

LAWRENCE & NOI ALLEN
Asia Market – Houston, TX

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Interviewer: Amy C. Evans
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[Begin Lawrence & Noi Allen-Asia Market]**00:00:00**

Amy Evans: Testing, testing. One, two. This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Monday, June 30, 2014. And I am in Houston, Texas, at Asia Market, a Thai market and restaurant here on the north side of town. And if I could get you, Lawrence and Noi, to introduce yourselves for the record, I'll ask more—oh, okay. **[Laughs]** Deferring to each other. I'm going to make Noi introduce herself first, please, and—and share your—your role in the restaurant.

00:00:36

Noi Allen: Okay; my name is Narumol Allen, just call me N-o-i—Noi. And just—we are the owner and actually owner and we do a lot of the day-to-day work and whatever it needs in the restaurant part and also grocery because we have both.

00:00:57

AE: Okay. And Lawrence, if you would introduce yourself, please?

00:00:59

Lawrence Allen: All right. Lawrence Allen, co-owner, partner in Asia Market. Daily activities include picking up vegetables, cooking, stocking, waiting, busing, taking out trash, mopping the floor; just do everything that needs—anything that needs to be done to get the job done daily.

00:01:18

AE: Sure. Okay. And as promised, in the follow-up question I want to ask y'all to share your birth dates for the record. Noi, please?

00:01:23

NA: Okay. September 24, 1973.

00:01:26

LA: You want the exact day? October 2, 1960.

00:01:33

AE: Okay. And if we could go back to—first, let me ask you each where you were born, if I may, and I'll start with Noi.

00:01:41

NA: Where—Bangkok, Thailand.

00:01:43

AE: Lawrence?

00:01:45

LA: Cincinnati, Ohio.

00:01:47

AE: Okay; so tell me how y'all came together and how—how and where you met. Who wants to tell that story?

00:01:55

LA: We met in Southern California. I believe it was Cerritos, California, at the time, 19—what?

00:02:07

NA: Nineteen ninety-nine.

00:02:08

LA: Ninety-nine. Yeah, ninety-nine, okay. Yeah, just going to school—computer school yeah.

00:02:16

AE: So you were both going to computer school?

00:02:17

NA: Yes, we did. Yes, at that time. That's what we did, I guess, part of the work that we did at that time, so yeah.

00:02:28

LA: Yeah. Actually—actually, for me, it was get some additional computer training and knowledge because that was my interest at the time. And that's kind of—my job, that wasn't what I did primarily, but my interest was high in the area. I guess in the late [nineteen] '90s, computers were almost in—not in infancy but coming out to—to be more popular. The 486, I guess, at that time, was really the dominant computer speed, with like oh, ah, wow, you know. So since then, it's grown—I don't know, a thousand-fold if it—. So I was going to school after

working, paying for it myself to get some more knowledge for—in computers. Windows 3.1, I believe it was, right, right, right. It was, yeah.

00:03:13

AE: Now how is it that you got from Ohio to California?

00:03:15

LA: Oh, that's a long—that's a long story. As a child, you don't have much choice in where you go, so my step-father, at the time, moved us to—well, I was born there, born there first of all and from there at nine, I guess, we moved to Boston. And then from Boston, some time in the Service, which from—from Boston and from all around the South. I was in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia for school and Basic Training, and then a year in Korea. And then I got out of the Service at Fort Irwin, California. That's how I got to California, yeah.

00:04:04

AE: Okay. What part of the Service were you in?

00:04:05

LA: The Army, the Army four years active. Yeah.

00:04:08

AE: May I ask what you thought about the American South when you were there in Georgia and South Carolina?

00:04:13

LA: I was really immune to it because I was kind of young, naïve, and shielded because I was in the Service, so I really didn't get a real feel for it, I don't think. Yeah, because, you know, you're young and naïve, you don't, you know—. You're being off—you're being—lack of transportation means you're confined mainly to the ability to get off base, which means, if you can't get off base, you stay on base, and that's your world. *[Laughs]*

00:04:39

AE: All the barracks look the same?

00:04:39

LA: All the barracks look the same, you know, activities are limited, you know, and so that's— that's what I did on base is what—what could be done and did that. And then you leave. Then I left and went to Basic School and then a year at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, the home of the 82nd Airborne. But I was not airborne. I kept my feet on the ground, just signal—I was in communications area, yeah.

00:05:07

AE: And Noi, may I ask how you got from Bangkok to California?

00:05:11

NA: I finished my Bachelor Degree in Thailand in Computer Science and decided to come to the U.S. for my Master's and MBA. So I went to school in Kalamazoo, Michigan. It's Western Michigan University. So I finished my Master's there and decided to move to L.A. because I had

my cousin live over there. I lived with her at that time and looked for a job, and I got a job.

That's why I went to school, and I met Lawrence there.

00:05:41

AE: May I ask how y'all came to meet each other in school and what you remember—
impressions of each other might have been?

00:05:51

LA: The class was a small class, so that probably forced us to all get to know the class—our fellow classmates, so that's a contributing factor, you know. I think it was less than ten in the class and people started dropping out as you go on and it got to be less and less, so—. [*Laughs*] You know, we ended up working together and, you know, one thing led to another, you know. And she asked me out, you know. No, no—no, just things, you know, things happen and you get to know people and friendships and—

00:06:19

NA: Get to talk.

00:06:20

LA: Right, talk. And here we—and that started it, let's say. It's not here we are. That started it, yeah.

