

IZOLA WHITE
Izola's Family Dining - Chicago, IL

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Date: March 24, 2008

Location: Izola's Family Dining

Interviewer: Amy Evans

Length: 55 minutes

Project: Chicago Eats/TABASCO Guardians of the Tradition

[Begin Izola White Interview]

00:00:00

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Monday, March 24, 2008 and I'm in Chicago, Illinois, at Izola's Family Restaurant with Miss Izola White. And ma'am, if you wouldn't mind saying your full name and your birth date for the record, please?

00:00:15

Izola White: Izola White, 1922, November 3.

00:00:24

AE: And you're originally from Kenton, Tennessee, is that right?

00:00:26

IW: From Kenton, Tennessee.

00:00:30

AE: And what year did you come to Chicago?

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IW: [Nineteen] Forty-five.

00:00:35

AE: Did you come with just your family, or did you come on your own?

00:00:37

IW: By myself.

00:00:40

AE: Can you tell me a little bit about that and—and when and why you left Kenton?

00:00:42

IW: Well it was the best place to come to to live, so that's why I landed here. I worked in a drugstore as a cashier and worked on the farm. Then from that I was a waitress at another restaurant. And then I decided to open up my—my own business and come out here.

00:01:04

AE: Did you already know folks up here in Chicago when you made the trip?

00:01:07

IW: No, uh-um.

00:01:09

AE: So you came all by yourself all the way up here to Chicago?

00:01:13

IW: Right, all by myself.

00:01:14

AE: How old were you at that time?

00:01:15

IW: Nineteen.

00:01:18

AE: How did you—how did you make your way up—up here?

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IW: On a train. On the train, uh-hmm.

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AE: So can you tell me about how you were—how you were feeling when you made that big trip?

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IW: It's really fine; I'm glad to get away. It was nice.

00:01:36

AE: And looking forward to things in the big city and—and making your own way?

00:01:42

IW: Yes, I waited tables, and then I decided to go in for myself, and that's how I happened to come out here.

00:01:49

AE: What kind of restaurant was it that you were waiting tables at?

00:01:53

IW: Same as this one.

00:01:56

AE: So another soul food restaurant?

00:01:58

IW: Uh-hmm.

00:01:58

AE: Can you talk a little bit about the people that had that and—and what kind of food they did?

00:02:04

IW: They were very—they were very nice people. The name was Hayles. Vernola. And they were very nice people.

00:02:11

AE: Did they have a connection to the South?

00:02:16

IW: I think they was from Mississippi. I didn't know too much where they were from. I—

00:02:23

AE: What was the name of the restaurant—their name?

00:02:24

IW: Vernola's [*Vernola's was located on 407 E. 61st St. in Chicago*].

00:02:27

AE: And can you say, after you left there to start your own place, how long were they in business or might they still be?

00:02:35

IW: Well, one passed away, then next, another one passed, so they was in business for about three years after I come out here.

00:02:43

AE: And what part of town was that? Was that here in the South Side?

00:02:45

IW: Sixty-first Street and King Drive, uh-hmm.

00:02:51

AE: So when you decided that you wanted to open your own place, about how long did it take from when you had that idea to when you actually got a building?

00:02:58

IW: When I started out here I had \$800 to my name. And it took me about five years to get it up off the ground; it was slow. I had to do the cooking and waiting tables and all like that to survive.

00:03:12

AE: So tell me about coming up in Tennessee and—and learning to cook down there. I understand you learned to cook from your mama working at—at a woodstove.

00:03:18

IW: Oh, yes. I helped my mother when they worked in the fields picking cotton. And it was hard work, but it was okay. So I don't mind working because I'd much rather be doing this than out in the cotton field picking cotton.

00:03:39

AE: Sure. What was your mother's name?

00:03:41

IW: Mamie, uh-hmm.

00:03:41

AE: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

00:03:44

IW: I have a sister and one passed—no brothers.

00:03:49

AE: And where did your sisters end up after you left Tennessee?

00:03:53

IW: One stays here, uh-hmm. She here in the city, but she not able to work.

00:04:00

AE: Are you the oldest, then, I guess?

00:04:02

IW: Yes.

00:04:04

AE: So she followed you up here after you opened the restaurant?

00:04:05

IW: She followed me up here after I come up, and then she come up later.

00:04:12

AE: So it was about the 1950s, then, that you moved up to Chicago?

00:04:18

IW: Nineteen forty.

00:04:19

AE: Okay. So you were just in the front-end of—of the Great Migration. Did you have a lot of people over—you know, during those years from your neck of the woods down in Tennessee that—that came up and joined you here, other than family members?

00:04:33

IW: Mississippi and all around they were here.

00:04:38

AE: What was it like when you first got here? Can you talk about that?

00:04:39

IW: I was afraid, but it turned out to be nice. The people are very friendly. And that was very good.

00:04:48

AE: Did it mean something to be from the South and connect with people from the South up here and help make your way and find a place to live and things?

00:04:54

IW: Well some of them was very nasty, but they soon turned to be nice. So you see, there is a God; without him, I wouldn't be here today. That's who is helping me right now—faith.

00:05:13

AE: So when you were coming up and learning to cook, did you enjoy cooking?

00:05:16

IW: Yes, I enjoy doing nice things and making people happy, just like I'm doing today.

00:05:27

AE: Were you cooking the same kinds of things with—with your mother?

00:05:29

IW: No, it was different. We cooked rabbit and all that kind of stuff. [*Laughs*] Fish. We had to go fishing to get it.

00:05:39

AE: And raised a lot of your own food in the garden and—and animals and whatnot?

