differences, and I know that it has to do with class and race and this dichotomy between country and city, but would you describe that? What you think about it?

[0:25:34.2]

Marcelle Bienvenu: Well, you know, this is interesting. I just had a call last week from this guy in *The New York Times*, and I said, you know, it used to be very easy to define the two. It was the country as opposed to the city. The Creole was more sophisticated than the poor little country people. Country people cooked in one pot, and the people in New Orleans, they had courses in their dinner and everything. And I really think that when Paul and then maybe Emeril and some others, they started kind of marrying these two together, so it's not as easy to determine that anymore. In my little culinary class, culinary history class, we were talking about, you know, it's amazing that people still think this, because Paul Prudhomme has come and gone, and I think a lot of people from away thought that if you put enough cayenne pepper or hot sauce on anything, it's Cajun, and I went, "Ooh." Or if you cook something with okra, it's Cajun.

Then the other day, someone said, "I had the best Cajun pizza."

I went, "Oh, yeah? What was on that Cajun pizza?"

"Well, it had shrimp and some Tony Chachere's, and it's a Cajun pizza."

I said, "Why are we making Cajun pizzas?"

He said, "Well, you know, you—."

I said, "It's almost—." Okay. Like my bistro people the other day said, "We're going to have Eggs Benedict, but we're not going to use the Hollandaise sauce."

I said, "Well, then it's not going to be Eggs Benedict." I said, "What do y'all want to do with it?"

"We're going to make a cheese sauce."

I said, "Well, then you'll have to call it something else, because it's not going to be Eggs Benedict."

[0:27:17.0]

And I worry about what could happen in this Acadian Creole—give and take—and marrying that some—let's see. Stuffed Flounder used to be on all menus in New Orleans. You hardly see it anymore. After Katrina, some of the restaurants came back doing very old, the old classics. And I'm not against anybody changing it for the better, but if they change it completely, then it's *not* really Acadian or Creole or even something similar to it.

I had gone to a dinner party in New Orleans—this is several years ago—and there was a guy from—I think he was from Tennessee. Anyway, he was a little chef, very nice man, and I think that he really tried too hard. It became a Tex-Mex-Cajun something dish, and it was awful. You know how they make those little fried tortillas to put your salad in at Taco Bell? Well, he had one like that, and in it was Crawfish Étouffée with rice, with some guacamole and black beans and then a big old chunk of fried catfish on the top. And I went, "It doesn't work." He's probably a fabulous little chef, but he didn't understand that, and he's up for a James Beard Award. He left, he graduated from here,

and said he was going to open an Asian Cajun restaurant. I went, "Oh, yeah? Okay." And it works.

I think we all talked about this the other day. The food here in South Louisiana, we're very used to bright and seasoned food, doesn't have to be peppered, and I think it's almost the same kind of—not the same kind of flavors, but that same kind of excitement that you get when you have Asian food. We have a lot of Asian students, and the other day I heard one of them says—Jeong says, "Well, you know, my," whatever his little Korean dish, "it's kind of like that."

I went, "It is?" And I think he was talking about flavors. It brings the mouth to just—it just bobs around in your mouth and everything's [unclear].

So I don't know what to tell you what's happening. It depends on who's stirring the pot. It's like one of the kids, I said, "How do you cook rice?"

He said, "Oh, in a rice cooker."

[0:29:55.7]

I said, "Oh, okay."

So we started asking how people cook rice on a stove, and, again, I can almost tell where they come from by their technique. It's kind of interesting because the little girl that she's from near Lake Charles, she said, "Those Germans, they the ones that brought this heavy food"— between Lake Charles and Lafayette. And you can see that in their cooking methods. So I'm not sure if all of it's going to be lost and become something else or it's going to be something better. I don't know. It's just different.

I think that people still hang on to their traditions. We talk about gumbo in one of my classes, and I said, "Who makes the best gumbo? Your grandma or your mama or

your Tante May or some—, because it's the gumbo you grew up with, and your taste buds just got used to that."

Then don't let them start talking about the difference between a brown jambalaya and a red jambalaya . They'll almost cut each other's throats. "Oh, no, I'm not eating a brown jambalaya. I never eat—nuh-uh. Oh, I don't ever eat—no." I think it's just where they grew up and what their family cooked.

The other day I was in Rouse's and I saw two of my students standing in front of this *huge* display of Zatarain's boxed jambalaya mix. Boy, they were looking. I saw one of them take one and put it in their basket. I said, "Hey, put that back. Put that back."

He said, "Chef, Chef, it has cheese."

I said, "You ever had jambalaya with cheese on it?"

"No."

[0:31:37.9]

I said, "Put that back." And I said, "You know, this is the problem with stuff in a box, jambalaya in a box, gumbo in a box, or whatever." I said, "Y'all are losing the point of cooking stuff. Y'all want to do it fast. Y'all eat fast. Y'all eat standing up. Y'all don't sit down and eat. You don't visit." And I said, "The reason that our food is what it is, is because families and friends used to get together and it was kind of their entertainment. For four hours they would cook, they would chop and cook and visit and gossip and stir, and so it was a big family gathering." And I think that if they cook everything from a box, they lose that. That's why they don't know who they are.

The other day I had a student. I said, "I want y'all to find out if y'all are Italian or French and Italian or German and French or whatever."

He came, he said, "We don't know."

I said, "How come you don't know?"

He says, "Well, I think I just want to be an Italian."

I went, "Okay."

He says, "Because I eat spaghetti every Sunday."

I went, "Okay, then you're Italian." [Laughter]

And I think that this generation, it's not as—I shouldn't say it's not as important. I think still in South Louisiana we do have a big family nucleus, and we're having more and more kids come from other—we now have people from the West Coast, we have people from the Carolinas. I think I have two Canadians. So they're bringing to the table here a different attitude about food, and so it's kind of interesting to see. The little girl from California, she says she has never eaten food like this before, ever. [0:33:20.4]

And I ask them why they come here. Of course, we're cheap. Not cheap, but they get a four-year degree for a lot less than if they went to any of the cooking schools for profit, and I think a lot of them are very happy to come to Louisiana because we're not far from New Orleans and they can go hear the music, they can go to the city, and I think it's a great environment for them to learn the food that we have here. I mean, not solely, because we have other. We do French classes, German classes, Italian, Asian. We do special baking classes and everything.

But I think the kids here, they go, "He really liked my gumbo."

"Oh, well, okay."

And, of course, we have a lot of athletes, and the people in Thibodaux, they're generous, and Houma, they'll come fix jambalaya for the football teams after their football games, or the soccer people, the soccer moms. One little girl said, "I never had a crawfish in my life. It looks like a baby lobster, but it was so good." And she really was honest and really genuine about it.

I said, "Yeah." We take it for granted, I guess.

[0:34:35.7]

Annemarie Nichols: I want to back up a little more, too, and talk about your time—what exactly did you write, because you were writing for the *Dixie Roto*, right?

[0:34:46.1]

Marcelle Bienvenu: Mm-hmm.

[0:34:46.7]

Annemarie Nichols: What were the kind of articles you wrote, and what was the kind of general dynamics of the newsroom at that time, in the late [19]60s and early [19]70s?

