
FULL TRANSCRIPT:

SUBJECT: Bobby Oakes, bartender @
Arnaud Restaurant's French 75 Bar
813 Rue Bienville
New Orleans, LA 70112

DATE: March 31, 2005 @ 8:45 p.m.

LOCATION: Rue de la Course coffeehouse on Magazine St.

INTERVIEWER: Amy Evans

LENGTH: Approx. 55 minutes

NOTE: Various sounds occur throughout this interview. Rather than mention them individually and interrupt the flow of the conversation, they are noted here: the coffeehouse is crowded, so many voices can be heard in conversation; classical music plays in the background continuously; various mechanical sounds are heard occasionally as employees make coffee drinks. When the occurring sounds are an obvious interruption to the interview, they are noted in the transcript.

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Amy Evans: It's Thursday, March thirty-first, two thousand and five. This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance, and I'm in New Orleans, Louisiana, on Magazine Street at Rue de la Course coffeehouse with Bobby Oakes from Arnaud's Restaurant. And it's about a quarter to nine o'clock [at night]. And, um, Booby, would you mind introducing yourself to the recorder here and also stating your birthdate, please.

Bobby Oakes: Okay. My name is Bobby Oakes, obviously. Um, my birthday is June 28, 1960. Um, and like, uh, like Amy said, I've been a bartender at Arnaud's for a little over nine years.

AE: All right, well how'd you get started in the bartending business in the first place?

BO: Um—

AE: Let's start there.

BO: My—my wife made me do it.

AE: [Laughs]

BO: I had decided [loud banging noise in background], um, I was in my thirties and decided I wanted to go back to school [banging noise again] and finish—um, talked to some friends about it, and one of them

suggested—because what I wanted to do, ultimately, required a competitive entrance to a program. He suggested I do what he did which was declare amnesty about—against my previous work and start school over. And so I did. So at thirty-three or thirty-four years old, I started school over. And, uh, for the first few semesters I went to school, uh, picking up curriculum—core curriculum like, you know, english and math—and did them at night. But I got to the point where I wanted to go to school [sound of chair being dragged across the floor] during the day. So, um, I left the job I had doing computer support down at a—at a ship building company, and, uh, my wife said, uh, “Why don’t you try to bartend?” And I said, “Well, you know, I really don’t know much about it.” And she said, “Well—” —she was telling me that her sister had bartended her way through college and, you know, it’s—it’s fun, it’s an easy way to make money while you go to school and it’s flexible. So I started going out and giving resumes, which were very thin for bartending—at bars and restaurants all across New Orleans. And I got turned down by *hundreds* of bars. Um [short pause] I applied at Pat O’Brien’s and it—didn’t hear anything back from—for—from them and got a job at a daiquiri shop—a daiquiri shop in a mall in the river walk. Started working there, and I worked there for a couple of weeks when I got a call from Pat O’Brien’s. Now, the—the mall daiquiri shop was not my optimum job. Um, it was daytime, which was going to conflict as soon as school started again, and it was, uh, basically minimum wage. Very few people tipped, and so you—you earned what—whatever you did on the clock. [Short pause] Pat O’Brien’s had called, I went and interviewed and got hired. [Clears throat] And I worked there for about—oh, a little less than a year. Um, the drinking age in Louisiana changed. Uh, we were—had to comply with the laws just like the other states to get federal money. And, uh [short pause] Pat O’Brien’s laid off a cashier, two bartenders and a couple of doormen. No waiters got laid off. [Short pause] But waiters don’t cost Pat O’Brien’s any money, I guess. Uh, [I] saw an ad in the paper for Arnaud’s, um, hiring a bartender. And it was ironic because I had met a bartender from Arnaud’s at my bar at Pat O’Brien’s one night. And, uh, we hit it off, and he was there with a friend. He was a really nice guy. I’ll think of his name before this is over.

AE: [Quiet laugh] **[COUNTER: 03:44]**

BO: Um, but as it turns out, he was leaving. He was getting married and moving away. I ended up, um, replacing him at Arnaud’s. And [short pause] I had learned a lot at Pat O’Brien’s. But Pat O’Brien’s—Pat O’Brien’s is unique in itself. Um, the number one drink there is the Hurricane. Now, you—you serve them, you know, by the dozens. The Hurricanes are premixed at a—at a commissary out in the suburbs. They’re delivered to Pat O’Brien’s in five-gallon jugs, and we fill up a big [raises hands above table to illustrate size] stainless steel vessel with—pouring out of these five gallon jugs, put the top back on the stainless steel vessel, it’s pressurized and then you use a little—a little three-prong—pronged gun that looks like something you’d use in your garden, and you fill three [sound of Bobby tapping three fingers on the table in succession to illustrate] glasses at a time with—

AE: No kidding.

BO: —Hurricane mix. No kidding. Um, we'd then take those cases of—of pre-filled glasses behind the bar, and as people would order them, we would ice them down and fruit them and serve them. And it was quite an assembly line. But we do also make normal cocktails. Um, again, Pat O'Brien's is unique. Most of the bar business done at Pat O'Brien's is done by the waiters. So the waiters would come in and order their drinks, and all they would order from the bartender would be the alcohol. The waiter himself did the mixers: Seven-Up, Coke, um, that sort of thing. Very strange. Uh, but at the other side of the bar, you were dealing with the public, and you were making full-fledged cocktails. Except on busy nights. The bartenders at the front of the bar on busy nights, um, are basically cashiers. They're taking the order, they're handling the money, with the manager maybe over at the cash register behind them, and there's somebody hidden off on the side that actually makes the cocktails. And things are moving very quickly. Um, and that's a—that's a rush that lasts about six or eight hours. Um, last call at Pat O'Brien's is four a.m., and you can be busy until four. Yeah, that's what happens with a city that doesn't have a legal last-call.