00:05:40

IW: Right, uh-hmm.

00:05:42

AE: Do you ever miss that at all?

00:05:44

IW: No. [*Emphasis Added*] No, not at all—no. [*Laughs*] No, I don't miss any of that.

00:05:50

AE: So when you said when you were working in the restaurant you decided that you wanted a restaurant of your own. Did you know that also before you ever came to the city or was that something that—?

00:06:01

IW: When you work with other places—places and you find out maybe I can do that too, so that's what happened.

00:06:07

AE: So is this building we're sitting in right now, this is the building that you bought and started out, originally?

00:06:11

IW: I didn't buy; they don't sell to blacks.

00:06:17

AE: So are you still renting?

00:06:17

IW: Yes, the Chinese own it. People that owned it before, they sold it to another person and then the person sold that and sold it to the Chinese. They do not sell to blacks.

00:06:31

AE: Huh. So has that ever been an issue to you that you wanted to own your own building and would think about moving, or renting is okay?

00:06:37

IW: I just got through making a statement. I'd like to have this. But he didn't sell to blacks.

00:06:44

AE: But if you found any—

00:06:45

IW: I don't want to go into anything else by buying a building, no.

00:06:52

AE: So how did you find this location when you first started?

00:06:56

IW: Well, when I first come out here, the place was for rent, and you had a hard time staying out here because the blacks wasn't supposed to be here. They'd throw bricks at you, break out your windows if you had a car; it was very bad. You had policemen that had to stand around and help out.

00:07:18

AE: And you're talking about this neighborhood, the South Side of Chicago?

00:07:21

IW: Yes, yes.

00:07:23

AE: So was it—was the neighborhood predominantly white or—?

00:07:28

IW: All white. When I come out here, there was only three of us: a barber shop and a drugstore and myself and another restaurant.

00:07:42

AE: So you got enough gumption and had enough faith to—to plant some roots here and start your business?

00:07:46

IW: Yes, I did, uh-hmm.

00:07:50

AE: So was it, you know, it was obviously hard for you early on but can—can you talk about that in a little bit of detail?

00:07:59

IW: No, it's hard being out here trying to make a living and people are not coming in—they're afraid to come in. They're throwing bricks. It's—it's bad—it was bad. It's a little bit better.

00:08:15

AE: But the—the demographic of this neighborhood has changed since then, yes?

00:08:19

IW: Yeah, but it's back now to where it was before.

00:08:26

AE: So what's kept you here?

00:08:27

IW: Well, I like the neighborhood, and I like the people and all of them are my friends, so why leave, if you can stay? So that's why I'm holding on.

00:08:40

AE: Did your mother make it up here after you came to Chicago?

00:08:44

IW: She couldn't stand it—being locked up. She couldn't—she had to be free, so she went back home. I built her a nice house, so she didn't have to come back up no more.

00:08:56

AE: Yeah, I remember reading that—that you took care of your mother and she didn't have to work.

00:09:00

IW: I bought the furniture from Polk Brothers and hired a truck—rented a truck—and took the furniture down there—nice furniture. So she enjoyed it; she enjoyed everything.

00:09:14

AE: Do you still have some family down there?

00:09:17

IW: I have a lot of cousins and nephews. But I don't go down there anymore. I'm too old to get around. Not too old, I just don't go.

00:09:28

AE: So let's talk about the food and—and when you started the restaurant and—and how you—you started feeding people.

00:09:33

IW: When I started out here, my breakfast was fifty-one cents. The dinners were seventy-five—after two o'clock they went up to \$1.50. That's about it.

00:09:48

AE: And do you remember the first meal that you made?

00:09:51

IW: Well, we did ham and eggs, bacon and eggs—everything like that.

00:09:57

AE: And so is breakfast something—I mean the sign says you're open twenty-four hours, so breakfast was something that was important for you to have food all day and all night?

00:10:05

IW: Breakfast is all day. And we serve it whenever they want. If they want breakfast, they get breakfast. A lot of people cut it off at one o'clock, but we don't.

00:10:18

AE: So when you named the restaurant Izola's Family Dining, tell me about coming up—coming up with that name.

00:10:23

IW: I did that when I first opened up, and that was the name.

00:10:29

AE: And can you talk about the family dining element and why that was important to you to be a part of the name?

00:10:33

IW: That was a part—it was important for me to know the people and to know how they come around and to help me. So that means a lot; I have a lot of friends. So they're standing by helping me; they stay around.

00:10:49

AE: And they were for support early on from the beginning?

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IW: Always.

00:10:55

AE: So you—you worked at a soul food restaurant here and you started one. Were there very many soul food restaurants here when you first opened Izola's?

00:11:03

IW: It may have been around about four or five. **[Phone Rings]** Four or five, that's about it.

00:11:11

AE: Do you need to catch that or—? And so, again, about your menu and—and your dinners and things and fried chicken and chicken and dumplings, can you talk about developing your menu and—and how you chose what you wanted to serve folks?

00:11:26

IW: Yes. I did that myself. Like pork chops, stewed chicken and dumplings, ham hocks and greens, veal cutlets, liver and onions—so everything on that menu you can get.

00:11:41

AE: And that's stuff you came upon in Tennessee?

00:11:43

IW: Yes, from the people that I used to work with.

00:11:47

AE: So what has that—what has that meant over the years for the people here in Chicago to come here and have, you know, this good Southern home cooking?

00:11:55

IW: Well it's good to see people coming in from out of state to come in here, and I've gotten them all over from that magazine [*Izola's was featured in the October 2007 issue of Saveur magazine*].

00:12:04

AE: From the *Saveur* article that came out this fall?