[0:34:56.6]

Marcelle Bienvenu: Oh, lord. Well, we still had typewriters so you'd hear [demonstrates] and it was very loud. *Dixie Roto*, we wrote about cute things, like the Swan Boat. It was mostly I did—well, we didn't do everything in New Orleans. The *Times-Picayune* was distributed almost all over from New Orleans. We always got the

paper in St. Martinville. It was human interest stories. I had done one— probably one of the first articles that had ever done really—this is in the [19]60s—on why we had jazz funerals and second line. I forget the guy who died that I went to, and he was buried in the cemetery off the Quarter. I don't know, I forget his name, but evidently, he was very well known because there were people from other newspapers, and we never heard of people dancing and all this at funerals.

I also did one on after Hurricane Camille that destroyed Biloxi, and they flew me in a helicopter, and I said, "I don't do dead people."

"Well, you're doing it today." [Laughter] I had to stay there with my photographer and with the Coast Guard guy who took us by boat. That was incredible.

Then I said, "I'll never see that again." Of course, we saw that at Katrina, and it was worse at Katrina.

[0:36:27.4]

I did a lot of things on—I had this thing about—I had a collection, and I still have a collection of dolls. I found this lady in—I think she was from Covington, who had this fabulous collection. It was all just human interest stuff.

But you know what was fun, I think, was that it really was when the newsroom was still a busy, busy place, and they had the Sports over here and the Society here, and then we are. That was still when we had the *Times-Picayune* and the—my mind just went blank. There were two papers that we put out. *Times-Picayune* was in the morning, and the afternoon was the whatever. They would ring a bell when you were one hour out of deadline time, and the place would go cuckoo. I mean, everybody would just—it was like everybody was shaking, and you could hear the—especially the last, the pop that was

printed the first that came out, like, at 2:00 in the morning, their deadlines were early afternoon, like mid-afternoon, so they were really anxious to get that, so there was all this rumbling around.

We still had photographers that had to take pictures, that had to go develop pictures, and whoever would go out on assignment, he would make you come back, see what he took, see if it would work with what you were writing, so it was a lot of hands-on thing.

[0:37:56.4]

I don't know whether it was the time, the [19]60s, our core group, we still stay in touch, and most of us that worked together in the [19]60s and [19]70s there, they've now gotten rid of all of us, so we're gone. It's time for another generation to come in. Millie Ball and I was saying—we were very, very close with even the sports people. On Fridays, our deadline for *Dixie Roto*, we had to send all the copy and everything, physically, in the mail in this black box, by 4:00 o'clock on Fridays. And I don't know who started this, but we started going out to lunch, and it was when they had 50-cents martinis. We'd come back, and we were drunk as fools. I said I don't know how we got everything in the box and shipped, because we were all drunk. [Laughter] We were. I mean, I can't believe we even were able to put everything in the box with the photographs, with the copy, and it had to be in a certain way.

One of the girls, I see her every once in a while, she says, "We were drunk as skunks." She says, "I'm surprised they never sent any of us home."

I thought, "Oh, no. Maybe they were drunk too."

It was kind of sad when—when I started writing my column was in [19]84, and I was living in St. Martinville. I'd just closed a restaurant in Lafayette, and I had to type it on—well, I had gotten me a word processor—ooh!—but I still had to physically send it in the mail to the *Times-Picayune*. Then, of course, when we had email and everything, I had two great food editors, and she said, "Did you send it?"

I said, "Yes, but it's still flying over the Atchafalaya Basin, but it's almost there to New Orleans. I just know it's almost there."

[0:39:52.8]

So it was fun to see the transition from typewriters to email to—you know. It's all different. My father, we were saying if he was alive, he would never, never get this computer stuff and taking pictures with a phone, because he was such old school, and we had linotypes. Even when I went to the *Picayune,* we were still on linotypes. So, yeah, it was very interesting.

And, of course, we covered everything very differently. It's not like fast news that we have today. I told my husband the other day, I said, "If they watched me, 'She's taking her shoe off.'" I said I don't know how they find out things so fast, but it's just a different world.

[0:40:41.1]

Annemarie Nichols: How did you get involved with—I think her name was Sarah Brash, in the *Times*? Time Life Books?

[0:40:46.1]

Marcelle Bienvenu: Sarah Brash? Her father was the Dean of Men at LSU, and she had gone to work for Time Life Books on some other project, and I'm not sure how that happened. She was one of the people that came to the *Times-Picayune* looking for somebody, and when I told her, "I knew everything. You don't need to look any further."

So we got to be friends, and when I found out that she had Louisiana connections, she said, "Okay, we'll hire you full-time." I went, "Oh, wow!" That was in [19]73, I guess, [19]72. No, the book was published in [19]71 or [19]72.

We stayed in touch. I did another series with them. They did another series of—they did it on the Gulf of Mexico. They were doing kind of wildlife series. They'd done something on the Everglades. They'd done something on the—what's the swamp in Georgia? Okefenokee or whatever it is. And then the Gulf of Mexico. So I did another thing with them, stayed on, but that was mostly part-time, I guess, because I went back to the *Times-Picayune* but only for a short while. Then I was at Commander's. [0:42:15.3]

So she was very good about opening a whole new world of journalism, for me, anyway. She would fly to New York City, and they were testing stuff in New York. When I got there, there was about six people cooking, making a roux, and I saw this little bald-headed, short little fat guy, and his roux was kind of like exploding over the side of his pot. I went, "Who is that?" Well, it was James Beard. And I said, "What happened? What's wrong with his pot?" Well, somebody had given him self-rising flour, so the roux grew. It exploded. And that's how I kind of got to meet him. He was a really delightful fellow, and I didn't keep up with him, but he would come to Avery Island because he was friends with the McIlhennys. So a couple times I was invited for dinner

over there when he was there. So I've been very lucky. I've met some really nice people.

[0:43:22.6]

Annemarie Nichols: You were talking about how you kind of took your own growing-up years and the Cajun food that you grew up with for granted a little bit, and how when you started working for Time Life you were kind of opened up to the fact that this is really important historically and culinarily too. What was it like? What was that realization like, and what was it like to be able to go around—what were the specific things you had to do for this specific American cooking book?

[0:43:56.1]

Marcelle Bienvenu: Well, it was really interesting, too, because they sent me a photographer who was from England. I went, "Oh, no." He kept driving on the wrong side of the road, and he had been in whatever the Air Force is in Britain, so he was missing part of his hand, and he was always having trouble with his camera. So I was always kind of carrying his stuff. But he was a precious guy, fun, fun, fun guy. And he just passed away, I heard from his wife. Anyway, he was a lot of fun.

We had to organize a real boucherie, and he says, "This is kind of scruffy."

I said, "Like, what do you mean, 'scruffy'?"

He said, "Well, there's these big old pots over wood fires."

I said, "Well, that's how they do it."

Of course, then we'd have to call New York, and then Sarah says, "We want it authentic, so even if it looks scruffy, take a picture of it."