AE: [Laughs] **[COUNTER: 05:55]**

BO: Um, so I ended up at Arnaud's. And I already had bartending experience, but I—

AE: Did you learn a lot at Pat O'Brien's?

BO: I did. I—I did learn a lot. Um, and I started there being very, very green. I still am very appreciative to the—to the people that I worked with there that took me under their wing and—and brought me along to where I could hold my at—at Arnaud's. And I—b—but I've grown so much more there [sound of chair being dragged across the floor]. Um, I was not a good fit at Pat O'Brien's [short pause] a—and [short laugh] it's funny, I—I—not to brag. Some of this is just—it's the way it's turned out. But I get a lot of compliments, um, in my bar. People talk about, "Oh, you're so great!" Well, it's—it's not—I—I know guys that are much better than me at bartending. Um, where I'm fortunate is that I'm a good fit for the room. Um, it's a low-key room, and I'm kind of low-key. And I have fun doing it. I meet the *neatest* people. Um, so I've—I've been able to take time and learn a lot. I do—

AE: Were you trained formally during your time at Arnaud's or you were just thrown into the mix? **[COUNTER: 07:07]**

BO: Um, thrown into it. Unfortunately, we're—you're expected when you take a job like that to have some knowledge, and they knew I had experience. Um, working in [sort pause] a—a bar like Pat O'Brien's doesn't really prepare

you, though, to work in a place like Arnaud's, where you're making—hand-making every cocktail. Uh, you know, the only—the only shortcuts we take are that we make our Bloody Mary mix five gallons at a time and, uh, you know, we use regular sour mix. I pre-make my—my simple syrup so it's alr—always at the ready. [Bobby pauses to take a sip of water.] Um, things that I *didn't* know about, which have turned into some funny stories along the way, are things like port. Um, how many bars will you work in that will prepare you to decant and serve port wines? Um, much less know really what they are—the origins, the differences. Um, so a lot of things like that I took on myself to learn. I was also very fortunate to work with a guy for [short pause] seems like it was about a year. A guy named Rob Collins. They sent Rob to me—oh, this is—this has got to go back and set the foundation for the bar. Are you ready for that?

AE: I'm ready. **[COUNTER: 08:30]**

BO: Um, [short pause] Arnaud's has several bars, and the one I was working in at the time, uh, wou—when I was hired, primarily I worked in the bar called the Richelieu Bar, and I worked two nights a week. Then they decided to revamp the bar, add a nice cigar humidor, and make it sort of it's own destination. At about the same time that that bar was going to reopen, they also planned to add live jazz music to the dining room adjacent to the Richelieu Bar. Now the guy that was working full-time in the Grill Bar, as it was called in those days, um, he was a jazz maven.

AE: Okay.

BO: He didn't want to work around a lot of smoke.

AE: Oh.

BO: I had, uh, an interest in cigars, and so they decided it would be a good fit for me to go take over the quote cigar bar and, uh, Gary would go work in the Richelieu Bar, and we'd both be very happy. And it worked out really, really well. Uh, Gary was nearing retirement at the time and, uh, he was going to retire to Florida. But we worked together like that for [short pause] four, five, six years. And I'm losing track of time now. Um, so when they—they remodeled the—the Grill Bar, they added the cigar humidor, they redid the furnishings, and I was practicing—learning more—more about cigars in general and, uh, trying to get to know something about all the ones that I was going to offer. We also added several port wines by the glass and several new single-malt scotches. Um, when I had started there, we had one single-malt scotch: Glenlivet. Mr. Casbarian [owner of Arnaud's] added three more for the grand reopening of the Grill Bar. And then at one point I had talked them up to eighteen different single-malts, so we had quite a selection.

AE: How did you talk them into that? **[COUNTER: 10:42]**

BO: Well, I—I [short pause] it seemed to be around August or September of each year. After the doldrums of the summer were over, I would make up sort of my wish list of things I thought would—would sell well, that I was getting calls for, or a—something that might be missing from—um, you know, it's like you might have a nice selection, but you're missing the one thing that completes the set.

AE: Um-hmm.

BO: So several years in a row I went to the Casbarians with my wish list and got just about everything I'd asked for. Um, so the—the bar is very well stocked now. We've lost a few scotches that are just—have just have become too hard to get anymore.

AE: Um-hmm.

BO: Um, you know, you can't make extra eighteen year-old scotch.

AE: [Short laugh] Right.

BO: It takes a little time.

AE: Are there ot—other bartenders there at Arnaud's that have the same kind of, um, interest in stocking their bar as thoroughly as you do?

BO: Um— [Short pause]

AE: No? [Short laugh]

BO: No.

AE: [Laughs] You're face said no.

BO: Not as much.

AE: [Laughing]

BO: Um, so much was done before they got there. I'm—I've managed to be the—the—the longest lasting, uh, of the current generation of people. When I started at Arnaud's, the av—probably the average tenure of staff members in general, uh—front of the house—was probably around six or eight years. And we had one team that had been together for more than fifteen years—as a three-man team in the dining room. Um, the changing economy, the changing—everything. Um, now, I am the oldest, most tenured guy on the floor at Arnaud's, except for the maitre d's. At—at a little over nine years. The next closest is probably—well, wait, he's a maitre d' too. Um, I don't know. Four years?