00:12:06

IW: Right. And they love fried chicken. Mostly that's what they order, fried chicken.

00:12:12

AE: Tell me about your fried chicken?

00:12:15

IW: Well at first I started frying, but now I got someone else to do it so I don't cook anymore. She can—you have to batter it, flour, pepper, garlic and that's about it.

00:12:30

AE: And your fried chicken recipe is published here in this *Saveur* article. Is there—is there maybe a little something special that you left out?

00:12:36

IW: I don't think so, uh-uh.

00:12:39

AE: No? That's the real deal, huh?

00:12:42

IW: It's the real deal, uh-hmm.

00:12:43

AE: So what are you—you said you're not frying chicken anymore but is there a—a dish that you really enjoy making?

00:12:51

IW: I don't cook anymore. I tell them what to do right.

00:12:55

AE: Right. So when—so when you were cooking, was there something that you especially liked to make?

00:13:02

IW: Biscuits. I love to make the biscuits and to do the greens and the beans—things like that.

Hash and rice, liver and onions—they're easy.

00:13:17

AE: So tell me about your greens because in the *Saveur* article they were talking about—you are adding coffee to the pepper vinegar to your greens, no?

00:13:23

IW: Oh, when that—you talking about stuff like that in the container [of vinegar sitting on the table]? We put a little coffee in it to turn it and make it brown, and you put peppers and onions and all in that, so it will be peppered. It makes it nice. And your greens—when you're cooking your greens, you put salt pork in first. And cook that and then you put your greens and let it cook and season them and that's it.

00:13:50

AE: And a little bit of sugar? Do I remember that?

00:13:52

IW: No, I don't like that much sugar. No, uh-um, no—no sugar.

00:13:57

AE: How about your cornbread—your corn muffins today?

00:14:01

IW: They put sugar in cornbread but not that much, uh-hmm. So cornbread you make with eggs, salt, Crisco, sometimes you can even put margarine and make it nice. And then have it real fluffy with eggs. It turns out nice.

00:14:22

AE: And you use the white cornmeal?

00:14:25

IW: Yes. No yellow [cornmeal]. I never did like yellow cornmeal because that's all we had down South—yellow cornmeal—never did like it. So I don't buy it, either, when I—white, only.

00:14:40

AE: So is it just an association with—with home and the South to the yellow cornmeal or is it a flavor difference to you too?

00:14:49

IW: Well, when you're in the South and you don't have no money, you get the corn and you take it to the gin, and they ground it up and make it into yellow cornmeal. That's what we had. I never liked it from that day on, and I don't mind working because I like to have the best. The best you got to work for; nobody will give you no nothing, so that's the way it goes.

00:15:16

AE: So that was a—a decision you made early on that you weren't going to use yellow cornmeal?

00:15:22

IW: Right, that was it. Life has been very good to me, and what about it is that I like people. And if you don't like people, please don't go in the business because this is a business that you have to be friendly. You have to know people. You have to treat them right and you got it made. And meet them and talk to them. A lot of people, they have a business and they don't even speak to you. Me, I practically know everybody that walks through the door.

00:15:53

AE: I believe you.

00:15:54

IW: I make it my business to know you, okay. Right?

00:15:57

AE: Yeah. And when I sat here and had lunch today, you walked in the back door and said—and greeted everyone in the dining room.

00:16:02

IW: Right, that's every day. I never walk through there without stopping.

00:16:07

AE: And now this table that you're sitting at here, is this where you stay all afternoon pretty much?

00:16:12

IW: Different places—people—are sitting here. Every morning it's packed.

00:16:21

AE: So you're here. Even though you're not cooking, you're here all day every day?

00:16:24

IW: Oh, yes, I'm here. I better be here, keep things going. If not, something goes wrong, and I'm here to straighten it.

00:16:31

AE: And people expect to see you, of course.

00:16:34

IW: Yes, they expect to see me. If I'm not here, they think I'm sick.

00:16:39

AE: So tell me more about breakfast, too, because I notice that you have brains and eggs on the menu for breakfast. Tell me about that.

00:16:44

IW: Well brains—we don't have brains anymore with that cow thing [*Mad Cow Disease*], they cut that out. So I was selling like fifty pounds of—of brains a week. And brains are hard to clean—to get the veins out and all like that, yeah. But people love brains; they still ask for them. But they haven't turned them loose yet for me to order—to buy them anymore.

00:17:14

AE: Interesting. And then salmon patties, were those—do I remember those on your breakfast menu, too?

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IW: Yeah, salmon patties, that's on breakfast and dinner. We sell a lot of it.

00:17:25

AE: Can you tell me about—a little bit about what you put in a salmon patty?

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IW: Oh, we put onions, eggs, cornmeal, salt, pepper, that's it, and mix it together.

00:17:38

AE: And then I mentioned before we started that I was hoping you might share how you—how you make your dumplings for your chicken and dumplings because I had that for lunch today.

00:17:44

IW: We boil the chicken; we use a chicken base to season it. In the flour we put salt, ice water, mix it up and Crisco, and you roll them out real thin and the—the broth has got to be real hot, and you drop them, but you can't drop them all at one time. You cook so many at a time and to the side and drop some more because if you don't, they all glue together. That's about it.

00:18:18

AE: And you serve it with a whole piece of chicken instead of—?

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IW: A fourth of a chicken yes—a fourth of a chicken on a platter and put the—the dumplings on top in the juice.

00:18:31

AE: That's a lot of food.

00:18:31

IW: Very good. That's what you had, wasn't it?

00:18:35

AE: Yes, ma'am.