It also gave you an insight as to how and why some of the dishes that developed, like at Antoine's—certainly when I was five years old, I certainly did not know that Oysters Rockefeller was created at Antoine's and why it was called Oysters Rockefeller. And a lot of the food that is—I mean, everybody knows about Bananas Foster, and it was created in New Orleans. And I think a lot of food that people recognize had a Louisiana beginning. Well, Baked Alaska started at Delmonico's in New York, but it became a very famous dessert in New Orleans.

So, finding out—I remember working at Commander's, I called my mother. I said, "Mom, Mom, they have tomatoes in the seafood gumbo."

She said, "Don't eat it."

I said, "But it tastes kind of good." [Laughter] I said, "Mom, but, wait, when you make shrimp and okra gumbo, you have tomatoes in your okra."

"Well, it doesn't count." [Laughter]

[0:46:00.8]

It was really kind of fun to see where they would butt heads. Mama would say, "You tell that little guy Emeril that when he makes crab cakes, he has to make a Béchamel. Tell him. Put him on the phone. Put him on the phone." Because she said, "you can only do it this way, and only eighteen Saltine crackers, no more, no less."

I go, "Yes, ma'am. Yes, ma'am."

Emeril was very good when I was working on his book and the first couple of books we did. He said, "I really would like to keep the traditional stuff alive," and so a

lot of stuff that we did for the first book was really the old-line Cajun stuff. I mean, he called my mother more than he talked to me. Of course, that was when Paul Prudhomme had come on the scene.

So it was interesting to see how it trends from—it even changed after Paul left and opened his own place and when Emeril stepped in, and Emeril started calling that cuisine new New Orleans food, and he was trying to give it a better, a lighter flavor, give it a little twist here and there. And at first I was going, "Oh, no, he's going to screw it all up." But I think people were ready for that kind of change, to see oysters maybe cooked a little bit differently than they always had 'em.

[0:47:18.5]

Certainly, as I mentioned, Chef Paul's creations also went another kind of understanding of what he grew up with. You know, blackened redfish, my mother said he burned it. But, hey, they out-fished the redfish in the Gulf of Mexico, so, you know, whatever the public likes is what happens.

I think that we were lucky that these guys, Paul—Leah Chase is just an incredible person, and she has such an understanding of what she always said, "That's my people."

I said, "I know that's your people."

She always said she's a Creole cook. She said, "If you make a gumbo without okra, it's not a real gumbo."

But I said, "What about my gumbo?"

She said, "Well, it's okay for your people." But she always says her Creole background is what she knows, and that's her style of cooking, and I think it mixes in

with a little bit of soul food, with the Gumbo Z'Herbes and her cornbread and fried chicken.

So I think the people that have had such an impact on our cuisine, I think have understood that, that you can take a little bit over here and mix it with a little bit of that, but be careful that you don't ruin the traditions or the classics. As I said, "Don't call this Chicken Pontalba if it's not Chicken Pontalba." That's my mantra when I teach Bistro, because they come up with all—I said, "Where'd y'all figure that out?" And I know they want to be creative, and I said, "That's fine, guys, but you have to understand that you're living in the parameters. The people that come to our bistro is from this area, and you have to please their palates. When you have your own restaurant, you can do whatever you want."

[0:49:15.7]

But we try to teach them some good background. They learn all about soup stock and sauces. They have meat. They have baking— four kinds of baking. They have a lot of electives, and now we're giving them—after junior, sophomore year, I try to tell them, "Have a plan. Your plan changes," but now we have concentrations so that they can go into different areas.

Okay. I got off the subject again.

[0:49:46.1]

Annemarie Nichols: That's totally okay. I want to talk a little bit—we've talked a little bit about this book, and you mentioned you stage a boucherie. What other things were you as—you were the local researcher. That was your title, right?

[0:50:00.4]

Marcelle Bienvenu: Mm-hmm.

[0:50:00.8]

Annemarie Nichols: What were some of the other things that you did as the local researcher to research?

[0:50:04.2]

Marcelle Bienvenu: Well, when we had to do the pictures of the Tabasco, which is near my house, I had to call the McIlhennys and ask them if we could bring photographers, so we'd spend two or three days. Here's the little boucherie. [Shows photos in cookbook] The photographer climbed up in a tree. Here's our ponce. No one had ever seen a stuffed pig's stomach. This is taken here in Thibodaux, and it's his grandson now that's doing the stuff. This was our old maid. She used to make us—I had to go find her and tell her she had to come make Lait z'de Cochon.

[0:50:36.6]

This is at a museum in St. Martinville that's still there. Crawfish was just getting really established. Up until the [19]60s, crawfish was considered a poor man's food, and all the crawfish came from the Basin. But, of course, when it became in high demand, LSU started figuring out how to do raise crawfish in ponds. This was back of my mama's house, because they wanted a sunset on the bayou. I think we took this one at Brennan's, three kinds of oysters, Bienville, Rockefeller, and Ruffinaque.

I'd just have to go call up the owner of such-and-so restaurant, and say, "Can we come take a picture?" And that's what we did. We did some of this in studios, but it was all just real people. [Showing pages of Time-Life book] This was Chez Helène, which was the first soul food restaurant that let white people in. This is all the people at Antoine's. Look at Ella. She was probably thirty or twenty years old, at Galatoire's.

My mother was very good about preparing some of this. This was all my daddy's friends. So it was just trying to find real things. Sarah Brash came up with an outline and it was supposed to be just a chapter. This book was really supposed to be just a chapter in the Book of the South. And as we started working, she said, "We have too much material." Paul just had come on the scene. She said, "Well, there's these people in Acadiana that we have to pay attention to and not just the people in New Orleans." And so it became a book.

[0:52:28.6]

Some of this became very enlightening to me. One of the pictures, this is my aunt. But I called my daddy and I said, "Pop, Pop, I have to have a picture of some fishermen in the Basin."

"Well, yeah,

you call Mr. so-and-so." Of course, half these people spoke French.

I'd go, "I need your *bateau à demain*," *en français*, whatever o'clock.

"Okay, *chère*, okay. Can I bring my wife?"

"Oh, yeah, you can bring your wife."

And we went into the swamp. The little British guy, he was afraid of snakes. Me too. He wasn't too sure about the crawfish. [Laughter] When he saw that, he went,

"Hmm. I don't know." But, yeah, we spent a whole day taking pictures. He was a good sport. He says, "Oh, well, I never did this before."

This was interesting. This was at Shadows-on-the-Teche, and the owner had just passed away and he had left this to the National Trust, so it was in transition. So when I called them, the little old lady who was kind of in charge, she says, "Well, I packed all the silver, all the china, all the crystal. They're in crates. But, darling, I will unpack it for you." So I found a little caterer in New Iberia to tell her that I needed to have hogshead cheese and ba blah, and we did it. This was all done. This was in Shadows. [0:53:57.9]

So it was kind of nobody really had a plan. It was kind of every week we'd get a new plan. I look at this and I go, "Oh, somebody did not know that this is not a Louisiana crab." It's some kind of other crab. The writer, Peter Feibleman, was absolutely incredible, because after we took the pictures, he had to take all this stuff and put it together. So I stayed on another six or eight months with him. Ti Brennan, Ti Martin. [Shows a picture of a young Ti Martin eating watermelon] Being with him was—his mother, she wrote *Toys in the Attic*? She was a writer. Anyway, she was kind of the same ilk as Tennessee Williams. So I got to meet her. I'd never done anything like that, but I convinced him I knew everything. I can't believe I even lied like that, but anyway. [Laughter]

[0:55:01.2]

Annemarie Nichols: How old were you?