AE: Well let me ask you this: you—you started out doing this as just kind of like a moonlighting gig while you were in college, and now you're obviously passionate about it— **[COUNTER: 12:54]**

BO: Yeah. It was—once I got into it, I realized that I really liked it. Um, and—and I warn people that—people ask me all the time about, you know, they want to bartend while they go to college or they want to, you know, [they'll ask me], "What is it like to bartend? I want to become a bartender." And it [short pause] like many job—jobs, there's more to it than meets the eye. It's, uh, it's more than just knowing a bunch of recipes. It's more than just being able to talk to people. Um, people like to go into a bar and—and—and have a good drink in a nice atmosphere, but nobody wants to—wants to—wants to drink in a divey, you know, unkempt bar. One of my mentors, when I was at Pat O'Brien's was a kid. Um, he was nineteen at the time. Um, Tony, every week we would do a project. And he showed me how to move with purpose, make your trips count for something, you know? And he was always in motion. You know, whether he was cleaning out an ashtray or making a drink or, you know, fixing the coffee maker. He was always doing something. And it's so true that in—in a bar—especially in a busy bar—there are a million details. So to me, what separates good bartenders from bad is being able to, um, interact with customers, you know, in a—in a way that everybody expects, um, but still be able to keep your bar clean and set and, um, it—I—for that bar—for that size bar, I'm a good fit for that.

AE: But where does the passion come in to play? Where did that come from?

BO: [Let's out a sigh] You know, it comes from wanting to do it well, I guess. Um, I—I never intended—I didn't set out to—to be a professional bartender, but working with Tony at—at Pat O'Brien's, um, I was convinced that I could do it well while I was doing it. Um, and it's just—it only takes a little bit more effort to do it well. And Tony—Tony is still one of my heroes. Uh, as far as bartenders go. Um [short pause] and I guess it was through him that I—I was convinced that I could do it well while I did it.

AE: Um-hmm. **[COUNTER: 15:14]**

BO: Um, working at Arnaud's, I found myself interested in a lot of the—the better things that we had to offer. Um, my parents drank growing up, but my parents drank bourbon, and that was it. I mean, I didn't know—I didn't know a Manhattan from an Old Fashioned. Um—

AE: Are you from New Orleans originally?

BO: No, I'm from Atlanta originally.

AE: Okay.

BO: But I've b—been in New Orleans since, uh, since 1969.

AE: Okay.

BO: So I've grown up here.

AE: Long enough, yeah.

BO: Um, but my parents drank bourbon on the rocks with a Coke chaser. And that was—that was it. So I really didn't know much. And it's funny because when my—

AE: [Coughs]

BO: —my wife—uh, she was my girlfriend then—was convincing me to—to be a bartender [takes a drink of water], I explained to her that I didn't know a lot about alcohol, and she basically taught me everything she knew. At least enough to get me familiar with—with liquors that I'd never heard of.

AE: Had she ever bartended?

BO: No.

AE: Is she from New Orleans?

BO: No. She's from upstate New York.

AE: Okay. Interesting.

BO: Um, I—I can remember going to one of the hundreds of places that didn't hire me, and they gave me a bartending test. And it was very simple. It was, uh, name three scotches, name five vodkas, and it—just some other very simple things that—you know, I look back on it now, you know, and it's like, "Oh, that was easy!" I failed it!

AE: [Laughs]

BO: Um, I thought Pinch was a rum, but it turns out it's a scotch. That was just bad—bad word-association on my part because my parents had traveled to the Caribbean one time, and my dad brought back a bottle of Pinch scotch. So I always equated it with the, um, with the Caribbean.

AE: [Short laugh]

BO: When I started, um, working with Rob was another thing at—at Arnaud's that—that elevated—uh, kicked it up a notch.

AE: Yeah.

BO: As Emeril would say.

AE: Yeah.

BO: Rob taught me stuff that I didn't know. And, uh, I would do research on my computer, and we would learn about, uh, you know, some new scotch—something we had on the bar. And we—we'd go on the Internet, look stuff up and, um, I kept learning more and more and found more and more to learn.

AE: Um-hmm.

BO: Um, one of my favorites is—is port. And I've turned the port into sort of my own show. I—I—I never intended it to be a show. You have to understand, port—port comes in several varieties and, uh, port can have [loud banging sound in background] a vintage. And Portuguese law is very strict about their vintages. You can only have three vintages per decade. So that leaves you seven years of non-vintage ports. Well, a good vintage port, like a 1963 or a seventy-seven, by the time you open it now—twenty-five years later—um, a lot of—a lot of the sediment has accumulated in the bottle. Well, we serve it by the glass, so we're going to want to get the most out of that bottle as we can. So we decant it. Um, and I, for expedience sake, I decant it through, um, like a coffee filter. Actually, I steal the filters from our iced tea maker at work.

AE: [Quiet laugh] **[COUNTER: 18:47]**

BO: Which they barely get enough to make iced tea, but I—

AE: [Laughs]

BO: I—I get some of the filters to decant port. Because it decants faster than the coffee filters does. It's a little wider weave. Um, I decant it into a glass decanter, then I'll wash out the bottle, then I'll pour it back into the original bottle. Well, because of height, because of having to deal with everything, I tend to do it behind the bar on top of my little freezer. But there's people at the bar [short pause]—I've always been worried that they were thinking I was doing something underhanded. And so I started making it a point that if I have to decant the port, with people there [loud banging noise in background] watching, I involve them in it. And [clears throat] [sound of chair being dragged across floor] so I'll do part of it on the bar. And what's left—the sediment that's left is [short pause] it's not gritty, it's not grainy, it's not slimy, but it is like mashed blueberry skins. I'd read in a, uh, a book by a guy by the name of [F.] Paul Pacult about—he— wrote a book called *Kindred Spirits*. He's a spirits connoisseur. He's a spirits, uh, critic.

AE: Okay.

BO: So I read this little, uh, byline in one of his, uh, in the section about ports, about how he like to save the sediment and put it on his toast the next day.

AE: No kidding.

BO: This is one of my—my epiphany moments at—at Arnaud’s and bartending in general. I thought at first that he meant it tongue-in-cheek. Now here I am, I’ve been decanting port for a couple of years by then, I didn’t know what the sediment was. I—I assumed it was like wood pulp from the original barrels it was stored in or something. I just didn’t know. So after reading that story, the next time I decanted a bottle of port, I ate some of the—some of the sediment. And it was—I found it very interesting. So now, as part of my decanting port I, uh, if somebody’s sitting at the bar, I will offer them some. I will always take a pinch first, so that they know it’s safe and not too weird.

