

HIEU PHAM

Crawfish Shack Seafood - Atlanta, GA

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Date: May 31, 2010

Location: Home of Hieu Pham - Atlanta, Georgia

Interviewer: Kate Medley

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: 1 hour, 12 minutes

Project: Buford Highway - Georgia

[Begin Hieu Pham Interview]

00:00:00

Kate Medley: This is Kate Medley interviewing Hieu Pham in his apartment in Atlanta, Georgia, on May 31, 2010. So I'll get you to start by introducing yourself, telling us who you are and where you're from and what you do and that sort of thing.

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Hieu Pham: Well my name is Hieu Pham. I'm from Atlanta. I was born at Grady Memorial Hospital, so I'm a true Peach boy, I guess a Southern guy. I'm the sole owner of Crawfish Shack Seafood, which is right off of Buford Highway in the Atlanta Metro area.

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KM: And tell us about your restaurant.

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HP: It is a Cajun influenced restaurant, a lot of just deep-frying fish, shrimp, a lot of Low Country boils. I also do Po-boys there but it's not a typical Cajun restaurant because there is— my background nationality-wise is I'm half Vietnamese, one-fourth Chinese, one-fourth Cambodian, so there's a lot of ethnic influence behind the ingredients of the food, which gives a different taste, a little bit more handsome flavoring and aroma.

00:01:32

KM: And tell us about your parents.

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HP: My parents are from Vietnam. My dad is half-Chinese, half-Vietnamese; my mom is half-Cambodian and half-Vietnamese. They both are refugees from Vietnam during the Vietnam War. They came here in 1980—is when they came over here to the United States to Atlanta, Georgia is where they were sponsored by a Vietnamese Baptist Church, which makes me actually Baptist now because I grew up in a Baptist Church.

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It's a funny story, just real quick that for America, Friday the 13th is of course the most unlucky number and unluckiest day. You know the hotels don't even have a thirteenth floor but for my dad it's actually the most luckiest day. And I don't remember exactly what camp he was in, but he was at a refugee camp in some part of Southeast Asia at an American camp where you know the Marines were there. But for some reason when it happened to land on Friday the 13th you know every day they choose how many refugees get to actually go to the United States, just to be on the safe side everybody at the camp that was there on Friday the 13th was granted citizenship to be as a refugee in the United States. So for my dad it was a lucky day.

00:03:05

KM: Did your father know your mother at that point?

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HP: No. I believe from the story I remember them telling me they actually met on the boat on their way over here. And so they actually got married in a Baptist Church in Georgia at Ponce De Leon First Baptist Church, which is towards Buckhead.

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KM: What do you know about where your father grew up?

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HP: My dad grew up in Soctrang, the very southern tip of Vietnam. My dad grew up, he pretty much raised his family. I guess my grandma, we would call, my dad's mom, and brothers and sisters, my dad education-wise was only up to like the eighth or tenth grade. He was forced to work just to make a living, just to have rice on the table. From what my dad told me, many days no food sometimes and then my dad was also part of the Vietnam War. You know, he did have to go fight a little bit before trying to escape.

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He told me a little story about his escaping--was they took small fishing boat with about 20--30 people on a small fishing tugboat which was only meant for five to ten people. In the middle of the ocean the boat died, ran out of gas, lost power, and then during—I guess in the middle of kind of like monsoon season, so a lot of hurricane storm. My dad said he did not sleep for two - three days because nobody else—him and another person would just maneuver the boat from having it flip over during the storm. But they did get captured by, I believe it was the Cambodians that was against the Vietnamese War and they were fighting against them. But he did get captured and that's how much I know about the story.

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KM: And from there he ended up in the refugee camp?

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HP: Uh-hm.

00:05:17

KM: And how long did he spend there, do you know?

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HP: I do not know.

00:05:22

KM: And what do you know about where your mother grew up?

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HP: My mom grew up and was raised in Cambodia. But the borderline where Vietnam and Cambodia met, so I don't know exactly what part of the southern part of the Vietnamese country but my mom told me just from what the stories I've asked that she worked most her whole entire life and did not have a lot of food. There were many days from my mom's family's side that they didn't got a lot of food. My mom had a total of two sisters and three brothers from—my mom, so she traveled a lot between countries a lot just vendor(ing) some cigarette boxes, rice, just anything just to make a buck or two.

00:06:20

KM: Do you know how she came to be on the boat?

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HP: I do not know about that story how she got actually on the boat.

00:06:28

KM: But they're both from the area of Southern Vietnam?

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HP: Uh-hm.

00:06:35

KM: Do you know much of your family there or do you—?

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HP: I have only visited once. On my mom's side, everybody is actually over here in the United States. There is really nobody left. Probably a couple cousins over there but they're lost touch due to War so you know there is no relationship on my mom's side.

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My dad's side, there's a few brothers and sisters over here but the majority of my dad's family actually still lives in Vietnam, the Southern part of Soctrang, south of Saigon.

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KM: And when did you visit there?

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HP: I visited there when I was 16, which, right now I'm 27 so it makes it 11 years since the last time I visited Vietnam.

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KM: And what was that like?

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HP: It was actually really fun. The food is wonderful. The people definitely know that you're from America. **[Laughs]** I love the nightlife because food there, I guess it's kind of like New York. It never really sleeps; there's always somebody up and about cooking food, selling food, and just people out on the mopeds driving around the city just to entertain themselves with different events and just eating and hanging out with friends, like I guess drinking coffee and just eating different Vietnamese desserts. But I did get really sick over there, so that makes it unforgettable. **[Laughs]**

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KM: That really colored it, huh?

00:08:08

HP: Oh yeah. **[Laughs]**

00:08:13

KM: Do you know much about when and how your parents met?

00:08:17

HP: Uh--

00:08:19

KM: What's their love story?