00:18:36

IW: Okay, so a lot of people like for them to be a little yellow, but I like for them to be white. You put that color in, and it turns it a little yellow. It makes it look nice. Sometimes they put too much, and I tell them don't put anymore.

00:18:51

AE: Do you have an idea why people prefer them a little more yellow?

00:18:55

IW: I don't know, but they don't say anything about it anymore. Whatever we fix they—that's it. You know it's going to be right.

00:19:02

AE: And so the dinners like the dinner I had today, it was \$10 and I had a salad, a soup—

00:19:10

IW: Two side dishes.

00:19:13

AE: —and two side dishes and—and the cornbread, in addition to my main meal. Have you always had that—that big spread for dinner?

00:19:20

IW: Yes. Yeah, we always have it like that. You have your choice of two vegetables, your salad, your coffee or hot tea and your meat.

00:19:32

AE: That's a lot of food.

00:19:33

IW: And I don't put the food together; they go on side dishes because I don't like food in the soup. [*To server*] Thank you, baby. [*Laughs*] And we give it—most of them give salad or soup but we give them both.

00:19:50

AE: And now the soup today was like a chicken noodle. Do you have—do you vary that up a lot?

00:19:55

IW: It's different. You might have that one day and the next day might be bean soup, vegetables—different soup every day.

00:20:04

AE: Does—does every day have a specific soup so people know what kind of soup they're giving, or you just mix it up however it works out?

00:20:08

IW: Say they want soup, we just bring soup—whatever it is. That's it.

00:20:15

AE: So do you have one of your dinners that's more popular than the rest?

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IW: Short ribs. A lot of people love short ribs. The young man right there love liver and onions. He likes short ribs.

00:20:32

AE: How do you do your short ribs?

00:20:34

IW: Well I shouldn't tell you. [*Laughs*] I'm not going to tell you that.

00:20:39

AE: Okay.

00:20:39

IW: Somebody else will be doing that, so I can't let everything go.

00:20:42

AE: All right, fair enough. Fair enough.

00:20:44

IW: I can't tell you about the short ribs. If they don't know, they'll never learn it from me.

00:20:49

AE: All right. And I forgot to mention in my dinner I also had ice cream; I had a dessert as a part of my dinner.

00:20:54

IW: Right, yeah, we serve dessert. Sometimes we might have peach cobbler, bread pudding, ice cream. We have ice cream every day. You have a choice.

00:21:03

AE: Do you ever do cakes or pies?

00:21:04

IW: We only do sweet potato pies.

00:21:11

AE: Tell me about your sweet potato pie.

00:21:15

IW: Well they're very good, but I don't get a chance to make them anymore. The cooks makes it. They use—they cook the sweet potatoes and then they mash them up and put the egg, the cinnamon, your butter and beat them up real good and put them in your crust and put them—let them bake. They turn out nice.

00:21:33

AE: Do you ever sell those whole or you just have them as dessert for the dinner?

00:21:38

IW: On Thanksgiving we serve at least about fifty potato pies—sweet potatoes. They just call in from all over. “We want five, we want ten,” you know. So, okay—but I don't do it anymore because the other cook, he got sick, and it's too hard for me to carry on with that. So we just forgot about it. We just do pies here—sweet potato pies here. Just if somebody want one and we have it, we'll let you have it.

00:22:05

AE: And in the *Saveur* article it mentioned that your favorite ingredient is sweet potatoes.

00:22:08

IW: Right. People love sweet potatoes and sweet potatoes during the summer, it's hard. They are new potatoes and they are hard to cook, so most of the time we really don't need bother with sweet potatoes during the summer because they're hard, and they don't never get done, yeah.

00:22:33

AE: So what is it that you like about them as an ingredient? You like their taste or you like their versatility?

00:22:39

IW: I like the way we season them—the way we season them and they're good and, of course, I like baked sweet potatoes. They are good. So you put whatever you want on them—butter—take them out. Nice.

00:22:54

AE: And tell me about some of the other things on your menu. You have some sandwiches and things, too, that aren't—aren't your big dinners.

00:22:59

IW: We have roast beef and we have tuna, bacon-lettuce-tomato, pork chop sandwich, practically the kind of sandwich that you want—salami. We don't have liver sausage because I don't like liver. Anything I don't like, I don't serve. **[Laughs]** So it don't make sense for me to do that. So that's about it—combination salads, you know—chicken salad, tuna cold plate, everything like that. You can get that any time.

00:23:34

AE: That's a real big menu that you keep. Did you start out with the menu that big?

00:23:38

IW: Yes, everything on that menu we have.

00:23:44

AE: For fifty-one years you've had the same things on the menu?

00:23:47

IW: That's right. You got ten things off our dinner menu. A lot of people only have two or three. But we have all of it.

00:23:55

AE: So now tell me about this building and—and was this one half original and you expanded?

00:24:04

IW: No, this was all—next over there [where the large dining room is] was a beauty school. She passed and it was for rent, so we knocked a hole through and then went over and made a dining room, so that's it.

00:24:18

AE: Okay. About what year was that?

00:24:19

IW: [Nineteen] Seventy-two.

00:24:21

AE: So then before then it was just these five or so tables [and a counter]?

00:24:24

IW: Right. Thirty seats. Thirty-two people.

00:24:29

AE: So they're—that's—there are four tables and a counter.

00:24:35

IW: Booth—since I've been here, I think I had about five sets of booths all different colors—orange, blue, whatever. I decide to change the colors, we change colors.

00:24:49

AE: So when the—before you expanded, then, and opened that dining room—but you carried a steady stream of people through here. It was pretty crowded.