[0:55:03.6]

Marcelle Bienvenu: I was twenty-five, twenty-six. [Laughter] "I know everything there is to know. I'm fine. You'd better hire me." Okay. And I would not dare say I didn't know. So I'd call Papa up, and my mother, and all my old aunts and say, "Is this right? Is a ponce the same thing as a chaudin?"

"Me chère, yes, chère. All depends on where you're from."

"Okay." So thank God I had the family to back me up and tell me what I was doing.

[0:55:30.1]

Annemarie Nichols: It sounds like it was an amazing project.

[0:55:33.9]

Marcelle Bienvenu: It was. We took a picture—I think it's the last one in the book—Rienzi. Of course, the people here in Thibodaux call it "Rah-enzy," but it's "Ree-enzy." But anyway, it's Spanish. Anyway, my daddy knew the people. In fact, he was in their wedding. They were married in Alabama. He called Mr. Lavere and he said, "They'd like to take a picture at Rienzi. Marcelle has these people."

So I called the Louisiana—like the little 4-H lady. I said, "Can you make me a pie and get me a watermelon basket and some ice cream?"

She said, "Oh, yeah, I can do that."

Well, you don't need to know, but Mr. Lavere was a terrible alcoholic. He was always walking around with a glass of gin or bourbon or scotch. It didn't matter. And he

had a one-armed driver, and his name was Lucien. I said, "Lucien, make sure Mr. Didi doesn't come where we taking pictures."

"Oh, I'm gonna take care of that."

Well, of course, we took a break because I had to go get another ice cream thing, this little ice cream cake thing. Sure enough, we come back, and this is missing. I said, "Lucien."

He says, "He took the lemonade, the pitcher of lemonade, and he's sitting in the car with his bourbon."

I said, "Mr. Lavere, I need the pitcher."

"Oh, okay, honey." Pour half the stuff out of it, but we could make more. [0:57:03.1]

Anyway, now its owned by this other guy that has been redoing it. So it was always—poor Mrs. Levere. She had a lot of silverware but nothing was polished. So I had to start polishing silver. She didn't have any— The photographer wanted something that looked lacy, so I had to go to the lady next door, ask her if she had something like he wanted. It was a major commotion.

My little photographer, we were staying in a hotel in Houma, and he said, "I think I'm going to go out and get a couple of beers. I'll get us each an oyster po' boy." He liked oyster po' boys.

I said, "Okay." That was when we still put those big rollers in your hair, like this hair thing, because we were going to go out later. And I get a call from the Sheriff's Department. "Do you know so-and-so?"

I said, "Yeah."

"Well, we have him here at the jail."

And I went, "What now?"

"Driving on the wrong side of the road, drinking beer."

So I had to go get him out. Of course, it was a Saturday night. And it became the greatest story in the world because, "We were trying to fingerprint him, but he only has three fingers on this hand." [Laughter] It was an experience.

Okay. What else?

[0:58:13.1]

Annemarie Nichols: I bet. That's great. What about let's move on and talk a little bit about your column, "Cooking Creole." Can you start about first coming to the *Times-Pic* again? It was in 1984, right?

[0:58:29.3]

Marcelle Bienvenu: Mm-hmm.

[0:58:30.0]

Annemarie Nichols: And I want to talk a little bit especially about your audience, because you do have this really conversational tone like you're the neighbor and you guys are just kind of like having a really intimate conversation, and you're sharing parts about your life and your mother's recipes, and it's really special. So would you start off and talk a little bit about that?

[0:58:52.3]

Marcelle Bienvenu: Yeah. Remember I said that my daddy was a big raconteur. He loved to tell stories. And I think listening to him when I was a child, well, even in high school, he loved to tell stories. He really enjoyed—we always had a family thing on Sunday. He loved cooking for his Boy Scouts. He loved cooking. There was a bunch of men called—I forget what they called. They called them like the Friday Night whatever. It was about six men, and this guy had a camp near Catahoula, and they would cook every Friday, and sometime it was Ladies' Night or whatever. And I was always amazed, too, that people would share. Daddy would say, "Oh, Mr. so-and-so called, he's bringing me ten pounds of crawfish." Then he'd say, "Oh, and Mr. so-and-so brought me a whole sack of corn." And they really did share a lot when they had home gardens, and everybody shared. That became great memories to me. My mother, even after she decided she didn't have to can and preserve anymore, she quickly learned that what they made at the supermarket was not near as good as hers. So even into high school, we had a home garden. We lived in the country.

[1:00:14.1]

Ella Brennan, she said, "Just tell 'em how you live," and that's what I did.

Everybody said, "Do you really have a husband named Rock?" This is really funny. I think I was at a book signing or something, and this couple, cute couple, came, said, "Is Rock with y'all today?"

I went, "Yeah."

He said, "Well, I can't wait to talk to that guy."

I'm going, "What? What?"

He says, "You know, I'm really sick of my wife saying, 'Rocky did that. Rocky did that.'" So he said, "I just want to meet him and punch him in the nose." Of course, they became big friends, you see.

To this day in the grocery store, they say, "Are you Marcelle? Is your husband here?"

I said, "No, he's not here."

"Well, when he comes next time, give me a call, and I can come meet y'all."

I'm always amazed why they want to know more about Rock than anybody, but I created a monster. And he is. He is a story unto himself. He's a big storyteller as well. His father was as well too.

[1:01:23.0]

So if anybody said, "Nobody brings you baskets of cucumbers," I said, "Yes, they do, and they leave them on the steps, and sometimes they don't even have a note."

But then more and more people would say, "You know, my mother used to get crabs from such-and-so," and it kind of made people think of their own. I'm in my seventies, so I think my audience was kind of that generation who kind of remembered the Sunday dinners and people going fishing and people sharing stuff. So it kind of reminded them of their childhood or when they were growing up.

I had a call one day. It was a little college guy from Tulane. "Miss Bienvenu, I got one of your cookbooks. I want to bring it to my mama."

I said, "Okay." I said, "Where does your mama live?"

"Colorado."

I said, "Oh." I said, "Maybe she won't like this kind of—."

"Oh," he said, "the stories." He said, "I read it almost every night." And he said, "I wanted to have a childhood like that." [Laughter]

I went, "Don't tell your mama that."

But he said it was somebody, a little guy from St. Martinville that gave it to him. And I think that it was still kind of a possible way that people lived like that, and I think it just made them remember good parts of their lives. I didn't realize—I didn't do that to do that. It was just the way that we lived.