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HP: Don't really know too much. I never really asked because among Vietnamese parents, they don't—at least what I see on television or what I know with my Caucasian friends, parents are not that really open to tell the stories about love life and this unless you really, really dig. It's just something in my culture you don't ask too much. *[Laughs]*

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KM: So they came to the United States and they came to Atlanta?

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HP: Yeah, they live right off of Buford Highway is where the first apartment. It was called the Shallowford Apartments, which is still there. It's right off the Shallowford Road and the name of the apartment is Shallowford Apartments, which is across from another apartment called Wood Gate, which, for the longest time was the biggest Vietnamese refugee apartments where—if they came to Atlanta that was the place they always stayed first before moving onto other relatives or finding homes on their own.

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KM: And why Atlanta?

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HP: Why my parents chose here? I believe it's just because they got sponsored by the Vietnamese Church here is why they got to go over here. You know I know a lot of Vietnamese were sponsored in Houston, in the Texas area—Houston, Dallas, or of course California, the southern part of California there's a lot of Vietnamese.

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KM: So did you grow up in that area right off of Buford Highway?

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HP: Right off of Buford Highway, I grew up there to the age of four and then for a good majority of my life from five to seventeen I was off of Pleasant Hill in Lawrenceville. And then the last couple years of high school I grew up in Suwanee, which is right by Buford Dam.

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KM: So tell us when you were born and give us the basic information about your family, siblings –.

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HP: I was born April 17, 1983, which makes me today 27. I have two younger sisters. The middle one is named Linda; she is 23, which I have a nephew to my sister Linda, which is

Jayden Memphis Lim. He's five now. I have a younger sister; she is 22. And my parents are, oh boy, between 50 and 55. I don't know exactly. You know, parents don't like tell how old they are now. *[Laughs]*

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KM: So when they came to Atlanta they were in their late 20s would you say?

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HP: Yes, they were mid-20s. I think when they had me my dad was about 25 or 27 is when he had me. My dad is a little bit younger than my mom, by a year or two.

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KM: So growing up in Atlanta, tell us about your food experiences over the years.

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HP: Well growing up in Atlanta, of course at a Vietnamese home, my mom due to her traveling—she actually picked up a lot of learning how to cook the Malaysian way, Thai food, and of course Vietnamese, which is my mom's culture, and also Cambodian because my mom is half-Cambodian. Growing up I ate a lot of home-cooked food, Southern Asian food, new Vietnamese, Cambodian area, Thailand.

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KM: Like what?

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HP: Homemade pho, the Vietnamese noodle, homemade rice, fried rice. I always loved home fried rice compared to any restaurant.

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KM: The way your mom makes it?

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HP: Yeah, and gosh banh khot, which is kind of like a Vietnamese pancake style but it's little round balls with shrimp, coconut milk in it, and green onions. It's cooked over a shaped skillet. Oh and one of my favorite dishes is bun rieu, which is the Vietnamese noodle for crabmeat. It's a seafood noodle dish. That's one of my favorite ones I always request to eat all the time.

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KM: Would your mother do all the cooking?

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HP: My mom would do all the cooking. I'd watch every so often or help out with the cooking. Actually, my real good skill growing up-wise was grilling. Always when it came to grill the chicken, the marinated Vietnamese-style chicken wings or pork or steak type of meat, I would be the one that would stand in the grill for an hour or two, and of course smelled like smoke.

[Laughs]

00:13:47

KM: Do you know who taught your mother to cook?

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HP: My mom self-taught herself by just looking at other people. I do not believe my grandmother really taught her because I really believe my mom—from what my mom told me, she just watches other people, plays with food, and then just finds out the ingredients or if what she learned was satisfying then she would be happy. But if she was unsatisfied she would always add more ingredients or mix further ingredients just to enhance the flavor of what she found that was great for her taste.

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KM: So more than straight-up Vietnamese food, she was cooking more a hybrid of Cambodian—

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HP: Cambodian and Thai food kind of mixed sometimes, uh-hm.

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KM: What would be the Cambodian influence?

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HP: Well like for Cambodian, to be honest I never even know anything to describe how to say the names at all.

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KM: Yeah.

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HP: Because—

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KM: How did her food differ from a traditional Vietnamese dish?

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HP: Because my mom is from the southern part and all, Vietnam there's actually a difference in the northern and the middle. They really all cook differently in what they add in ingredients. My mom was not really always about spice so much because really you think kind of southern like Thailand, they're a little bit about spice, but really they're about flavor, a lot of flavor. Like Thai would be a lot of coconut milk stuff, something sweet with a little garnish and ingredients here and there. And so really just she always added a lot more ingredients than necessary for a typical Vietnamese dish.

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KM: And tell us about that apartment complex where you first lived. You were surrounded by other Vietnamese?

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HP: Yes, surrounded by other Vietnamese but really felt lonely. I felt like the only kid around that was Asian, because it's still really the early '80s. There wasn't that many [Asians], at least in

the Atlanta area. It was just slowly trickling at that time when I was still there at the Shallowford Apartments. My best friends were my sisters. I remember not having other friends outside-wise. I remember in preschool I got beat up [*Laughs*] protecting my sister because some kids were about to—I don't remember this, but my mom tells me what had happened at the preschool where I would cover my sister and took the beating for her. [*Laughs*] So I was very protective of my sisters when I was young. I don't know about these days. [*Laughs*] But growing up, once I started school, I remember well at the Shallowford Apartments, I remember there was a pool there. There's not a pool there anymore, always riding bikes. I remember definitely toys that I cannot seem to find anymore and I really wish to find them because there was a homemade bike somewhere that had a seat that you could kind of carry somebody behind you. It's like one of those carriages in an Asian movie where somebody is holding a stick and just somebody sitting in the back carriage type of thing—bike. It's so many fond memories of when I was growing up.