00:24:59

IW: Yes. Open twenty-four hours, it would be packed. It's when people—out at night and get hungry and don't have no place—so they come here and this is the only place that's opened twenty-four hours now.

00:25:12

AE: So what made—what made you want to be open twenty-four hours, being a single woman, female business owner?

00:25:17

IW: It's too hard on me to get up at five o'clock in the morning and open up, so that's what I did. Twenty-four hours made it easy for me. I didn't have to be to work until eight o'clock, uh-hmm.

00:25:28

AE: So you had a night crew that would take care of business for you?

00:25:34

IW: Right. I have very nice employees.

00:25:37

AE: You have some employees that have been with you for a long time?

00:25:39

IW: I have one that's been with me for about thirty years, maybe others twenty-four.

00:25:49

AE: Are they—they're in the kitchen, or they're on the floor?

00:25:50

IW: No, out front, uh-hmm. Both of them was managers. One on the midnight shift, she thinks she owns the place. She thinks she's me. That's Sandy, but she's nice; she's good, yes. And Mattie is the other one; she was manager during the day. But she's been kind of sick, so she comes in maybe three times a week. But I'm here every day.

00:26:24

AE: Yeah. So tell me about some of the changes over all these five decades that you've been in the restaurant business.

00:26:31

IW: It's been a lot of changes. We had all blacks own their business, but they all sold to Chinese and everybody else but I'm—it's only about three or four blacks that's still here as been as long as I have. The rest of them are not—. They sell and gone out of business.

00:26:59

AE: And what—what are some of the other long-time places that you're thinking of—the three?

00:27:06

IW: I don't know. They got a few places down the street there, but they don't come in here, uh-um.

00:27:15

AE: So how did you get word out about your restaurant when you first started?

00:27:19

IW: Just the people would pass by and see, and they'd come in and like the way things—liked the way things were and how the food was and that was it.

00:27:31

AE: So you got customers just in passing by and then word of mouth, of course, I'm sure, after they had your good food.

00:27:37

IW: And a lot of people from out of town. This book [*Saveur* magazine] has brought me a lot of people.

00:27:42

AE: Have you had many white folks as customers?

00:27:45

IW: That's what I'm talking about. Shit. [*Laughs*].

00:27:49

AE: Out of town doesn't mean white, now.

00:27:51

IW: No, no, no, we get a lot of whites, Indiana and all around. One lady says, "We come here, and we want to see Izola." So I went to the table, and I gave them the menus. I said, "You want to see who?" She said, "I want to see Izola." Well I had on a dress. I'm clean, and my hair is white and so she said—I said, "You know what? We could really pass as sisters because you're looking at Izola." She grabbed and hugged me, yeah, uh-hmm. She said, "We want some chicken." Everybody eats chicken. I have one fellow coming in, he says, "I love the chicken—so good. But can't I go back there and see how they cook it?" I said, "Sure." He was white—a young white fellow. I said, "Sure, go on back there. They'll show you." He went back there and stayed about an hour and a half just to see how they could make the chicken. And he said, "I know I can do it now myself." [*Phone Rings*] Yeah, God has been very good to me. Very good.

00:28:55

AE: So have you ever—so the press that you got from this magazine, have you ever had any press like that before? That's a big national—.

00:29:02

IW: Never. Everybody—and I got—[*Chicago*] *Sun Times* did a thing on me.

00:29:09

AE: Has that totally changed your business with the people that it's brought in and the exposure you've gotten?

00:29:14

IW: It's good—it's good. It's good and this man come from California, he did a thing on me, and this one is still going around. Yeah. [To employee] Little Bit, bring me the thing from *Sun Times*. [Article is "*Stirring Up Good Fortune*," by Chuck Sudo, *Chicago Sun Times*, January 2, 2008.]

00:29:37

AE: So that's something for people from far away to hear about you and—and come on down.

00:29:42

IW: Yeah. . [To employee] Little Bit, what's the man that come in from New—California and did a thing on me? Garby? Garby did a thing on me from California? This what the *Sun Times* did.

00:30:02

AE: Oh, okay and it has a recipe for your black-eyed peas and ham hocks.

00:30:07

IW: Black-eyed, hams—ham hocks. You cook the ham hocks first. Cook them done. And then you take the broth from the ham hocks and cook your black-eyed peas. You clean your black-eyed peas. You can let them sit for a while there, you know, and take all that black out of them and then cook them. They're good.

00:30:29

AE: Do you serve black-eyed peas on New Year's Day?

00:30:33

IW: We have black-eyed peas today on the dinner.

00:30:35

AE: Yeah? I didn't see that.

00:30:36

IW: Yeah.

00:30:38

AE: And now here in this article they list the nutrition facts for your black-eyed peas and ham hocks: 1,180 calories per serving.

00:30:47

IW: Right. So we fixed for them the platters of ham hocks and greens and fried chicken and candied sweets and something else. So they took pictures of it, and so when they got through that they said, "What are you going to do with this food?" I said, "Well I'm just going to take it back

there and do something with it.” “Can we have it?” I said, “Sure.” So they sat there and ate all of that—pork chops, chicken, everything. They enjoyed it.

00:31:20

AE: I bet they did. [*Laughs*]

00:31:25

IW: Very nice.

00:31:27

AE: So is it—and you say that they were white. Is it surprising you that white folks like your food?