[1:02:51.7]

Food was a big focus in our lives. My mother, she couldn't stop talking about it, "Now, Blackie, we're having this for lunch and this tomorrow night, and then Friday night and then Sunday afternoon." I mean, she had like a calendar thing, and she'd have all her food poked in there. So it was important for her and Daddy too. So that's how we lived.

People, I think—once in a while I'll get a letter, "I want to hear the story again, like when you went fishing with your sister and you fell off the boat." No need to put that. I'd say, "Why would I even put that in a food column?" I fell off the boat. Anyway, I just think people like to read things that make 'em feel good. I guess.

[1:03:41.5]

Annemarie Nichols: I think so too. Another thing I have a question about in regards to your column is what about recipe testing? How did you do that?

[1:03:53.4]

Marcelle Bienvenu: I tested a lot of stuff, because a lot of the stuff that I learned—we were laughing the other day. I had a picture of it. Daddy's recipe for his bouillabaisse was—remember the old [inaudible] you have to type from a typewriter? It was the brown paper. Anyway, it was what we'd put our stuff on it. He'd written it by hand, part of it by hand, and part of it on this old typewriter that didn't have an *e*. So it was these gaps. I framed it. It's in my little kitchen in my new little party house. "If you're more than five people, use an extra tablespoon of flour for your roux," as opposed to what—I don't even have a beginning number. "As to the oil, it's best not to use bacon fat in this particular recipe. Go get some Crisco or LouAna Oil." He has that in the directions. "It's best not to use—." I don't know why he would say, "Don't use tomato sauce. It's best to use canned whole tomatoes that you squish." That's before we had diced tomatoes. "And no garlic goes in here. Don't put any garlic. There's tomatoes, onions, celery."

[1:05:14.4]

And he'd make it like a fish stew, so there was a roux, and he'd put in the tomatoes and let that cook until—it's in the recipe—there's a paper film on top when the oil kind of—okay. Then your tomatoes are ready. I mean, you can move on. Then, of course, he tells you to add either fish stock or shrimp stock or whatever. "You partially cover the pot, and when it makes another paper thing on the top, it's done." No amount of—don't tell me how many teaspoons of anything; it's just the technique. So I had to test a lot of stuff.

Mama was very good about her fancy stuff. She did have a great collection. I still have her boxes. Her house burned right before she died, but I was able to salvage

almost everything in the kitchen, and all of her recipes are still on cards, or she had newspaper clippings, or she had attached something to a piece of recipe saying, "Don't do this, don't do that," or, "Do this instead."

So they certainly didn't give me money to test, so I would just cook it for my family. My older brother is not the best cook, but he was a Boy Scout, so he kind of remembered what Papa did cook and how much. And later, in the last maybe five years that I did it, I did some recipe testing because I was moving into something that was not my own. The *Picayune* was changing what they wanted us to write about. But, yeah, I'd test just about everything. I'm not a good baker, so I really have to test things. Cakes and pies are just not my thing. My sister shouldn't cook but she can bake, so sometimes she was my tester. She can't cook. I don't know. Don't give her pot, but she can bake. Her children would come and say, "There's a mystery meal at the table." [Laughter] She was so good about it. There was the meal and the table was set. She had seven children. I'd go, "I have no clue what's that." It was always covered with cream of mushroom soup, whatever it was.

[1:07:26.0]

and the kids would go, "What is it, Mom?"

"Well, it's—you know." A lot of it looked like of like Shepherd's Pie with cream of mushroom soup over it. I don't know. I don't know. Don't go eat at her house. So, yeah, we tested stuff.

[1:07:40.2]

Annemarie Nichols: How'd you go about choosing the recipes that you wanted to put in your column?

[1:07:45.0]

Marcelle Bienvenu: Through my mama's recipe box, or I'd see somebody, like my great-aunt Grace. I called her Seena. Other people called her Nana. Some people called her Grace. She was not the best cook, but she could make pralines, and when she died, she left me her praline pot. I remember she was still alive when she gave it to me, she says, "I only make pralines in this pot. Don't cook anything else in it. It's my praline pot." And you could tell how much stuff she had in, because you could tell how—she said, "Just whenever you measure, that's how it's supposed to look."

Or I remember something that somebody used to—like I hated liver and onions and grits. My mother, she thought that was so wonderful. So I said, "Okay, I'll write about it."

[1:08:35.3]

Then as our family started growing with kids, the grandkids wanted to learn how to make such-and-so, so that would give me some inkling. I just kind of remembered what we had for Christmas.

After my mama died, everybody said, "Okay, we're going to do a different menu."

I said, "Oh, okay."

Well, my two brothers said, "We not coming. If we don't have this, this, and this like Mama had, we not coming."

I went, "Oh, okay." So we had to go back to the old stuff.

So I had input from the family. My daddy was one of twelve, and two of his sisters had thirteen children, so I have so many first cousins, we *never* run out of things. I mean, I could call them and say, "What are you cooking? What was your favorite thing? What are you cooking now?"

They did have a great—I cannot fix any desserts. Just don't even ask me. I can make pecan pie. That's about it. We never made Divinity Fudge, but Aunt Tay's children used to make Divinity Fudge like we'd pop popcorn, and I'd never really seen it done. So one afternoon I went and watched.

[1:09:42.8]

One of the aunts, she can dissect a chicken, debone a chicken in two minutes flat. I mean, I've never seen anything—even my little students here are not that good. She was incredible. She would debone a turkey and a chicken in a minute. I never saw anything. The hands of a surgeon.

Okay. What else? I don't know how much—

[1:10:09.1]

Annemarie Nichols: It's crazy. Well, there's plenty.

[1:10:11.6]

Marcelle Bienvenu: That's all right.

[1:10:14.6]

Annemarie Nichols: I wanted to talk a little bit about differences between mediums. So you've worked in journalism, you've worked in cookbooks, you've written your own cookbooks personally, but you've also co-edited and edited. You even did a cookbook for *True Blood*, the TV show. [Laughter]

[1:10:31.8]

Marcelle Bienvenu: I didn't even know what *True Blood* was about. When they sent me the videos, I went, "Wait. This can't be the—."

My husband's going, "Kind of, um, pornographic, huh?"

I went, "Oh, okay." Yeah.

But the first one that I wrote with somebody was Emeril, and I had to kind of become him so I could write like him—no, so I could sound like him. He was kind of easy to do. When I did the first book with him, nobody knew who he was. I mean, he wasn't on television yet. Well, it was that book that really kind of launched this TV thing. But he was easy to do because he was kind of shy in some ways, but he loved talking about food, and he said, "Well, this is how I want to do it, but do you think it'll work?"

I said, "I'm not the chef. I'm just here writing the book."

Then I had to kind of keep him in line. He'd say, "Well, let's add lobster to that."

I said, "We don't have lobsters in Louisiana. You can't do it, can't do that." So it was kind of fun, and we had to do it in between his—him at the restaurant. I followed him around in my—I'd go pick him up, and we'd write while we rode around New

Orleans. Then I'd have to go to the test kitchen and wait for him to come. So it was kind of, that was a new experience for me.