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A lot of birthdays there and my parents—seeing them and knowing them— they worked very hard. Before I was born, my dad had worked three jobs. My dad used to be actually a very heavy smoker when I was little. But due to working three jobs he actually ended up in the hospital because of smoking and just sleeping an hour or two a day. He would do that for the longest time just to help support, to make sure the family had money, had food, and the rent, and to have a home, a place to sleep.

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And due to the hospital, which is unfortunate, but also a blessing came out of it that he was forced to not smoke anymore. So my dad's life is extended. My dad has a saying – one day a customer asked him, so how many days do you work? My dad said eight. The customer—you

think about it, there's not eight days. There's seven. My dad says, well if there's eight days I work eight days a week. **[Laughs]**

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KM: Hard work, huh?

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HP: Yeah; he—

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KM: So he was working three jobs all at once when he first got to Atlanta?

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HP: Yeah. He worked at the Hilton. Right off of Buford [Highway] there's a Hilton down there. He actually worked there.

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KM: What did he do?

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HP: A cleaner. The hotel cleaner person.

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KM: Housekeeper?

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HP: Housekeeping. He worked at some restaurant and did dishwashing, did anything that he could just to earn a buck or two.

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KM: What had he previously done in Vietnam?

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HP: His main skill I guess in Vietnam was working on cars, mechanic-wise, which he did eventually find himself in school to earn his Mechanic Certificate. So my dad in the early '80s also ended up opening his own mechanic shop and to this day still owns a mechanic shop and works as a mechanic.

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KM: Growing up, were you in public schools in Atlanta?

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HP: Yes, when I moved at the age of five, I moved to Lawrenceville right off of Pleasant Hill. I went to Kanoheda which – many, many fond memories. I was maybe one of two Asians that lived there but from my memories, the teachers and all the staff there were wonderful, very, very kind and very humble, very wonderful teachers. And to this day I will never forget. And from there, I actually got transferred to a new school, Kanoheda which is not another elementary because the city was growing really fast.

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KM: How do you spell that?

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HP: Kanoleda, well I do not remember [*Laughs*]; that's off of Cruise Road. That's all I remember. That school is right off of Cruise, off of Pleasant Hill. From there I went to Sweetwater Middle School, which isn't so sweet because right behind the school is the sewer treatment plant, so you're among kids who had another name.

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KM: What was that?

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HP: The Shit Water [*Laughs*] Middle School and every day that's what you'd smell in the morning. [*Laughs*] It was nothing sweet about that school. But from the middle school, I went to Berkmar High School for ninth and tenth grade, which was wonderful.

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Academically-wise I didn't do too well. But I had a lot of fun there. [*Laughs*]

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KM: What were you doing?

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HP: Just clowning around a lot but I was very into art. That's one of the few things that I found myself intrigued. The only subject in school I would actually focus. I would spend many hours

after school just working on an art project or just to hang out with other art students and with the teacher. But before the high school I was actually in middle school. I did band, and then in high school sport-wise, I did tennis, and of course the biggest thing was art. Back again, I didn't do well academically but the school—my fond memories was just the people and how diverse Berkmar, a very cultural school. I would say the [United Nations] was there. Any culture from Europe, from Asia, from America, from Africa were all melded into that school.

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My biggest memory is that was the last two years that Berkmar won two State championships in a row, so it was really wonderful and definitely something to remember. But from then on I actually moved to North Gwinnett High School which is in Suwanee my senior year is where I graduated. Totally different school, different environment. It was definitely more of a Caucasian school. There was only two Asians besides me that actually graduated for their senior year, so it was less play, more academic, so I actually ended up getting straight As those last two years because there's nothing else to be distracting but to take care of your academic—.

[Laughs]

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KM: You were one of three Asians?

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HP: Two.

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KM: Two. In a huge school?

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HP: Yeah. And the other Asian actually went to my church. You know we were actually church members and it just happened that I went to her school because she had been going there that we're the only two Asian seniors that graduated.

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KM: What was your church?

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HP: The church I go to is Faith and Grace Baptist Church. It's a Vietnamese Baptist Church and they have been around since the early '80s.

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KM: And is that the church that your parents went to when you were a child?

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HP: Yes. Well the original church was off of Ponce De Leon but now the church is actually located in Stone Mountain off of Ponce De Leon, kind of funny. We went to Ponce De Leon Church in Buckhead but we were right off the head of Ponce De Leon now in Stone Mountain. The same Minister is still ministering, the one that married my parents, so he's been there for 20-plus years. Well at least 30, coming close to 30 years.

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KM: Is he Vietnamese?

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HP: Yes, he's a Vietnamese Baptist Minister.

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KM: And the whole congregation is—?

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HP: Is Vietnamese. Well we do actually have a couple Caucasian that are married to the Vietnamese- wives or husbands that go to the church, too.

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KM: So what was the role of that church in your childhood?

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HP: Growing up, definitely brought a sense of feeling of the emptiness because growing up at home I did not learn a lot of English. Actually I was forced to go to Readiness. I didn't get to go to first grade after kindergarten because my parents didn't know any better, but I only spoke Vietnamese in kindergarten. I got in trouble a lot. *[Laughs]*

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KM: You couldn't speak English?

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HP: Yes, or at least not anything proper at all. So I couldn't make any friends because if you can't speak English you can't quite make friends that easily. But at church, among other Vietnamese, it helped to at least feel not so empty and knowing that you have friends. But the church really later in my life growing up really helped influence to have a commitment in faith and to find a role definitely knowing the difference from right and wrong besides my parents teaching.

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I grew up being – I was never influenced by a crowd. I guess I would call myself more the loner type. But I was always happy to make friends though. I never felt to be alone completely but just didn't want other people to influence. I always made my own decisions. The church really helped to show me the role of being a leader because I was actually a Youth Leader for a couple of years, to not give up in life. Just the role of what was taught at church with life that when life gets tough always keep on going and fighting for life. Don't put yourself down. Achieve a goal, set a goal, and just go for it, and reach it and just set another goal in life to make yourself a better person.