00:31:34

IW: Well, you know what, I’ll tell you what happened. After this, they started coming in. They went to another place, and they asked if they could take pictures and they said [to] come back on a Wednesday. I don’t want to call the name [of the restaurant]. So they come here the same day that evening and started—said, “Can we take pictures?” I said, “Sure, you can take pictures.” They took pictures. They come back that Sunday, and the dining room had white tablecloths and people coming in from church all dressed. That’s when they got me. They stayed in here for almost two weeks taking pictures. It was nice. It was really nice, and that was free. It didn’t cost me a penny. I couldn’t pay for this; it would be too much money. But that is like I was telling you, there is a God, and he sure is good because he works with me. Yeah.

00:32:42

AE: So what does soul food mean to you?

00:32:45

IW: Well I really don't consider myself as being soul food. I just consider it as being a restaurant with decent food, and it's not pig tails, neck bones, or nothing like that—greasy food. My food is not greasy, so I don't consider myself being soul food.

00:33:07

AE: Okay. So you would consider the other that you just listed—the neck bones and all that—that would be soul food to you?

00:33:10

IW: I never listed but everybody just said it. Right. *[Laughs]* So other than that, everything has been good.

00:33:21

AE: So then what—what do you think when people call this a soul food place? Is that—is that flattering or unflattering to you?

00:33:28

IW: I don't know. I guess the way—any way you want to take it. But I know I don't serve that. So I don't consider it being soul food.

00:33:40

AE: Would you say it's good home cooking—Southern home cooking?

00:33:46

IW: Yeah, that's right.

00:33:48

AE: And so do you—how do you feel about your Southern roots and—and making this kind of Southern home cooking here in Chicago—that connection?

00:33:57

IW: Well I'll tell you what, I really wouldn't want to go back there to live again because I had it hard down there—picking cotton, picking strawberries. I wouldn't—I couldn't go back to that no more. I'd rather stay in the kitchen than to do that. I've been there, done that. A lot of people haven't, but I have and a lot of people—we've talked about it. I talk about it because I know what I went through, but I wouldn't want to do it again. If I had to, I could, but I'm too old for it now so—. *[Laughs]*

00:34:32

AE: Yeah, well and it means something to remember where you came from. So you can appreciate what you have—?

00:34:36

IW: That's right. Hungry a many days because we didn't have nothing. So now I can eat all I want, and I don't mind working. And my mother, she lived good. I made it possible that she had everything that she needed. She didn't have to work for nobody. I was right there for her.

00:34:59

AE: Good for you; that's great.

00:35:01

IW: I also didn't know—a lot of white folks didn't have in Kentucky. At first when I went down there and was buying this house, they was wondering who was buying the house and who is—who is she. They didn't want blacks in their neighborhood, but I went up to get some gas in my car and they said, “Oh, are you the lady buying the house?” I said, “Yes, for my mother.” In the white neighborhood. My neighbor was a white lady; she was really nice. I loved Anne—Anne was one of the best—she and her husband. They looked out after the house if I wasn't there. After my mother passed, they just took care of everything for me. Nice. When I sold the house, her brother-in-law bought the house. It's about a year ago.

00:35:49

AE: And this is in Kentucky now, you say?

00:35:50

IW: Mayfield, Kentucky, uh-hmm.

00:35:56

AE: Well that's—that's an achievement to—to be in a place where you can take care of your mother like that and—and take care of yourself, too.

00:36:02

IW: She had everything. She didn't have to want for nothing—custom made drapes. [**Phone Rings**] The man went down from here down there to put them in. The drapes, I didn't have them in my own house. [**Laughs**] They were nice.

00:36:15

AE: Was your mother surprised at all that you got into the restaurant business up here in Chicago?

00:36:21

IW: Uh-um, she wasn't surprised. I went down there and told her to come and live with me. So she stayed. "I can't stand being locked up. I can't stay here," [she said]. And I said, "Okay, give me two weeks." And I went down there and had a house built from the ground and took her down there, took a truck from Polk Brothers—hired a truck and took the furniture from Polk Brothers and put it down there in the house, custom made drapes. She had everything; she was satisfied. And I would call her—she had two TVs, one in the living room and one in the kitchen, where she could sit there and look at both of them. When I got really a chance to talk to her, it would be like ten o'clock at night—the television goes off and then she wanted to talk until 2:00 in the morning. I said, "Mom, I got to go to sleep." She—she was a doll, yeah.

00:37:16

AE: Was she—she wasn't surprised that you opened a restaurant. Was she surprised how—how good the restaurant was to you?

00:37:21

IW: Yeah, she was surprised that I could do things that I could do for her and she lived good. She didn't have to want for nothing.

00:37:32

AE: And you were talking about being a black business owner starting out, but what about being a woman business owner?

00:37:41

IW: I guess then a woman is—is hard too. Whatever you do, you have to work at it, plus you got to be a good person. You can't do no wrong to run a business. You've got to be right. And I'm straight with all my salesmen. They all—I can get anything I want from them.

00:38:04

AE: Now are these salesmen that you've had a relationship with all the years you've been in business?

00:38:08

IW: Yes. Paper Supply, ever since I been in business. And I do business with Monarch's. I do—down the street here—I do business with them. They are really my good customers—my good friends that I get all my meat and things from them. So they're white.

00:38:27

AE: And what's that company name?

00:38:29

IW: Huh?

00:38:29

AE: What's that meat company name?

00:38:31

IW: Monarch is one. And I can't think of it, but down here on 79th Street way over before you get to Vincennes [Avenue]. Why can't I think of his—? I can't even think. But anyway, that's where I buy a lot of my stuff from—meat, eggs, anything I need, all I got to do is call and they deliver it.

00:38:59

AE: Early on, was it hard to find specific things that you wanted that were hard to get in the city here?

00:39:04

IW: Uh-um. No, uh-um.

00:39:08

AE: And the—the recipes that you were cooking from when you started out, were they all in your hear or are they—they things that you brought in a family cookbook or—?