Then when I wrote about the one with Miss—I think I have it here. When I wrote the one with—well, there were several with Emeril, but I was used to him, and I knew what he said. He'd tell me to do something in a recipe, but it was not something that you would understand. I didn't understand it. I said, "I don't know what you're talking about." I said, "The little lady in Nevada has no clue, so you have to tell me." So it was kind of I had to pick on him.

[1:12:23.7]

When I did the book with Miss Eula Mae at Avery Island, that was a real trip. She was a self-taught cook, she hardly could read and write, but she was the most joyous person, and she taught me a lot of stuff. I mean, you always can learn something. When we started working on it, Mr. McIlhenny's always tight. He said, "Now, Miss Eula, you and Marcelle, if y'all need some pots and pans and all that, I want you all to go to the Kitchenaire and get whatever you need."

"Okay." I said, "Eula, get in the car. We're going to go to the Kitchenaire."

She looked at me, sweet as could be, she says, "Honey, I can't cook in pots I don't know."

"Does that mean we can't go buy some new pots?"

She says, "No, we have to cook in my old pots."

I'm like, "Huh. I wanted to spend Mr. McIlhenny's money."

So we cooked in her old pots, and she was used to those pots 'cause she knew how to measure. And the only measuring—in fact, I had it out the other day. She left it

to me. After she died, [inaudible] gave it to me. It was a little maraschino cherry jar. That's what she measured everything in. That was her measure. She'd say, "I need this much sugar, plus two tablespoons."

I'd go, "Ooh, well, let me see what it—." And that was her only thing. She'd walk around with this jar. And sometimes she would put it in back.

"What are you doing, Miss Eula?"

"Nothing."

I said, "I have to see what you're doing."

And she never had a mess. I said, "Miss Eula, where are the seeds from the peppers?"

"They're in my pocket. I have to take that to use to go make some more peppers."

[1:14:05.1]

"Where are the onion skins?"

"That's in the freezer."

I said, "What are we doing with that?"

She said, "Well, when you make stock, if you put the onion skins in, it'll help clear the cloudiness."

"Okay." She taught me—I said, "I never heard of some of this stuff."

Then we had to go to New York. I had to ship her pots to New York because she couldn't cook up there without her pots. She was kind of hard to do, but she and I had so much fun in the test kitchen and, of course, near the plant and in where the corporate office is. But we'd start about 8:00 o'clock in the morning. About 10:30, they'd come

and go, "What are y'all cooking today? Can we have some?" Of course, we always did, because we couldn't eat it all. I mean, we had to pass it around.

And she was so humble and genuine about the way she cooked and what she cooked. She was an incredible—and she cooked there for forty years, forty years, and she would *never* tell Mr. McIlhenny, "Oh, no, I'm not doing that." She would do it, even if she had to walk through fire. Her book is one of my favorites because it's so genuine.

The pecan book, I knew the guy that had written the original one and he'd passed away. He used to call me and he'd say, "You want to come over for a highball?"

I'd say, "Okay."

So he said, "You can bring your husband, too, if you want." And we'd go, have a couple of drinks, and he would cook.

[1:15:40.7]

This one, well, Emeril's, this one was one of the funnest books, because that was something that this was really his style when we did this one. *Stir the Pot* was all about the history of Cajun cuisine, and that was the first time really somebody said, "Well, this is how it happened." There's a couple more history books, but I think that's the best. I mean, I think that we got the information right.

Who else? I did one for Abita Beer. *Cooking Up a Storm* was the one after Katrina, which I really am proud of that one. I'm sorry we didn't win, but I knew why we wouldn't win. It was really mostly a community book. It wasn't something that we had done on our own. But it was kind of fun going up there and seeing people.

[1:16:33.1]

Annemarie Nichols: Would you talk about that experience, going up for the James Beard Awards?

[1:16:35.7]

Marcelle Bienvenu: Yeah. Of course, when we heard that poor—what's her name? Judy Walker said, "It's got to be a mistake."

I said, "Well, I like mistakes." But we were cuckoo. And I had just started working here. That was in 2009, and I had to go to New York, and, of course, I'd just started here and they were going to let me off for ten days. Not ten days, but I had to leave on a Tuesday and I couldn't come back till the following Sunday or Monday. Anyway. You can't put that anywhere, but the *Times-Picayune* was so tight. "This is what you can have per diem."

So Judy and I said, "We'll put up some." We didn't want to stay in some nasty old hotel, so we got something kind of in between. One of my nephews was up there, and I can't remember why he was, but he was up there at the time, and he was so good about taking us. We went to the Four Seasons for dinner one night, and then we went to eat at this, and we went to church at the Cathedral. It was really fun.

Then, of course, when they got us, they had hired a limo to pick us up, and we went. We went to—not Macy's. What's the big store in New York? I don't think we did it at Saks. Anyway, she said, "We have to go get our makeup done." So we had to go get our makeup done.

When we got to—not Rockefeller. It was—I can't remember the name of the place. Anyway, it's where the operas are. They said, "This is for the red carpet."

I said, "Okay."

It just so happened that when I got there, this gentleman said, "I'll walk with you."

I said, "And who are you?"

He said, "Jacques Pépin."

I went, "Oh, my little French bread." He was so cute.

[Laughter] Then Judy and I were in the elevator with Martha Stewart.

[1:18:30.5]

But anyway, it was a beautiful party. It was a lovely time. We were sitting with the little chef in the Oxford—and he won. So it was really nice and it was a really lovely party. It was nice being nominated for a James Beard thing, and we saw a lot of people that we got to meet. It's one of the best things that—I mean, I was very proud of that. I really was.

[1:19:05.4]

Marcelle Bienvenu: We worked hard on it. Judy is probably—she and Dale Curry, my two food editors, they're like a dog with a bone. They will not let things go. I mean, they do it. Then they say, "We got to finish this book." Otherwise, I was getting [Whispers] really tired of it. But anyway.

[1:19:22.1]

Annemarie Nichols: What did it mean for the people of New Orleans?

[1:19:23.8]

Marcelle Bienvenu: When Brett Anderson—he served on the nominating committee and he had written a little story about it. I can't remember exactly. I thought I had it. The other day I was looking for it and I couldn't find it. It really brought to the forefront how important food is to New Orleanians. I think in the story was when he said only in New Orleans would people have been worried about that they lost their cookbooks, their family recipes are gone, and it was so important for them to have that, for somebody to find the recipes and to put it in a book so people could have it. It used to make me cry.

[1:20:09.1]

Annemarie Nichols: I have another question, too, about trying to interpret recipes from chefs like Miss Eula Mae Dore, who was self-taught, and Emeril, who might be a lot more—he's very trained. What was it like? What was the challenges of trying to interpret that?

[1:20:33.1]

Marcelle Bienvenu: The worst people to write recipes is a chef. You know why? Because they think everybody at home has some demi-glace, they have twelve quarts of this, and they'll say "to taste." I said, "Stop with this 'to taste.'" They cannot make a requisition. It's horrible.

So Emeril's—and it was so tedious. I had Anne Kearney for a while, and then I had—I forgot the name. I just talked to her last—anyway. She'd say, "Okay, this is two and a half tablespoons."