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KM: So as a kid were most of your social activities through the church?

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HP: A good bit. There was actually a big part in early elementary and fifth grade and sixth grade. I was actually in Boy Scouts. I believe back then they were recruiting at the school, which was allowed back then. I don't know about today. But I asked my parents to join Boy Scouts and then I did and it really actually helped a lot. I really truly believe as a guy that every guy needs to

really find himself in the woods. They need to be wild because I really truly believe – it's a book I read by John Eldridge; it's called *Wild at Heart*. Adam and Eve—Eve was in a garden, which is beautiful, which is peaceful, kind, you know gentle, but Adam was made outside of the garden in the desert, the dirt, the wilderness, wild. And every guy— I really truly believe a guy can't find himself to be a man or to find peace in his heart until he really experiences some type of wilderness, some wildness in his life. I'm not saying go crazy and drinking but just to go on an adventure, climb Mount Everest you know. Yes, you're risking your life but this overwhelming satisfaction that you achieve something that seems nearly impossible.

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KM: And so what was that for you or has that—?

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HP: It really made a strong person, just the Boy Scouts and just growing up loving the outdoors really made me a strong guy because every day I look around and I see a lot of guys always taking the easy road, quick-fix, quick money, where it taught me to work hard. Like currently I put myself 50 to 70 hours or more sometimes a week to work just to make sure that I am successful – that I can call myself that. My name, Hieu, I can be proud of it and not be ashamed telling other people who I am.

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I can rely on myself and not on others. You know, I can make a fire out of sticks. I can change cars parts. I know how to cook for myself.

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KM: When did you first become interested in cooking?

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HP: It's kind of funny. I was actually in school for interior designing. So like I said, I always loved art, but due to the economics and everything, my parents asked me about the Cajun cooking – to open a restaurant. And I decided sure. I know this other career probably won't go anywhere due just to the changing of how the United States is becoming.

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The cooking influence came from my mom and just enjoying different cooking from seeing other friends - always liked the *Food Network* channel, the dishes, or buying cookbooks just for fun. Instead of buying comic books and stuff I would buy cookbooks just for the fun because, you know, to me cooking is art too. It's just another form of art and you can make anything look beautiful or tasteful as another form of calling it art to wow a person.

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So when I opened the restaurant, I did my studies, you know, knowing what types of foods were already being cooked in the Atlanta area and what my friends had taught me in New Orleans - the original boil - that I could find something even better and really bring something to Atlanta that they don't have because when I go to the beach I always love seafood. I always loved going to the shack-types of foods and just found myself indulged in snow crab legs and boils. Or when I go into New Orleans eating all the crawfish and Café du Monde and beignets, and so you know it's just a lot of friends, family has definitely influenced and just from my background I wanted to bring something better than what people are selling at the moment.

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KM: Tell us about the Louisiana connection.

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HP: I met my friends at a church camp almost 15 years ago. It was a Vietnamese Baptist Church Convention, which is held every summer, the first week of July, and I met them at a church camp and we became friends. And from that day on we actually became friends for the rest of my life. They're like my brothers and sisters. They would come up here a lot and I would come down there a lot between summer visits, between the church camps. If we were not to meet at church camps they would bring sacks of crawfish up to Atlanta or whenever I came down to New Orleans they would always have a big seafood feast, grilled oysters on the half shell, of course the crawfish boil is spread out on a big huge picnic table. They taught me how to cook the crawfish.

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KM: Was the camp in New Orleans?

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HP: Yes, the original one that I met—the Vietnamese Baptist camp actually moves around to different States.

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KM: So tell us about that first summer. How old were you and—?

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HP: I was only 14 when I first met them. Definitely felt like the new kid, not my State, you know. That's the first Vietnamese camp I ever went to, so I was very shy. I grew up to be a very shy guy until now [*Laughs*]. But my friends, the experience when I first met them, they were very—I guess it's like New Orleans—when you go into New Orleans, everybody seems to be very friendly, very talkative, so when I first met my friends—opened arms and started talking as if they knew you for the last couple of camps. So it was a hit and to this day I call them my brothers and sisters now. They're like my blood.

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KM: And that's where you met your fiancé is that right?

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HP: No, I actually met her at a couple different other camps. The camp moves every summer and is in a different State.

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KM: And what are these camps? What were they like?

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HP: Fifty States of Vietnamese collide in one State alone. Camps were fun for the guys. Always a lot of ladies to meet and to greet, a lot of activities. They always have games, missionary activities to do to go outside and just to spread the word of God among strangers, a great way to meet friends from out of state because—or else we're especially in an age where internet wasn't around yet, so it was a great opportunity just to write letters to each other or a phone call long

distance to people from New Orleans or California or all the way up in New York. If it wasn't for the camps I wouldn't have friends from all over the world because even people from Europe would come sometimes to stay at the camp and I mean it's a great opportunity to meet different—I wouldn't say cultural wise but different regions of the States or countries sometimes.

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KM: And so it just happens that your close-knit crew was from New Orleans?

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HP: Yes.

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KM: And that started you going back and forth from Atlanta?

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HP: Correct.

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KM: And how often would you go down there?

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HP: I would go about two or three times a year during the summer or sometimes in the middle like winter break or often they would come up here, you know, vice-versa. My family treats my friends as if they're brothers—you know, their own sons and daughters now. Really a lot of my

friends have their own family now, too, so now we're all growing up and still just happy to know that this is a lifetime friendship.

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KM: And at what point did you start picking up on New Orleans food culture?

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HP: Always enjoyed their food because you know in the Atlanta area especially back then there was no crawfish at all, anywhere. Nobody knew what crawfish was. So it was always a thrill when my friends would come up here to bring crawfish and to introduce to other friends or other family members a Low County boil such as that to the Atlanta Metro area. So it was always exciting.