00:39:16

IW: From my mother, uh-hm.

00:39:21

AE: Did you have them written down?

00:39:21

IW: Nope.

00:39:24

AE: Are any of them written day today for your staff to use?

00:39:27

IW: Nope.

00:39:28

AE: Really?

00:39:30

IW: Uh-um. [*Laughs*]

00:39:29

AE: So you teach everybody coming through and—and they all know the recipes by heart.

00:39:35

IW: Right, that's right. I show them how to do it.

00:39:38

AE: So with—with all these recipes you have published now with this one in the *Chicago Sun Times* and the ones in *Saveur*, have you ever thought about doing a cookbook of your own?

00:39:49

IW: No, I don't have the time. I'm too old now. I wouldn't even enjoy it because since—I have asthma, and a lot of times you don't feel good. So I just want to be me.

00:40:02

AE: I hear you. So then this dining room, when you opened that in—in the early [nineteen] '70s, was that immediately full all the time that you—you—that was a long time coming?

00:40:15

IW: Yes, we have nice clientele. On Sundays we have tablecloths and table napkins—white—and everybody have a lot of church people. We're packed. On a Saturday we have about forty—say 8:30 or nine o'clock, all the judges, all the doctors, all the police—everybody that's important is in my dining room. And then the regular people come in. It's full.

00:40:50

AE: Now how do you explain that all the important people come to you?

00:40:52

IW: Because they want a place to come where they can relax and people is not fighting, the streets is clean, the place is clean, and the waitresses are clean, and it's just—they just come. Now just like that young man right there, every day—every day nobody bothers him. And that's good because a lot of places you go in there's so many that you can't even—and they're not buying nothing—just running their mouth, running, arguing, and bad-talking and stuff. I don't like that in here.

00:41:35

AE: Now, does that have something to do with the minimum charges in the dining room of \$2 and something?

00:41:43

IW: It has something to do with it.

00:41:45

AE: Yeah, so you have—that's been important to you from the beginning to have a respectable establishment and a certain look and feel—

00:41:51

IW: It's the way I want it, and I have my own say—what I way to say in it, and I will say.

[Laughs] I will say. Yeah.

00:42:03

AE: So tell me about that with your, you know, five decades in the business and—and the reputation that you've—you've generated over the years and—and the clientele that you have and the people who come through and—and what that means to be a part of this community now and be so respected.

00:42:20

IW: When I first come to Chicago I met a lot of people. As being a waitress, you'll meet them. I met Judge Pincham and his wife; I remember when they got married. They were my best friends.

If anything happened to me, that's who I went to for [*Laughs*] protection. And he—he's a nice Judge. Well he's sick right now but Judge Pincham is a doll. The whole family—his daughter is a doctor.

00:42:53

AE: And tell me a little bit more about politics in Chicago, relative to your restaurant. You have a lot of very large portraits of—of people like former Mayor [Harold] Washington [*Chicago's first black mayor*] and—and folks in the dining room there.

00:43:07

IW: Mayor Washington, I decided that he was running for mayor right in here—he and Congressman [Charles] Hayes. So I'm sitting at the table and I said, "Why don't you run for mayor?" He said, "Well, that's what we're talking about." So he said, "Izola, I got something to tell you." I said, "What is it?" "I'm running for mayor, and Charlie is going to take my place." So that's how it happened. So I said, "Well let me have a fundraiser for you." He said, "No, have it for Charlie. Charlie needs the money, and I'll give a fundraiser at my house for Charlie." And then I had one for him at my house. And then I had three in here: I had a fundraiser for Eugene Sawyer, one for Judge Pincham, one for Congressman Hayes and Mayor Washington. The biggest one was at my house. So I said, "The money—" He said, "Keep the money. I'll be on a Monday to pick it up." And I said, "Okay." We counted out the checks and the money. I said, "Checks—money will travel but checks won't." So he come that following Monday to pick his money up.

00:44:29

AE: So then what was—what was Chicago like and your restaurant like and that whole dynamic during Mayor Washington’s term?

00:44:35

IW: It was very rough at first. But he made it; he got to be mayor. And the other fellow that was running—I can’t—Epton [Bernard Epton], I believe his name—that same night that Mayor Washington won Epton got sick, and I think he died that next day. Jane Byrne lost and he was the one that won. It was good. And then when he died, you know, it was—it was sad. It was sad. And then they had the funeral reception was out downtown; that’s the only one that’s ever been like that. People standing in line all day and all night to see, but security was by—was by me so they come at my house and picked me up and walked me through. It was nice.

00:45:37

AE: So talk about that connection with—with what a person like you and a restaurant like this does for people in politics and—and what they do for you and what that relationship is about.

00:45:49

IW: They don’t do anything for me. They just come in and have a meeting or something like that and they pay. As far as giving me anything, no, never have.

00:46:04

AE: So you’re just an oasis of support and—and comfort in the community here in your restaurant?

00:46:10

IW: It's people coming—not the people in the neighborhood. Some of them never been in here. People that drives in their cars. I wish you was around here on a Saturday and you could see what I was talking about. You'd be shocked. I mean important people. Everybody is dressed.

00:46:35

AE: So this—has this Sunday white tablecloth [tradition], has that been a tradition since the beginning?

00:46:41

IW: Yes, uh-hmm, yes. It makes everything nice. I have bus boys on their—they get dirty they put a clean one back on and set them back up.

00:46:55

AE: And do you have it—is it just first come, first served, or do people save a table?

00:46:59

IW: I don't take reservations, uh-um. Because when you do that, someone isn't going to show, anyway, and you got a table there waiting. Uh-um, I don't do that.