[1:21:16.4]

I said, "Well, let's see. We can't do two and a half tablespoons. Can we do a tablespoon plus? Because three teaspoons are in a tablespoon." And I'm the worst, worst mathematician ever, but don't tell any of that to my students. I used to have a cheat sheet in my pocket of my apron, going, okay, two cups of butter is how many sticks. And Emeril is really a good baker, and when we'd do baking stuff, he was so precise about everything. He said, "It has to be exactly like this." And then it was the weighing. So weighing in volumes and liquids and all was kind of nerve-wracking. I think at one time we even had aprons that we made that we could look up on our aprons how many something made something, something. That was a horror.

But Eula Mae, I had to watch her because she'd just put it in a pinch, that much. Okay. You know what? Whenever she'd say, "This much hot sauce," it was exactly a fourth of a teaspoon. Then she'd walk around with that damn jar. When she saw me come in with measuring cups, she almost left, and I went, "Oh." Then I had to appeal to her, and I said, "You know, Miss Eula Mae, there's some people that live, like, in California, they haven't a clue. We have to tell them everything, I mean, like almost the size of the pot, and we can't just say 'sauté,' we have to say 'stir, cook stirring.' You have to tell them exactly, because you can't leave anything to chance."

And she'd just roll her little eyes, going, "Oh, lord." It was a challenge.

[1:23:08.7]

She wanted me to make fudge with her jar, and her jar was a little over a cup and a fourth. So then I had to back up and say, "Okay, I can't do a cup and a fourth, or can I break it down?" Ooh, that was tedious.

We did a lot of testing in Avery Island, but then I had to send some stuff up to New York. People in New York, "We don't want any recipes with grits."

I said, "Why?"

"Only poor people eat grits."

I said, "Well, that's not true."

[1:23:46.3]

So we had to argue why we had to have the grits with the grillades, and Emeril would say, "Just tell 'em I said we have to have grits."

People in New York City said, "Can we substitute walnuts for pecans?"

"Yeah, I guess so, but it's not going to be the same."

"Do we have to use—?""

See, Emeril would use Tabasco and Crystal. Of course, the McIlhennys, we had to use Tabasco. I said, "Emeril, you have to make up your mind. Either you use all recipes with Tabasco or all recipes with Crystal or whatever, but you cannot say on this dish it's—."

He says, "I can."

I said, "Well, you talk to the editor." Because then you had to proof everything, and they would always have these little queries, and we'd have to go back through the book. Of course, the first five thousand of *Real and Rustic*, I don't know how many times I read that. We found a place that said "a tablespoon of cayenne pepper," and we'd already printed out five thousand, so they had to go back and change it.

[1:24:50.6]

I hate the editors and I hate the proofers, because they question every little thing. In fact, I think when I got onto the *True Blood* thing, the lady, 'cause she said, "Marcelle, it's me. It's me. It's," whatever her name, "Gretchen, from South Carolina."

I said, "Oh!" She did all the Emeril books.

She said, "You'll know when I do my stuff what I need."

"Okay." That was funny.

[1:25:22.6]

Annemarie Nichols: What was it like trying to write recipes for a TV show you didn't even know anything about? [Laughter]

[1:25:28.3]

Marcelle Bienvenu: Well, what they did, it was pretty funny. They said, "We're going to send you all the videos," and I had no clue.

One of my students said, "Chef, maybe you shouldn't look at that."

I was going, "What's so wrong about—?"

Of course, my husband and I—and they said, "What you're going to have to do is," and I was working here, "is watch the video, and anytime they mention any kind of food, you have to make a note, and that's what's going to go in the book."

I went, "Oh, okay." But you have to watch the video four and five times. [Laughter] My husband I laughed ourselves off the bed many times.

[1:26:07.2]

So then I had to come up with a list of any kind of food they listed in there. So then I sent that to the editor, who happened to have worked with me on Miss Eula's book, so we worked well together. She was good. Then she said, "Okay, now we get to transport and come up with how to make this." And I was lucky enough they allowed me to do some testing in one of my kitchen labs, because it was very simple stuff, so the kids helped me with that.

But once I started watching, I kind of got into Lafayette and a couple of the others, so I said, "Well, now I know what they're trying to do." And the book was fun doing. I wasn't there for most of the photography because I was teaching, but they would send me proofs and say, "What do you think about this and how does this look?"

I had a sub-writer. I would write it in regular thing, then she would go back and tune it into the show. So it was kind of interesting— that was something very different. It was.

[1:27:17.4]

Annemarie Nichols: I bet. I kind of want to talk—I've taken up a lot of your time, but I have a couple more questions and then—

[1:27:25.6]

Marcelle Bienvenu: Oh, no, no. I have all—I'm not going anywhere.

[1:27:27.7]

Annemarie Nichols: What was the difference between working at the *Times-Picayune* in the [19]60s and early [19]70s and when you came back in [19]84? What was it like trying to, I guess, reintegrate yourself into kind of like a journalistic mindset after so many years?

[1:27:46.5]

Marcelle Bienvenu: To tell you the truth, it was very easy, I guess because I grew up in the newspaper thing, newspaper environment, because, I mean, even through college Daddy would call and say, "You have to come in." Paper night was Wednesdays. We came out on Thursday. He said, "We're shorthanded, you're going to have to come," and dah, dah, dah. So it was kind of—I mean, it was a small-town newspaper. It certainly wasn't like the *Times-Picayune*. But I respected the way that we had to be on—we had to have a deadline.

When I started back in [19]84, I was not at the *Picayune* anymore. I did it from my house. Every once in a while, I'd go in and do some stuff, so I was really kind of on my own. I had to figure out how I could get to it, how I could put out something every week, every week, every week, and sometimes what I would do—Dale Curry was great. She was a great editor. She said, "Well, let's work two months out." And so we'd make a little outline, and she'd say, "Okay, you have the cover." She'd try to give one or two covers a month, because I got an extra fifty dollars or something, but then she'd have to set up the time to do any kind—I rarely had a lot of big pictures, stories. It was just a column. I mean, sometimes I would set up something.

So it was kind of on my own steam, so she and I worked it out so that she'd say, "Okay, I need your copy by Thursday at noon," you know, Thursday morning, not noon. When we got into emails and all that, we did that. But sometimes I'd fax it. When faxes came in, I learned how to do that. So it wasn't that bad at all.

[1:29:30.7]

What I had to get used to for a while is that every time they would change, I guess, a program that they used on the—you know, the computers kept changing, and the worst thing I had to get used to was not to do a double click at the end of a sentence. She said, "You've got to just do one."

I said, "Okay." [Laughter]

Then for a while, they sent me the way it had to fit into a certain spot, and at first I thought it would be words, how many words. But then it was how much space these words would take. I went, "Oh, no, I don't understand that at all." But anyway, I finally got into it.

Judy was—was also an incredible—we had two or three really bad programs when she came in, and it was not her fault. The *Times-Picayune* was changing over to some new formats, the paper was changing, so it was just a little bit different, and I wasn't there. I would try to go in every three or four months to go over, spend the day, whatever, so I knew what was going on. We worked about a month or two in advance. It was okay.