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KM: Did you ever formally study cooking?

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HP: No. I did not go to any culinary school —just mainly influenced by friends and my mom.

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KM: So you went to college here in Atlanta?

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HP: Yes.

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KM: And take us from there to opening your restaurant.

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HP: Well it was really sad to know that I had really let go Interior Designing because truthfully it was my dream. But in life, like I said and all, life is unexpected sometimes and sometimes you have to take a different path even though it's not what you wanted. But sometimes in life it's what you were meant to do.

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From leaving school and preparing the restaurant was a lot of work. It was a lot of work mentally, too. We changed the mindset from going from designing something to cooking something wonderful for somebody. It was quite draining actually the first six months because I had worked at other restaurants before like P.F. Chang and a couple other small restaurants. So I just knew the basic of opening a restaurant. I didn't go to school for Business so I didn't quite have the idea of how to quite run a business, but luckily I was a Manager at Nordstrom for two years, so I did have the management skill on the side, so I was blessed to still have that to help start the restaurant. It was definitely learning experience and to this day it's still a learning experience – how to manage and operate the restaurant to the best of my ability.

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But fortunately, my fiancé, Jennifer, has a knack for marketing. If it wasn't for her, nobody else would have been here. I come up with the food and the ingredients to find what will work, make up the meals and the pricing set, where Jennifer was the one that would market by— encourage me to make the food wonderful, to make sure that people would have a great

experience and we always want them to come back, and to make sure that people knew that this was the place to eat.

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She would find ways on the internet just to put my name out and just write letters to people to say you know please come out and try our food and then you know from there, my biggest marketing is just word of mouth. People just tell each other how wonderful the food is.

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KM: But you said it was your parents who first planted the seed of opening a restaurant?

00:40:27

HP: Yes, because my dad didn't want to see any of his children to grow up not having anything. His biggest concern is, when I die I want to make sure that you guys have money, have a place to live, and maybe to raise your own family. So he wanted to start a business because he opened his own business and just to make sure that you're able to really earn a living.

00:40:55

KM: And when did you open your restaurant?

00:40:58

HP: The first week of August in 2008. So this coming August will be two years.

00:41:06

KM: And who designed the menu?

00:41:09

HP: Me and my fiancé.

00:41:13

KM: And how did you decide to go in the direction that you've gone?

00:41:16

HP: Just by looking at other restaurants, just to get ideas. Other seafood restaurants or just any other type of restaurants—steaks, just to see an idea of how the menu is laid out or the price point and what I felt was reasonable for good food. Because I always try to think about Florida, going to Florida or New Orleans, like food is tasteful, wonderful, but never really overly expensive. And then I kind of twisted other people's idea, but the influence of let's make food to order, literally let's pick a meal but you actually get to see the food picked out of the cold case, so people can feel good like, wow, my food is just now getting made. It's going to be fresh. You know this is—especially as you get—compare going to the coast.

00:42:12

KM: Tell people that have never visited your restaurant what your menu is like. What's on it?

00:42:17

HP: I always say when people ask, when they first come in, well the boil is a Low Country boil. It's a lot of aroma, a lot of flavoring, a lot of spices behind it. If you want yours steamed it's seasoned on top with just some spicy seasoning salt and our fish only comes fried, but the way

we batter it is a light type batter. We don't cake our batter on, so you won't taste the grease. That's why people love our food because it's made to order and it's not greasy. You're not feeling like you're eating yourself to death.

00:42:57

KM: So, Po-boys and what else?

00:43:01

HP: Fried fish like fish and chips, huge platters. You know, a platter for one can feed almost two, or just people do it by weight and they just order pounds and pounds of crawfish or you know a huge amount of shrimp and just go at it, peel and eat.

00:43:25

KM: How is your food different than the seafood you might get in New Orleans?

00:43:34

HP: Due to the influence, I mix my Low Country boil between Houston and New Orleans. There's a lot of ingredients that helps to bring a balance of everything. Sometimes in New Orleans, some places you get a lot of flavoring or sometimes a lot of places has a lot of heat. I'm always about balancing everything. I always want a customer—as if I was eating it – to enjoy the food, not to feel you can't taste anything anymore.

00:44:13

I want the customers to remember the food. The heat, the aroma, the flavoring is to bring a smile; the heat is to remember. You know when you think about the food it makes your mouth

water you know. You think about the place – all the sudden you have a craving for the food, just a simple thought because it's just that food, the taste, the smell has embedded into your brain.

00:44:46

The frying part, I was really particular about this. I wanted to make sure I buy the right type of oil. The way I batter my food because the biggest thing I always got disappointed by other places was it was always caked on. You couldn't taste the fish. You couldn't taste the shrimp. I always can tell the shrimp wasn't fresh sometimes or the fish also. I wanted to let customers know that it was picked out of the case so it would be really, really fresh and made to order. I wanted the food not to be greasy because eating grease is unsettling for the stomach and then it doesn't bring a memory back to your person you know. It's not an experience to make you crave next time. I want an experience where people are like oh, I really am dying for this food. I mean there's been customers that have told me when they travel you know they live in Atlanta, but when they travel and when they come back home it's like you have to be the first place I come back home.

00:46:00

I had a customer that, he's a vendor. He goes to China a lot and he goes there sometimes for a month or two but he always tells me when he goes to China, he always thinks about my food every day. And one of his first stops when he comes home before even going home from the airport is to make a stop at the restaurant to eat.

00:46:19

KM: Wow.

00:46:21

HP: [*Laughs*]

00:46:22

KM: What would you say is your mother's influence on the food you serve at your restaurant?