AE: [Laughs]

BO: But it makes for a nice story. And they get—they get a lesson about port wine, I get to do my—my—my work that I *have* to do—

AE: And it’s an experience for them.

BO: Yeah. So it works out well for everybody.

AE: Yeah.

BO: Um— [Short pause] Okay, ask me another question—

AE: [Laughs]

BO: —or else I’ll keep rambling down that path.

AE: [Laughs] Well, let’s see. You’re passionate about tradition and excellence, I think. And performance in your job. Um, how about some of the—the more [sound of chair being dragged across floor], um, tedious stuff that I would assume would come with the job of being a bartender in the Quarter and the tourist trade, and people coming in and asking—

BO: [Sighs]

AE: —for those cocktails—*those* cocktails. [Laughs]

BO: [Laughing] Uh, God, we could fill up the rest of the evening with this.

AE: [Laughs] **[COUNTER: 21:42]**

BO: I—I'm very fortunate that I don't work on Bourbon Street. Um, Bienville Street intersects Bourbon [Street] and my—it—my bar is literally half a block off of Bourbon. So I don't get a lot of, um, a lot of the people that are just looking for a shot and a—a beer kind of place. Although there are seasons, events, depending on what's going on in the Quarter, where I may—may keep my street door [to the bar] locked. Because if I don't it just—it's an endless parade of people looking for a bathroom. Um, I—I'm pretty—I can be easy-going about it to some extent, but we have a dining room full of people that are dressed to the nines for an evening out. And it's not fair to them to have street people, basically, coming in and using the bathroom. Um, I have a weakness for pregnant women and women in general. Um, if it's a slow night and a couple of guys come in, and they ask politely? I will usually let them. Um, I usually also remind them to be, um, good guests. Um, I'm always worried about somebody trashing our bathroom.

AE: [Short laugh]

BO: [Takes a drink of water.] Now, occasionally people will come in and—and because they've heard of the Hurricane, which Pat O'Brien's is so famous for, they will come in and ask me for a Hurricane. And I have a pat, flip answer. It's that I—I proudly don't make Hurricanes, it's the house drink of another bar, and they don't make them there either. They make them five hundred gallons at a time in a warehouse out in the suburbs. Um, I—I—I can't compete with a Hurricane in that, um, you know, people are looking for a big frosty glass, you know, with fruit punch in it.

AE: Yeah, and that's not—

BO: It's not what we do.

AE: —what y'all are there for.

BO: Right.

AE: Well, what about a classic cocktail like the Sazerac or something more old-school, traditional.

BO: That's [short pause] I make so many Sazeracs that it's, um, I can make them in my sleep. Um, a lot of—a lot of—I have *some* regular guests from New Orleans. Um, we—Arnaud's caters to, really, an international clientele. People from all over come to New Orleans, they've heard Arnaud's. We've been famous for a long time. Um, a lot of people have heard of us because of, uh, the Folgers commercial years ago. The [assumes different vice] "We're hear at world-famous Arnaud's restaurant, where we have secretly switched their coffee with Folger's Crystals." Remember that?

AE: Yes. Sure do. [Short laugh]

BO: Well, as they say, you can't buy that kind of advertising.

AE: Right.

BO: Um, we [loud banging noise in the background] still have people that ask us if this is the restaurant that was in the commercial. That happened at a time when the new—current owner, Mr. Casbarian—had just bought the restaurant—or leased it—from, uh, Count Arnaud's daughter, Germaine. So [short pause] a historical perspective: he was putting a lot of money into the restaurant during the Carter administration. Interest rates were [in the] double-digits, prime was in double-digits. And that was a great cash influx to help him, um, finish the remodeling. Or at least I associate the two things. I may have the timing a little off.

AE: Um-hmm. **[COUNTER: 24:50]**

BO: It just—still, it was a great way of advertising the restaurant. And keeping—really, restoring what was at one time the grand dame of—of New Orleans Creole dining. Restoring it back. It had—the—the restaurant had run in—it was living on its reputation really, by the time Mr. Casbarian bought it.

AE: Um-hmm.

[Short pause while Bobby takes a drink of water.]

BO: Um, so the people that come in and ask for Sazeracs, I'll tell them it's a good choice. Um, people that come in and want—and ask for a Hurricane, I'll say, you know, I don't make Hurricanes. I gave you the schpeal. And, um, I say, "But we do—we do keep alive the tradition of the—we honor the tradition of the Sazerac and the Ramos Gin Fizz." Um, I love making gin fizzes, but not if there's a bar full of people.

AE: Um-hmm.

BO: It—it takes a little time, uh, and I also don't like to make more than two at a time. When, you know, four people come in and they want gin fizzes, I am then in the weeds for five minutes.

AE: Yeah. [Short laugh]

BO: It's a time consuming drink, and I can only make two at a time. Although I just bought a new shaker, and we'll see if I can make three or four at a time in the new shaker.

AE: You—you buy your own bar accessories? [Laughs]

BO: Um, I did this time.

AE: Oh, okay. [Laughing]

BO: I—a lot of bars you're expected to bring your own minimum tools, you know: a cigarette lighter, pen—

AE: Sure, yeah.

BO: Um, that sort of thing. Um, because I'm only in my bar one night a week now, uh, I like having my own tools because anything could have happened since last week.

AE: Yeah.