Judy had a mind like an elephant. She said, "You did that six years ago."

I go, "I did? Six years ago? You remember six years ago?" So that was kind of—you can't write, do the same. But sometimes we'd say, "This appeared six years

ago," and we just redid it. I was running out. It's a good thing they got rid of me, because I was running out of words. After thirty-three years, I think I said it all.

[1:31:09.4]

Annemarie Nichols: That's a long time.

[1:31:10.9]

Marcelle Bienvenu: Yeah, yeah, and every week, every week, every week. I think I missed only three: when my mother passed away, when our house burned, and after Katrina. So it was incredible.

But I was comparing— Daddy wrote his column I don't know how many years, and my brother is still writing his column. So that's a lot of columns when you think about what's going on and what we did.

[1:31:37.1]

Annemarie Nichols: How did your dad feel about your journalism career?

[1:31:40.5]

Marcelle Bienvenu: He says, "You ain't gonna make it, honey."

I went, "Daddy, Daddy."

He says, "Well, I don't think you're going to enjoy being at a desk all the time." But luckily for me when I went to work for there, I could go see the Swan Boat and go out.

You know, when I started the column, he told me this, he says, "You know, writing a column—." He always had a good one, but it was every week. It was on the front page. It was called This and That, by Blackie. He said, "You have to do a lot of work alone."

I went, "Alone? What do you mean alone?"

[1:32:13.4]

He said, "You're going to be writing by yourself. You're not going to be in a roomful of people. You're going to have to put that column out every week by yourself in your little baby—."

My office was the utility closet, and I had a place for my little—my first computer was one of those big old things. My husband would come in and iron his shirts in the closet. [Laughter] I had two little bookshelves. But now my husband built me a—I mean, about ten years ago, he built me my own office.

The transformation from typewriters to computers was my worst thing. I went, "Oh, I'm going to have to relearn all this. It really was—" Students today, I think they're born with an iPhone in their hand. When I take them away from them, they start sweating. So going into computers really was a big change for me, and I kept wanting to do that to the carriage. [Makes swiping carriage motion] So it was very interesting.

[1:33:20.7]

Annemarie Nichols: I bet. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

[1:33:25.6]

Marcelle Bienvenu: Well, being here, I would never have thought I would have found myself here, teaching for the last ten years, because when they called me—I'm seventy-three yesterday—I was sixty-three, and I was going, "Oh, I'm retiring at sixty-five. I'm not working anymore. I've done my thing. I've had enough of that." But after Katrina, I didn't have a full-time—well, I worked for the *Picayune*, but I didn't have a full-time job because Emeril got rid of half of his people because he had no more restaurants. So I said, "Well, maybe I'll do it."

When I came here, they said, "It might just be two semesters until we find somebody else," because the enrollment started increasing.

So I said, "Okay, that's fine." And I'm still here, and this has been a really great experience, teaching kids. One of the reasons I'm getting ready to retire is I don't know how to teach kids anymore. They're on a different wave. This year is the first year that I just can't seem to connect with them, and I think they're just coming from a different generation, and we have some younger teachers now who can deal with them.

When I went to get a phone, I told the little guy at AT&T, I said, "You see this? Y'all should not sell that to old people unless you give somebody a ten-year-old, because I can't figure this out, and there's no booklet. There's no user thing."

So half the time, the other day, said, "Chef, we're going to fix it for you. We're going to get it."

Of course, I have computers in some of the test kitchens that they go on four screens, and I'm going, "Oh, my goodness." So every semester I have to find some little nerd that's going to help me get my screens together, but it's fun. They think that's funny.

But teaching the kids, I think there's one little book left, because it's amazing what—we've had some real experiences here. I used to go up to the Southern Foodways Alliance thing every year for their thing, Amelie and I left early and I told my [inaudible] class, I said, "After you use the smokers, just put them outside by the back door. Don't do anything."

[1:35:50.1]

We flew from New Orleans to Atlanta. I get a call. "One of your students put all of the ashes from the smokers into the dumpster and it caught fire, because there was also a huge container of oil. We have three fire trucks out on the campus trying to put the fire out."

So I said, "Jamie, what did Chef Marcelle tell you?"

"I know what you told me." He said, "I feel really bad."

I said, "You should feel really bad." I mean, I don't think he did that to be—but sometimes I go [makes exasperated face].

My husband said, "You know, first-year medical students do not do brain surgery, so your first-year culinary students don't know shit, so just that's what they're there for, you have to teach them."

"Okay, okay."

But we have some good stories here. Chef Amelie teaches. Well, she graduated from here, then she spent three years at Commander's. She was the first woman on the line at Commander's. She has a great sense of humor. So she came up, she said, "I'm going to kill them. I am going to kill them."

I said, "I have a better story than you." So at the end of the day, I said, "What did your kids do?" It's terrible. [Laughter]

[1:36:59.2]

Anyway, but it's been fun teaching, and it's a challenge. When I first started, I'd never taken an education course. I went to see Dr. Doucet, who was in charge of some of the stuff, and he said, "Marcelle, it's no problem. Just remember this. It's all about me. There've been photographed since they in the womb. So it's all about me. If it's not on the Internet, it's not true. And the third thing is, they don't have a good work ethic, so you have to spell it out and say, 'You're in charge of washing all of these dishes. Do you understand?'"

"Yeah."

Now, I had one the other day who said, "I didn't come here to wash dishes."

"You didn't? Oh, well." So we had to have a talk.

It's interesting, because the first couple of years, most of the students come from this area, but now we're getting kids from Australia, Canada, North Carolina, and it's really fun seeing them experience this cuisine first-hand. So it's really kind of nice to hear what they have to say. One girl said, "I don't know how y'all eat this. It's horrible."

But it's a great learning thing for any of these students, and they get a four-year degree, so they have a good college experience. We have some kids that they can't get enough. I had one little kid, we have to throw him out the building at night. I mean, he'd sleep here if he could, because he's so hungry to know everything. In fact, I got a call the other night. The guy that comes in, the security, he says, "Miss Marcelle, Matthew's still

in the building, but he's locked himself inside, and I don't think he realized that somebody locked the door in the back and you can't get out."

I said, "Okay."

He said, "Well, I'm going to go get the key and go see about him."

[1:38:49.2]

I said, "Okay."

I said, "Matthew, don't do that, honey. You can't just stay here all the time."

He said, "Well, I wanted to stay and see what the baking thing did."

I went, "Okay." But then he fell asleep in one of the classrooms.

So it's fun. I had a good time. I still hear from some of the ones that graduated years ago. I had one lady call me the other day. She said, "You know, Madison just adores you. He's getting married."

I said, "I know. He called me and came, introduced his girlfriend."

She said, "Well, your name is the first one on the list."

I said, "Well, good. I'll be there."

So it's fun. They become like little second children. I never had children, so it's fun to be around those kids.

[1:39:33.6]

Annemarie Nichols: That's great. Thank you very much.

[1:39:36.7]

Marcelle Bienvenu: Thank *you* very much. This is fun. It's a lot better than doing that.

[Laughter]

[End of interview]