00:46:30

HP: My mom's influence is definitely about flavoring. She loves to try different flavoring and different spice levels to enhance the taste. The technique of cutting the food or cooking the food, to make sure that the food comes out delicious, too. My mom at home always spent hours cooking and when we came up with the ingredients and the instruction of how to cook our food it took us months, nearly half a year. We would cook almost every day to try different ingredients.

00:47:08

KM: You and your mother?

00:47:08

HP: Uh-hmm. Me and my mom, and my dad also actually helped us, but to find different ingredients, what will work best, what certain ingredients would give a certain different taste, what would fit the general public. You know we don't want to hit just one audience, we want to hit almost everybody.

00:47:28

KM: And so what would you call out as being an Asian influence or Vietnamese influence or Cambodian? Are there particular flavors or spices or—?

00:47:43

HP: Well when we think about Asian food you go to an Asian restaurant, everything always seem to be well-balanced. It's flavorful. It's never too hot, it's never too salty. The influence was to make sure that the food wasn't overbearing with heat or just pure flavor with no type of spice behind it. We wanted to make sure that the food was well balanced and to cook correctly.

00:48:25

KM: [*Laughs*] Go on.

00:48:33

HP: I can't think of anything right now. [*Laughs*]

00:48:36

KM: And then also I wanted to ask you about your ingredients. Where is your fish coming from, your seafood, your bread, your—?

00:48:47

HP: Okay, the fish(es) are farm-raised, Mississippi, Alabama, Gulf. Our first is actually from the Gulf of Mexico and shrimp I actually get it from the Gulf of Mexico because the warmer the water the more flavor the white shrimp is going to have. There's a big difference in Houston and Louisiana Gulf and of course the Atlanta Gulf and it's just about water, where the water and the chemical mixture between that area of that country.

00:49:18

KM: And so how did you decide where you wanted your shrimp from?

00:49:21

HP: Taste. I bought a lot of different shrimps or fish from different regions, different companies, different brands to finally found ones that were satisfying that was at a good price point and that was also full of flavor that just made the difference in between another shrimp. You know, there's a difference in taste in tiger shrimp and white shrimp alone and just wanted to make sure that the customers were always going to be happy. They're going to have an experience here.

00:49:54

KM: Uh-hmm, and so what are some of your ingredients?

00:49:57

HP: For the longest time we had oysters from Louisiana, which is wonderful, but unfortunately due to the oil spill we're not able to get them at the moment. But we were going through about 600 pounds of oysters at the Crawfish Shack. The big difference between the oysters and, why I compare it to other restaurants, even if there was food point oysters from New York, which is wonderful, too or Apalachicola is whereas the way that we took care of our oysters. We'd always make sure that they're really chilled correctly at the right temperature, kept in the fridge. We would wash oysters really well and even when we shuck them we always took care of them to make sure we washed all the mud off or any grains of the shell bits after shucking isn't in there, because nobody wants to eat oysters that have a taste of mud or little bits of shell in their mouth.

It makes the food in an instant not enjoyable and we want to make sure every oyster—every customer eats really—or when they came back that’s one of the thoughts that they were craving for.

00:51:10

KM: And tell us again about why you can't get those oysters.

00:51:14

HP: Due to the oil spill, the recent oil spill of the BP, the explosion that all the beds in New Orleans are closed now because the oysters are filter animals, crustaceans, and so, you know, it’s going to be unsafe, un-sanitizing for any consumer to eat oysters from the Louisiana area.

00:51:38

KM: How else do you foresee the oil spill will affect your business?

00:51:45

HP: It’s going to be affected by the pricing due to supply and demand because a lot of shrimps are either dying or just swimming too far away for fishermen to catch them. The same thing with fish that the price is going to have to go up and that’s going to probably hurt my business a little bit because for the longest time— people loved the food because it was wonderful food for a really good price.

00:52:15

KM: Will you have to change your sourcing?

00:52:18

HP: Right now I refuse actually to get any oysters. It's just too expensive and I heard there's a restaurant, I believe it's Acme, the famous Acme Oyster Restaurant in New Orleans that they refused to get anybody else's oysters but New Orleans because that's what they're famous for. So, good luck to that restaurant. But for me, due to the pricing and just the quality and the taste of the oysters I will no longer be serving at the restaurant until you know—I even tell customers maybe it will be a year or two until I'll start serving [oysters] again. And until then I won't have any raw oysters or fried, deep-fried oysters or oyster Po-boys. And what made my oyster Po-boy famous was that it was freshly chopped. The oyster melted like butter in your mouth.

00:53:20

KM: Mmm. Tell us about where your restaurant is located.

00:53:27

HP: It's located right off of Buford Highway between Dresden and Buford Highway. The reason it's actually located there is because my dad actually owns the shopping center. [Locating my restaurant there] was to help to start off the shopping center because when we opened it was a bad time. I actually almost went out of business the first six months. It was the summer of 2008. Gas was at the highest that it has ever been—\$4.40-some cents. That was the beginning of the realization of job losses, so a lot of consumers were not going out to eat. They were being extremely conservative just to make ends meet, just to pay rent,

and just to put some type of food on the table and not to leisure themselves to go to some fancy restaurants.

00:54:19

So the first six months I was struggling and it was just me, my little sister, Melissa, and my mom working. We worked every day from opening to close and would have been just happy just to make \$50 or \$100 a day. But fortunately to this day that is not the case anymore. *[Laughs]* We are fortunate to be able to have about 20 workers now working at the restaurant. We've just been blessed because of hard work.

00:54:51

I used to advertise by going door-to-door to mailboxes, stick in the menus, walking for miles a day, having just my mom and my sister work at the restaurant. And I left, I would go in people's neighborhood and sticking up menus and just hoping one out of 100 would come, and hopefully from there on they would tell other people.

00:55:12

KM: Do your mom and your sister still work there?