00:47:08

AE: So is all day Sunday pretty much—pretty much packed?

00:47:10

IW: Yes, like twenty-four hours. We will take tablecloths off on a Sunday night like ten o'clock.

00:47:22

AE: And tell me about that jukebox you have in there. Is—is that something that is used pretty often?

00:47:27

IW: Oh, they play it all the time, yep.

00:47:29

AE: Do you ever have parties or anything in there where you move the tables and there's dancing or anything?

00:47:34

IW: Uh-um, it makes it rough. You bring in a rough crowd, so I don't want that.

00:47:45

AE: So have you ever had any—any trouble with the rough crowd kind of encroaching on your place here? Yeah?

00:47:52

IW: Five girls got to fighting and broke my big—one of those big mirrors [in the main dining room]. A month ago, they got to fighting, and it broke that window out right there, cut a man upside the head. Oh, they're bad. But I have security here, but it don't do no good. And I tell the girls now, when they started arguing, call the police then; don't wait until they start fighting.

00:48:20

AE: But other than—than some incidents here and there—do people pretty much just know and respect your place for who you are and—and what this is?

00:48:28

IW: I think so, yeah. I think so.

00:48:33

AE: And [let's] talk about politics again. You have an “Obama for President '08” cap on that has your name on the back of it. Tell me about that.

00:48:41

IW: Yes, right, well I really hopes he makes—because I had a party, and he was at my house with Jesse Jackson, Jr. So I hope he makes it. His wife is a doll, and he's got some pretty kids—two daughters, yeah. He's a nice young man.

00:48:55

AE: So do you see yourself as—as an influential member of the community that—that has a hand in—in politics, local and national?

00:49:06

IW: I don't know. I couldn't say yes, but my church is right around the corner. And they are—that's a good church. His father was my minister before he died and his aunt—his uncle and his name is Reverent Thurston—Thurston—Reverend Thurston. He can really preach, yeah. So that's about it.

00:49:42

AE: Have you had a relationship with Senator [Barack] Obama before his presidential race?

00:49:48

IW: No, uh-um. No, uh-uh.

00:49:54

AE: Did you admire what he was doing in the city and—and for the—for the—?

00:49:58

IW: Yeah, he's a nice young man, nice family. Everything is good about him. You never hear nothing that was bad.

00:50:09

AE: Well being someone who grew up in Tennessee picking cotton and made her way in Chicago as a black female business owner, what would it mean to you to have a black president?

00:50:19

IW: It would be great; it would be great. It was the same way with Mayor Washington—the same way with him. They didn't like him at first, but they all come to love him.

00:50:35

AE: So in—in your dining room with these big portraits is that—tell me how you came to want to do that—to have those big portraits in the dining room next door.

00:50:44

IW: Oh, that was brought in, and give it to me after he died. Congressman Hayes, they come in and brought me that one. So I had the photographer man that does frames for pictures and portraits, he come and got them and fixed them. I think that one over there for Congressman Hayes was \$140 and one was for the Mayor, and I think it might have been \$200-something. It was worth it. And I have president—you met Jones right there; he's got a whole other side—a big portrait of it. And hmm, Channel 7—his picture is over there. He's sick right now. All of them have been my friends—all of them, the policemen here retired, Sergeant, Lieutenant, some has passed away but they all nice, good, and they was right here with me.

00:51:55

AE: So you're—you're full of policemen and—and politicians. Do you have some Hollywood folks come in here from time to time? Movie stars?

00:52:06

IW: No. If they do, they come in when I'm not here. Uh-hmm, no. I'm sure some has been through here, you know, but I'm not here no twenty-four hours so—.

00:52:21

AE: So what would you say is the future of Izola's Family Dining?

00:52:27

IW: Well I really don't know. I hope I can continue to keep doing what I'm doing now and keep my health. And God has been so good to me, and I'm sure that I will continue. With him on my side, I see no other way.

00:52:45

AE: Well now you—you retired from working in the kitchen, but do you have someone in line to take over—take the reins of the restaurant when you're done with it?

00:52:54

IW: I have no one. They just have to learn from themselves.

00:52:59

AE: Do you hope to see it continue—continue on as Izola's?

00:53:03

IW: I hope so. I hope so. I'm going to try.

00:53:12

AE: Well what else can you tell me about being in the restaurant business for—for all these years?

00:53:17

IW: That's about it. That's about it.

00:53:21

AE: Tell me how you got your name, Izola.

00:53:23

IW: Oh, I don't know. My mother and them they named me, so it's an odd name.

00:53:33

AE: It's a beautiful name—beautiful, unique name.

00:53:36

IW: But I've never heard anyone else—have you?

00:53:37

AE: No.

00:53:39

IW: Me either. And no, I don't know. It just happened that was what my mother did. She was a—a lovely person and I loved her—still do. We talk together at night when I'm in bed.

00:54:03

AE: And was she from Tennessee, originally, or did she end up there somehow?

00:54:08

IW: Kenton, Tennessee. Uh-hmm, yeah. She moved to Kentucky after I left to come here.

00:54:18

AE: So do you have any words of—of wisdom or things that you'd like to let people know about your restaurant here?

00:54:27

IW: No. All I can say is that if you have a business, love your customers because you're not important—they are. That's the way I feel.

00:54:39

AE: All right.

00:54:39

IW: I'm here as a servant, and they're my hearts. That's about it.

00:54:47

AE: Well that's a good note to end on. Thank you, ma'am for sitting—sitting with me. I've enjoyed it.

00:54:51

[End Izola White Interview]