BO: So I lock up my set of tools in my locker. If the other—if the other bar supplies are out [and at the ready] when I get there, all the better. But one of the things that I [short pause] that I figured out a long time ago is don't leave things like that to chance. I was explaining to somebody—another bartender a few months ago—um, I was training him, and I was explaining to him that I'm not really that great a bartender. I—I have a every good reputation. But the way I—the way I compensate is [by] being well organized, and I don't let things like not having a shaker tin available kill my night. So I have that—my lighter is always full of—of butane, uh, if I'm expecting a busy night, I'll pre-spear olives. Things that will cause me to stop a step during the evening. Anything like that, I make sure I have [it] ahead of time. I always get plenty of ice. If I have to p—throw out a couple of buckets of ice at the end of the evening? No problem. I'd rather throw it away then have to go get it during my busy season—busy time. Because [short pause] the only time I'm gonna need it is when I'm busy.

AE: Um-hmm.

BO: Anyway, so I explained to these guys to think ahead and plan for the—plan for those inevitabilities. And that's what keeps me—helps me compensate. Um, I'm not the fastest bartender. Um—

[Short pause]

AE: Well you said earlier that you have a reputation. What—a: what is that reputation and b: how did—how did you gain that reputation?

[COUNTER: 27:52]

BO: Well part of it's [sighs]—Oh, God. This is, um, it—I think it all has to go back to me being a good fit for the bar. Um, and then a couple of happy, um, coincidences. One happy coincidence that will—that has helped, um, the *New York Times* was running an article sev—sever—*several* years ago. It was in, uh, ninety-seven or ninety-eight. It was in the travel section, and the article was about how certain cocktails can give you a sense of a certain place. So they talked about the Sazerac in Paris and the Manhattan in New

York and a lot of other cocktails. And the section on New Orleans was extensive. New Orleans, of course, is a colorful place and has had a long history with cocktails. And, uh, of course, they mentioned the Sazerac and the Ramos Gin Fizz in the article. Well, the *New York Times* wanted some photos to go along with it, so they got a photograph of a bartender named Guy at Harry's New York Bar in Paris making Sidecars, another bartender at the Waldorf Astoria making Manhattans, and my picture appeared in the *New York Times* making a Ramos Gin Fizz. Now, this all feeds into, why do I like making gin fizzes? Because then I get to tell people how my picture was in the *New York Times*. Um, is it puffery? I mean this is—that's—that's fourteen of my fifteen minutes of fame in that one photograph. I'm—I'm very proud of it. Mostly it was just—just chance. Just good karma, I guess. Um, *New York Times* sent out a—a wire request for a photograph, a stringer here picked it up, knew that Ar—Arnaud's had a good looking bar, came to Arnaud's and asked if they could shoot me making a gin fizz. Um, he expected to find a good bartender there that could do it. He knew that the room was pretty. So it was just—it really was just my good luck. Um [short pause] but having my picture in the *New York Times* gave me more cachet than before. [Short pause] I would like to think that I've—I've at least earned it in the meantime.

AE: Sure.

BO: But that's—that's part of it. So—so I have regulars that would come in and say, "Oh, show them the clipping!" Eehh—

AE: [Laughs]

BO: So it's like— I've got this one clipping among my tools and it's pretty, you know, it's pretty worn from people unfolding it and reading it.

AE: Uh-huh. **[COUNTER: 30:32]**

[Short pause]

BO: But it's a nice con—conversation piece. And—and certainly anybody that comes [into the bar] now thinks that I'm deserving of it. Another thing, at least at Arnaud's, that gives me a reputation for being, um, uh, what gives me a reputation. I'll just leave it at that. Is that over the years, I've built up my own clientele. Um, I have people from really all over the country that when they're in New Orleans—which may be a couple of times a year; it might be once every couple of years—um, they tend to make Arnaud's part of their visit. Um, and I've been told by—by many of them that I'm the reason why. They'll come in and say, "Oh, you were here five years ago. How's your daughter?" You know, "Did you ever get rid of the termites in your house?" or whatever. I'm—I'm certainly multi-dimensional. So they get—they've followed along all these stories. You know, people ask me, you know, "Oh, did you graduate?" And you know, "What are you doing now?" I—which is another fun story. Uh [short pause] but—so the—so it got to be

[that] when bartenders were working in that bar on my nights off, it actually got to be a sore spot with some of them because we—people would come in, ask if I was working, they would say no, and the guests would turn around and leave. Now—so—the other bartenders got this attitude that, you know, um, it—it wasn't good. [Laughs] You know?

AE: Right, right. What's going on here?

BO: I tell people now, even if—even if I'm not here, stop and tak—have a cocktail, you know, because it's a good place. You know, Tito will take good care of you or whomever. So, uh, I—I don't know if—if it's as bad as it used to be, but I have lots of people tell me that, you know, they plan their Saturday night to go to the bar.

AE: Um-hmm.

BO: Um, I get notes left for me when—when I'm not there. So it's—it's fun and it's—it's definitely an ego boost. Um— [short pause]

AE: Well let's talk about that graduation and, um, how it is that you're now—as our conversation last night revealed, you're working for Entergy.

BO: Entergy. Right.

AE: And, um, bartending just one night a week?

BO: Just one night a week. When I, uh, when I—when I got offered the job at Entergy—it was actually one of my bar customers. Um, I had graduated, and he said it was time to move up in the big leagues, and he, uh, we talked about it over the phone and over the bar a couple of times and I said, "Mike," you know, "don't—don't play with me. This is—this is how I pay my mortgage and stuff." And he said, "Nah, nah, we—" You know. And so I was going to take a leave of absence from Arnaud's. Kind of reminiscent to what happened years before, and the maitre d' asked me if I was interested in keeping my Saturday nights. Of course, I was and that's how I've worked Saturday nights ever since. Um, my day job at Entergy I do, um, computer work. It's—it's hard to tell you exactly what I do. It's not that's it's a secret, it's just kind of—it's not what most people associate with doing computer work.

AE: Uh-huh.

BO: Um, I don't—the tools I use during the day are things like Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, email. That's how I spend my day. Occasional using a drawing program to draw, um, a diagram of how a system is going to look. But my group helps integrate, um, the computer systems, and we mostly make sure that—that nothing falls through the cracks. That we haven't missed a—and obvious—an obvious "gotcha" in the end.