00:55:14

HP: Yes; my mom and sister still work there. Fortunately my mom started working there when she got laid off at her other job that she had worked for 20-plus years at Ciba Vision, which makes contacts. So it's a blessing at the same time, but a lot of hard work.

00:55:36

KM: Does she cook?

00:55:37

HP: She's actually considered to be the Head Cook. She is the mom in the kitchen. Everybody that works at the kitchen at the restaurant calls her mom. When she's not there, there's other cooks, but of course I'm the head guy that needs to be in charge.

00:55:54

KM: Tell people who may have never been to Atlanta what Buford Highway is like.

00:56:04

HP: Buford Highway is international food. You can find from Korean-influenced food to Cajun food, a lot of Vietnamese, a lot of Malaysian, Indonesian. It's the [United Nations] of all ethnic food. If you want to just pick one location just decide what food—Buford Highway would be the place your choice of food. There's Cuban restaurants, there's truthfully probably not one restaurant you couldn't think of that would not be off of Buford Highway. There's a vegan-influenced restaurant that's all tofu based. Buford Highway is just the international of Atlanta.

00:56:56

KM: When you were growing up there in the '80s what was it like?

00:57:00

HP: Growing up in the '80s was hard. My family worked a lot. My dad was never really home a lot because he would work long hours fixing cars and making sure we just have bread and water

on the table. My mom worked a lot, too. I took care of myself and my sisters, so I had to grow up really fast. Now maybe I had been a little kid but my mindset was already a teenager taking care, making food, cleaning up for yourself.

00:57:48

KM: What was Buford Highway like during that time? Or how is it different now?

00:57:58

HP: Definitely a lot more international than before. Buford Highway used to be dominated by, I guess, the Vietnamese community at the apartments. **Buford Highway was a lot more woods back then. It was not that many shops. Buford Highway back in the day was the big city from what I was told. But now, of course, Atlanta is growing big and other cities have grown bigger but Buford Highway is definitely a lot more influenced in different ethnic groups. It used to be more of just Caucasian and African Americans living there, but now it's everybody. You can find just about every single country and every single culture on Buford Highway.**

00:58:52

KM: And what's your clientele like?

00:58:55

HP: When people ask me what type of customers come here, I seriously always say it's the [United Nations]. I get all sorts of culture, Indian people, you know from India. They love the food because of all the spice and aroma from the boil. Americans, Asians, Koreans love

the food, Chinese. I get all sorts of business people too. I have built the restaurant to where it was—you know it's called the Crawfish Shack but then at the same time it doesn't look like a shack. But then at the same time it's not fancy. It's more casual, hand-made picnic tables are built there by me and my dad. The reason the picnic tables were built inside of the restaurant was to have a friendly atmosphere where—because anywhere you go when you eat at a picnic table it just seems so fun. It just makes the conversation between co-workers or your friends just a lot more relaxing, more casual, and just kind of wanted to take the stress away for customers, just enjoy your food and just have a good time with your friends or be by yourself. I made sure though it was a very clean place, a lot of art décor is in there. I used my interior designing behind it just to decorate the restaurant, hanged a lot of nets, and whenever I have the opportunity to go to the beach just to find some knickknacks.

01:00:37

KM: And aside from the food prepared to order, what else do you sell there?

01:00:43

HP: We do make Café du Monde there, beignets, we sell the beignet mixes, the coffee itself, the seasoning and also sell the fresh seafood itself as a market. Sometimes you know customers will like to just bring it home themselves and make pastas out of it or shrimp scampi, so you know people enjoy because they see how different of a taste, how fresh it is. It's just the way we kept our seafood is at a better temperature and how fresh it tastes compared to other supermarkets. The customers really enjoy getting their seafood from the Crawfish Shack Seafood.

01:01:25

KM: And isn't there like a sugarcane drink?

01:01:30

HP: Yes, one of the biggest influences that we brought to the restaurant was the Nuoc Mia, or simply, in English, sugarcane drink. It's just a freshly squeezed sugarcane stalk. It's a wonderful drink because it's always great to hear customers—because a lot of customers never had the drink. When customers see or ask about it, the same story always is—I remember growing up chewing on it as a little kid as a snack, you know, so it always brings a smile to a lot of customers just to hear the word sugarcane and just to see it as the whole stick itself.

01:02:12

So I have a machine that compresses the whole stick to juice it out. It's mixed with a slice of orange or sometimes, whenever it's in season, kumquats, to bring a little bit of the citrus taste behind the sugarcane to not to be overly sweet, just to tone it down a little bit. But the only way to describe it is the drink is very refreshingly sweet. It's not over-sweet but it's a type of drink where you feel like this is healthy for me.

01:02:41

KM: What's the origin of it?

01:02:42

HP: Well it's really big in Vietnam but the drink itself actually is drank all over the world. It's really big in South America, the only thing that in South America, the typical thing is

actually chili powder. It's really big in India. They do also orange, a slice of orange, but they add salt, which really makes the drink taste really wonderful, too. Of course the salt helps because it's so hot over there to help the salt content. But then of course in Vietnam, you can find it going down Vietnam, a person that's vending, pushing a cart will make squeezed, freshly squeezed sugarcane drinks.

01:03:25

KM: Did you grow up drinking it?

01:03:29

HP: No. My parents drink(ed) it a lot. I actually didn't start drinking it until the restaurant opening and got influenced and I was like, wow, this drink is really good because growing up I didn't really chew on sugarcane a lot. *[Laughs]* It wasn't a type of food that— it's not a lot of Vietnamese dishes that would have sugarcane as a food ingredient. There's only a few. But yeah, I didn't really start drinking it until the restaurant opened. *[Laughs]*

01:03:58

KM: Why did you decide to include it on the menu?

01:04:03

HP: It was the type of drink that I wanted to bring in the Vietnamese influence and just wanted to draw Vietnamese customers in. And then it was another thing that made the

Shack a little different that customers could enjoy with their spicy seafood besides drinking sweet tea.