AE: Um-hmm.

BO: So—

AE: So was it never an option or an interest of yours to work at Arnaud's many nights a week and have that be your career? Be a career bartender?
[COUNTER: 34:17]

BO: Um [short pause] Hmm. It's, um, [short pause] bartending nights—working full-time nights is only family friendly if the rest of the family works nights. Um, my wife and I for a long time worked opposite ends of the clock. Um, at one point, as a matter of fact, I—I was—I was working at the other bar down on Bourbon Street. Not Pat O'Brien's but another place called Baha Beach Club. And I had been in a car wreck, uh, a truck had t-boned my car, and it was in the shop for several months. So my wife would drop me off in the [French] Quarter, and I'd go to work at about eight o'clock at night. And we would give last call in that bar [at] four a.m.. The other managers and I would do all of our paperwork—counting the money, et cetera—we'd walk out, it'd be past sun-up. We'd walk around the corner to [the bar] Johnny White's, order a beer, I'd be about halfway through with my beer, and I'd call my wife. She would have already been up and had her shower. She would come to the Quarter and pick me up. I'd go home and shower while she got dressed, and she would take me to school.

AE: Oh, wow.

BO: So then I'd go to school all day, and then that afternoon when I'd get home from school, I'd go to sleep. So we really only saw each other while we were in the car. That—that went on for a few months. And then after our daughter was born—miracle of miracles—um [short laugh] that, um, there were times when she was going off to day care, [and] she'd come to my bedroom and kiss me goodni—goodbye in the morning, and I might not see her until she came to kiss me goodbye the next morning. Um, so for us, bartending full-time is not—is not family friendly.

AE: Yeah. Well, and that makes obvious sense.

BO: Can we take—

AE: But so it's still—

BO: Can we take a break for a second?

AE: We can. We sure can.

[Bobby takes a bathroom break. Recording stops for approximately five minutes]

[END TRACK 1 – COUNTER: 36:11]

[BEGIN TRACK 2]

AE: All right. So my question, as a follow-through to what we left—where we left the conversation is, um, the importance of retaining the Saturday night shift. Is that a love for bartending or is it an allegiance to Arnaud's or is it—what is it?

BO: It's all that and more. Um [short pause] bartending there has become my—wait. I hate to say my primary social outlet. But [sighs] I've met so many people that make that part of their Saturday night that I get to see some of the same people over and over—you know, once a month, once every couple of months. It's more than I get to see my, um, my other friends. Um, my old computer buddies from my old days I may see—one in particular, I might see him maybe once every two years now.

AE: Um-hmm.

BO: Some people I see every—every couple of weeks. So it—it fits that. Um, my student loans are in repayment—

AE: [Short laugh]

BO: —so it helps with that.

AE: Um-hmm. The reality of it all, yes.

BO: Um, and, uh [short pause] out of allegiance to Arnaud's—I don't know. I certainly—Arnaud's has been a big part of my life, and I—I certainly feel an allegiance there; I do feel part of the family. Um, as—as far as we can as staff. But, um, you know, if somebody offered me top-dog gig making a hundred thousand dollars a year at the restaurant across the street, well, I have a family. [Laughs]

AE: [Short laugh] Um-hmm.

BO: Um, uh, I can [telephone ringing in background]—I can take what I do and take it somewhere else. I—I don't know if I would be as successful. [Phone still ringing] Somebody would have to offer me the money up-front. Um, it's like I said before, the room that I work is a good fit for me. So there's—it's all of that. Um, and part of it's got to be too that, um, I'm resistant to change.

AE: [Laughs] Well, and is it unique for Arnaud's—or, I would think, any bar, really—to offer a one-night-a-week shift to *anyone*.

BO: Yeah. It's unique and—and it's—it has been a sore spot—excuse me—a sore spot for some of the other bartenders from time to time. Um, because Saturday night ought to be a very good night to work.

AE: Um-hmm. **[TRACK 2 - COUNTER: 02:21]**

BO: Oddly enough, I used to k—track the amount of money I made. Uh, I'd do it [short laugh] at the end of the shift. That's another—that's another sidebar story. Um, in that—that I figured once that I had to worry about how much tip I was making off each customer, that's when I know that I've been at it too long, and I'll have to give it up. Because I would be the most miserable person in the world if I was working for a tip, you know. If that's what drove me, I'd—I'd hate it. Um, the money works out in the end, thank God. But, um, Saturday is—is a good night. Because New Orleans is such a—such a large convention destination, Saturday night is not necessarily the only good night. Um, I've had fantastic Mondays and incredible Sundays. Nights that, you know, are not big eat-out nights at your neighborhood restaurant are—can be huge eat-out nights, depending on who's town—who's in town in New Orleans. Um, there's a—there's a saying, and—and people are going to read this, and I—I hope they're not offended by it. But they say that Friday and Saturday are—are amateur night; that's when amateurs go out to eat. I wouldn't have understood that until I worked at a place like Arnaud's, in that we have so many people that entertain so much, that they know how to get the very best out of their experience. Um, they know what to be insistent of, and they know what to leave to the discretion of their waiters to make everything work well—for them and for their guests. Um, in that vein, um, Thursday nights, Sunday nights, you know, Tuesday nights, can be very good. Because you can end up, as I used to do, you could have a—a group of salesmen that work for the same company [but] in disparate parts of the country, who might be in town for a convention, and they have sort of an impromptu sales meeting after dinner in the bar over good scotch, cognac, cigars. And those can easily be, you know, three and four hundred dollar bar tabs. That can make your night. And it can happen and its—its—its low-maintenance work. Um, they don't want to be doted over, they just, you know, they just want to be taken care of and kind of left alone. So Saturday nights are not necessarily the best nights. They're just more work. So, the other guys, um, a guy that works with me now named Tito, Tito has Saturday nights off. He's got a new family, he likes having Saturday night off. Um, every once in a while he'll switch up with me, if I need Saturday night off, and it works out well. But the rest of the guys haven't been there that long. They don't have enough seniority to really gripe about it.