01:04:22

KM: Who would you say are your primary food influences?

01:04:28

HP: Like the way of cooking?

01:04:34

KM: Yeah or that you look up to? Who did you learn from?

01:04:37

HP: My mom would be the number one person of how to cook the food and preparing it.

01:04:46

KM: And who else?

01:04:47

HP: And I would say my brother, Bach Dang, that's from New Orleans who I met at the church camp. He's definitely truly my brother in blood, the one that showed me and taught me the original boil on how to time the crawfish correctly, how to purge the crawfish and wash it, and how to season it correctly. But of course, now I show my brother how to season the crawfish. But he's the one – for the crawfish Cajun side, he's definitely the biggest one.

01:05:26

KM: Do you remember your first boil?

01:05:27

HP: Yes, the first boil would have happened in Atlanta when my friends from New Orleans and a group of four to five teenagers driving up from New Orleans for summer break. They were going to bring crawfish up and cooked the food for my family and just hanging out and just showing me how to do it correctly if I was ever to do it myself. And just to see you know 40 or 60 pounds of crawfish crawling everywhere under the deck, you know it was exciting just to see live crawfish to be washed and cooked and crawling everywhere and the next thing you know you're eating them. *[Laughs]*

01:06:09

KM: Had your parents at that point ever had crawfish?

01:06:12

HP: No, they never had crawfish until that first boil also.

01:06:18

KM: But they probably grew up eating a lot of seafood?

01:06:19

HP: Yes, in Vietnam they definitely do a lot of fish and lobsters, but of course in Vietnam anything shellfish-wise, oysters, clams, or lobster is a very luxury food in Vietnam, you know. Fish was kind of common but still it's a pretty luxury thing, too.

01:06:39

KM: So maybe they didn't grow up eating a lot of shellfish.

01:06:42

HP: No, not until they got to the United States.

01:06:47

KM: What's next? What does the future hold?

01:06:51

HP: The future holds to continue to always improve crawfish until there's really nothing left to improve. I always wanted to find something else I can add to the ingredients to make it better because I never liked—any restaurant I always took away because I can always tell a difference from how wonderful and how not so great it tastes.

01:07:13

I always want the customer to think that this place is always consistent or is satisfied or is like, wow, this tastes ever better than before. You know if before it was good but now it's even better. Looking maybe forward to maybe one day opening a second one somewhere in the Atlanta area. Franchising, I get asked about that a lot. It's probably not an idea of what I want because the type of cooking in this restaurant is a very attentive, very family-oriented style, so I

want to always make sure I have full control and because I really want when people think of the Crawfish Shack is that this is definitely a place to eat and a wonderful thought comes through.

01:08:04

KM: And who is over at the restaurant right now while we're doing this interview?

01:08:07

HP: My mom, my two sisters, and a couple other employees.

01:08:12

KM: They have it under control?

01:08:13

HP: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

01:08:16

KM: What else do you want to add that I haven't asked you about?

01:08:20

HP: Hmm, well I know for sure, we spoke(d) a little bit about it that my fiancé, but if it wasn't for her marketing and it wasn't for her motivating influence on me that the restaurant would not have been successful. Her influence really helped to push me to strive to put my whole effort into the restaurant to make sure that it was successful and that to come up with ideas of the menu, how to lay it out correctly, to make it attractive, to make it different. She also helped with the

decoration a little bit. You know it's between me and her helping to find the right type of settings and then I used what I learned from school from interior design to make the atmosphere friendly. I wanted to make it casual but friendly and just a place where you can bring your friends and family and white coats and blue coats to eat.

01:09:36

KM: And she's moving here?

01:09:37

HP: Yes.

01:09:39

KM: You're getting married?

01:09:39

HP: Yes.

01:09:40

KM: Tell us about that.

01:09:42

HP: Getting married in September, sometime in September and the place we have picked is at the Biltmore. We wanted a very couture type of wedding.

01:09:57

KM: The Biltmore in Atlanta?

01:09:58

HP: Yes, the Biltmore in Atlanta. It has a very European ballroom – our wedding [*Laughs*]—I forgot.

01:10:15

KM: Take your time. [*Laughs*]

01:10:19

HP: Me and Jennifer, it's a good thing that we're— actually a funny thing real quick. We're both really anal. It's actually kind of funny that today actually Channel 2 came by to do an interview about the restaurant. And when I came out of my kitchen they're like, wow, you are one of the cleanest restaurants I have ever seen. I'm like, yes, because I'm very anal. I make sure I clean every day really well—mopping, cleaning. I don't want to see anything because—the people—they love the restaurant because I keep it so clean. It doesn't smell like a stinky fish market. It's full of flavor, of aroma in the air, and people, the minute they walk in you start seeing the drool coming out of their mouth, you know or their eyes, or people just start screaming and yelling like yes. I finally found a place that tastes so wonderful and have people scream and holler saying how good the food is. It's like, okay. [*Laughs*] People just cursing this is so, you know, damn good or whatever comes out of people's mouths.

01:11:31

But back to the wedding, me and Jennifer, we're both anal so everything has to be perfect, has to be presentable, has to be—I don't know, as you can see in the apartment I'm very

Feng Shui, very critique, everything has to look beautiful, which really truthfully really influenced the restaurant because I want to make everything great, not just mediocre and just be satisfied. I want everything to be wonderful.

01:12:03

KM: And so will your wedding guests be dining on crawfish?

01:12:06

HP: No, because it's a pretty messy food. But there is going to be influence from the restaurant that's going to be served, you know like certain shrimp dishes, just definitely having seafood as part of the menu.

01:12:28

KM: Is there anything else?

01:12:29

HP: I think that's it. [*Laughs*]

01:12:31

KM: All right, well thank you.

01:12:32

HP: Thank you.

01:12:33

[End Hieu Pham Interview]