AE: Uh-huh. **[TRACK 2 - COUNTER: 05:11]**

BO: And some of them will last. Um, there's this guy there now, um, I think—a guy named Chris. Chris—Chris has a desire to be better. Chris has a desire to learn more. And, uh, he could—he can do it. He gets a lot of people coming in an asking for him because they've spent, you know, Friday night

with him, and then [on] Saturday, I send them over to his bar on the other side of the restaurant.

AE: Uh-huh.

BO: [Takes a drink of water] [Short pause] I forgot the question. [Laughs]

AE: As did I. And I think it's probably been answered. But, um, let's see. Um [short pause]. I don't know. Any thoughts in general about—maybe more of a historical bent on cocktails in New Orleans and more of a wide-ranging tradition.

BO: Uh, New Orleans certainly has a tradition. Um, it's funny because there have been a lot of things going on in the past year that have, uh, drawn new—new attention to classic cocktails. Um, New Orleans' legacy with cocktails. Um, some you've probably already heard of. There's, uh, there's a group that's trying to start a museum in the French Quarter called The Museum of the American Cocktail. Uh, I was quoted in a—in a recent Associated Press story about it and, uh, it was a lame quote about—

AE: [Laughs]

BO: —it filling a niche and a niche that needed to be filled or something like that. But if you look at what's going on [short pause] the evolution of something that I've noticed in my lifetime—and I can—I can't speak for a lot of what happened in say, the [nineteen] fifties and sixties. Um [sighs] my impression of drinking in the [nineteen] seventies was happy hour and then there was disco and everybody drinking to excess and it was, you know—it was all about getting drunk. And [short pause] we've evolved from that. Um, people are more conti—conscientious—more self-conscious about over-drinking. Um, you know, DWI [Driving While Intoxicated] is much more severe than—than it was back then. Uh, there's so many more consequences. So it's my opinion that people still have money to spend on a good night out that—I've noticed in my bartending years that they're spending their money on better quality—a better quality night out, instead of more quantity. [Short pause] Then you have things going on, sort of as a, uh, a parallel to it is [that] you have now celebrity chefs. Do—do you remember a chef before you knew the Wol—the name Wolfgang Puck? Um, he introduced—he created the genre of celebrity chef. Now we have Emeril [who] is on TV every night. And—and more power to him. Um, somebody was asking me one night about, uh, Emeril's restaurant, and they—they were—I guess they were afraid that I was going to trash it or that I was going to shill for my restaurant. I had to explain to them that—that Emeril Lagasse is *very* good for my business. And they crook their head, you know, "What do you mean?" I said, "He brings a lot of people to town to eat. You can't eat every night there. Arnaud's is going to get their shot, they're going to have their time, and I'm going to be a part of that evening. He's very good for me."

AE: Um-hmm. **[TRACK 2 – COUNTER: 08:53]**

BO: Um, so then you have—you have cooking shows [loud noise in background], and you have people that, um, conventions come to town and the—

[A man approaches the table where the interview is taking place to ask if he can plug his computer into the wall outlet beneath]

MAN: Excuse me, can I plug in right in there, please?

AE: [To man] Certainly.

BO: [To interviewer] The employee—

MAN: Sorry about that.

AE: [To man] No problem.

BO: The employee goes to his conference or sales meeting, but the company has set up some outing for the spouses. Whether it be a swamp tour, or sometimes they'll have cooking classes. Well, you know, who would have thought thirty years ago that people would pay to come to New Orleans and take a cooking class from Paul Prudhomme or whomever. Eh, taking all those things and converging them on the cocktail museum—The Museum of the American Cocktail—um, and anything like it—in my bar and bars like it—is that people have money to spend, they're willing to spend it on a high-quality, um, pleasurable experience and, um, get something out of it. With the interest in—in the cooking schools, I think that a—a—a teaching bar is a natural [occurrence] in a city that has such a cocktail culture in—in history. [sound of blender mixing at full-speed and continues for the next couple of minutes of audio] Um, there's at least two famous cocktails that started here. We've all heard, of course, of the Sazerac, the Ramos Gin Fizz. Um, the Sazerac may be two hundred years old. Um, you know it's—it's one hundred years older than what we think of is the cocktail—the cocktail era of the—of the roaring twenties. Uh, and we still—again, we keep that tradition alive. As—as do a lot of other bars in New Orleans. Um, your question was the—the—the history and where it's going. I think you will continue to see people with more and more interest into the things that they like. Um, and although drinking is not a hobby, um, more and more about what your drinking, I think, is—is going to grow—grow and grow. [Laughs] It's kind of like wine tastings in—in, uh, in California—in Napa Valley. I think people come to New Orleans and do cocktail tastings. Um, Southern Comfort is working with a local tour company, and I'm remiss that I can't think of the name of the tour company. Um, but they do a walking tour—a walking bar tour. They come through Arnaud's and, uh, they—the tour guide gives them a brief history of our bar. And I think that we may be his first stop, so he also

introduces them to Southern Comfort, which started in New Orleans. [Sound of blender mixing comes to and end] And, if I've got that story right, the guy original mixed it up in New Orleans, he ended up going to either Memphis or St. Louis where—where he, uh, he started marketing it nationally. Um, so it's a very old cocktail.

[Short pause] **[TRACK 2 – COUNTER: 12:04]**

AE: Do you pour much Southern Comfort in your bar?

BO: Um, a reasonable amount.

AE: Yeah?

BO: I have—I have probably [short pause] two hundred bottles on my bar. Um, and I pour a fair amount of—of Southern Comfort.

AE: On that walking tour do you, um, mix a drink for the tour group, or do they just come and look at the bar?

BO: Sometimes they'll—they'll want a drink. They don't always come to my bar. Sometimes they go to the Richelieu Bar.

AE: Okay.

BO: Um, there are certain times of the year that my bar is booked for a, uh, private party of about thirty to forty people every Saturday night. Right now they're doing it on Fridays, I understand. But it conflicts with Southern Comfort's schedule. Because that tour group that comes in is my—they're my first guests of the evening. Uh, that's ties up the bar for that whole hour. But yeah, they come in and the—the tour guide is usually introducing them to a mixed drink called a Scarlet O'Hara. And it's—basically it's Southern Comfort and cranberry juice. A delightful little, you know, Saturday afternoon drink. Um, the Southern Comfort's a little sweet, the cranberry's a little tart, it, uh, mellows each other out. It's a nice easy cocktail. And that's—

AE: Do you ever—

BO: That tends to be what they order when they order something.

AE: Okay. Do you ever serve that at Arnaud's outside of the tour group?

BO: Um-hmm.

AE: Yeah?

BO: Um-hmm.

AE: People request that?

BO: Yeah. Um, it's funny that, uh—again, right place, right time. Maybe this is the wrong place and the right time.

AE: [Laughs]

BO: The brand manager for Southern Comfort is a regular guest at Arnaud's. The guy that used to be. The—so—so much has happened in the last couple of years that I don't keep track of because I'm only there one night a week.

AE: Sure.

BO: Um, but there was a guy that entertained at Arnaud's a lot, and he came in one night and had—had a film crew with him and asked if he could shoot some video in our bar and in our dining room. And we let him. And there was a—a woman who had won a bartending contest and she worked at a—at a different restaurant, but she had made an award-winning cocktail with Southern Comfort. And after she did hers, they asked me to make a drink, and I, um, I made a Southern Comfort version of the Sazerac. Well, a Sazerac, you know, it's one of the things everybody does [short pause] Southern Comfort becomes a natural, um, um, evolution for the Sazerac. And—and you think it's—it's almost disrespecting the history of the Sazerac, unless you know the history of the Sazerac. Um, when Peychaud started adding his bitters to, um, to a cocktail two hundred years ago, he was using, uh, a cognac called Sazerac de Forge— Sazerac de Forge et fils, which I found out means, uh, Sazerac and sons or something like that. Um [short pause] I'm imagining that soon after—because that would have happened right after Louisiana became a state. It probably became easier to get Kentucky bourbon to New Orleans than French cognac. Um, there's also a vein of the story that says that the cocktail got its name from a coffeehouse, um, that the guy—the importer for Sazerac—was pouring them at the Sazerac Coffeehouse, and that's where the name became associated with it. Um, but it went from being a cognac drink to a rye whiskey drink. And introducing a new generation of drinkers, um, to a classic recipe but using Southern Comfort instead? I think [that] is okay. Um, I mean you and I, we group up on—we grew up on Kool-Aid and soda pop. We have—we have sweeter tastes than our parents had. Um, you know, you—

AE: Um-hmm. It's something familiar in a—

BO: —yeah. You may—

AE: —traditional cocktail.

BO: You meet—you don't meet many, uh, twenty, thirty, forty year-olds that drink scotch and water. We need something—we need a sweet mixer. Um,

Southern Comfort is—is a cocktail this is really pretty well suited for, uh, people with a sweeter taste profile.

AE: Um-hmm. **[TRACK 2 – COUNTER: 16:23]**

BO: I—I hope I don't sound like I'm shilling for Southern Comfort. I can't even think of the guys name but—

AE: No, it's good. I've not heard that before, and it's an interesting twist on—

BO: Anyway, I told my story as I made the Sazerac while they were filming—

AE: Uh-huh.

BO: And, uh, I got—I got Herbsaint in my face.

AE: [Laughs]

BO: It was—it was a total disaster.

AE: [Laughing]

BO: But, uh, I understand it ended up on—on one of their—uh, they were doing a long-format commercial or something. I've never seen it, though. But there's a—another thirty seconds of my fifteen minutes of fame.

AE: Yeah. You're clocking them in quick there.

BO: Ah—

AE: [Laughing]

BO: This one will put me over the top.

AE: Oh, I don't know about all that. Um, well, we've spent some good time here, and I've—I've enjoyed your stories and, um, all of your passion for your one day a week job.

BO: [Laughs]

AE: It's really admirable or questionable, I don't know which. Or both.
[Laughs]

BO: It's, uh, it's—it's something I look forward to all week.

AE: Yeah?

BO: So—

AE: Well, I, um—what time does your shift start on Saturday?

BO: Five [o'clock].

AE: Five? Okay. Because, um, I'm looking to leave town on Saturday, but I will more than likely be back for a second trip, and I definitely would love to visit you at the bar so—

BO: I'll make you a gin fizz. Or a—

AE: Okay.

BO: Or a Sazerac. Or—

AE: All right. Great. Yeah.

BO: —or whatever you like to drink. Drinking is—is—I think has become one of the [short pause] *truly* universal, um, [loud banging sound in background] you know, guests come in from—wherever. From Minnesota, from New York, you know [and say], "Oh," you know, "what do you all drink in New Orleans?" They assume it's, uh, Mint Juleps.

AE: Um-hmm.

BO: I say, "Well," you know, "people here drink what people where you live drink, you know? We drink gin and tonics and vodka Collins and, you know, martinis and things just like people in London and Germany and South America." Uh, it really is universal.

[Short pause]

AE: All right.

BO: I've rambled enough.

AE: Well, [that's a] good note to end on. Um, thank you so much for meeting me. It's been a pleasure to visit with you, Bobby. Really.

BO: I've enjoyed it.

AE: Well, thank you.

BO: I'm anxious to see how the—how the project comes out.

AE: All right. Well, I will keep in touch, and I will let you know.

[END TRACK 2 – COUNTER: 18:32]

[END]