00:06:27

AE: May I ask what year that was?

00:06:28

LA: As with many men, I have bad memories; so Noi can answer that one. [*Laughs*]

00:06:37

NA: The year right? Nineteen ninety-nine, yeah. I think ninety-nine, yeah.

00:06:44

AE: Okay, so fifteen years ago. And I wonder—and I’m leading up to your ownership of the restaurant and your intricate knowledge, it appears to me, of Thai food and ingredients. Did you have any relationship with Thai culture before you met Noi?

00:07:00

LA: No. No, I did not. But—but as a youngster, I was always in—involved in my mom’s cooking. And we used to have—I remember, growing up we—she’d have—we had this huge Thanksgiving, well dining table and we’d put a couple leafs in it, and we’d be cooking Thanksgiving dinner the day before, two days before preparing everything, you know, the potatoes that she—her famous pineapple upside down cake. Just everything. I was always in there, cooking and helping her. So—so my ability, I guess, to pick up knowledge and do stuff is—is part of how I’m able to do so much now, you know, and—and where it comes from, I don’t know, just curiosity is—is the main factor. And being here and that’s—that obviously has paid off because—because my knowledge of what we have and what we do is just—I have—. I’m not—I’m curious and I want to know, so—.

00:08:00

AE: And Noi, did you know that about him and his background and interest in cooking when y'all met?

00:08:05

NA: Not really but I—I know he's a good cook. Yeah, he cooked a lot, and his food is good and—and one thing about him is he—he's not afraid to try. You know Thai food is different, so things—you may not have seen it before, and he's not afraid. He just tries it and he sees—he would tell me this one he likes and this one he doesn't, which is good. At least you try it. Yeah, and that's him.

00:08:31

AE: So had you had Thai food at all before meeting Noi?

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LA: Maybe once or twice but to the extent that I do now no. It's, you know, because in California there's just so much more to do in Southern California. So one particular style or brand or fashion doesn't really stick out as much, you know. I think everyone knows Chinese food, American Chinese food, and probably some others but Thai didn't really—didn't really register with me. If I hadn't been in Korea a year, that probably was more in my mind, more prevalent in my mind, but you know—.

00:09:09

AE: Now when you were dating, Noi, did you cook for him?

00:09:12

NA: Yeah. Yeah, a lot right?

00:09:15

LA: I don't—my memory is fading again. [*Laughs*]

00:09:19

NA: Yeah. Yeah, we cooked together a lot and he—he was helping me, yes.

00:09:25

AE: Great. So tell me how y'all—tell me when you got married and how you ended up in Houston.

00:09:33

LA: I can give you the—my memory—2006, right?

00:09:39

NA: Yeah.

00:09:40

LA: January 2006, oh abroad, though, not here.

00:09:44

NA: No. I mean, married?

00:09:45

LA: Right.

00:09:47

NA: Two thousand five.

00:09:47

LA: Two thousand five, see.

00:09:49

NA: Two thousand six is the year we moved here from—from—yeah.

00:09:54

LA: Two thousand five, okay, corrected, is the marry date. A1nd 2006 we—we moved here after the company I worked for Dow Chemical in—in Long Beach had sold the terminal to Vopack Logistics Company and, because of my interest in computers, I was their IT guy that did the HMI programming which is a—or MMI they might call it now, Man Machine Interface or Human Machine Interface. I did the programming for the Allen Bradley POC Lateral Logic Programming. And so the IT person at that time, she—they noticed that I did this, and their interest in wanting to automate the terminal out here, which was bought this year. They—they—I came out a few times, I called it a scouting trip to find a house, you know, and—and they paid for everything. And that’s how we ended up in Houston, yeah. Plus we wanted—we wanted a home because California at the time it was—it still is and I’m not going to say it was—it remains

difficult to get into the house market, if you don't—you know, if you want a home, standalone, you know. It may be easier for an apartment or a condo, you know. But yeah, that was a—a factor that drove us here, yeah.

00:11:17

AE: And Noi, what did you think about coming to Texas and, not only that, but leaving your cousins behind?

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NA: It's a challenge. I—I had a job there and I liked it and—but, you know, I think you just have to move on. We looked into the future that we're going to have a house, and it's better that we started here. So, yeah, I mean, it's—it's exciting, so I'm not that—I don't feel very bad or anything.

00:11:45

AE: Do y'all have children?

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NA: No, not together but he has two children.

00:11:54

AE: Are there here or are they elsewhere?

00:11:55

LA: No. I have a son, and he's in San Diego right now with—and then my daughter is in Long Beach—Long Beach, California, yeah.

00:12:02

AE: So 2006 isn't that long ago. You've been here eight years. Tell me about the transition from your IT job to restaurant owning.

00:12:11

LA: Oh, gosh. You can probably start that because you—well basically, I guess, we—we always—this is our second business—second one, right? Our second business. We did have a website before, and we used to sell stuff. So our interest has been there—or mine has been there for a long time. So—so in coming here, we had no idea what we were going to do. Well, I had the job, so that was—we were here to work, so—. Then she—she—Noi found a job down in Clear Lake, but the job I had was interesting. It was okay. I did some traveling, and I enjoyed it. I went to Niagara Falls and got to see it from the Canada side, beautiful—in the wintertime, you know, so that was okay. But one thing that kind of probably pushed—pushed us through is two things. One, our own business and also one thing that probably pushed me more is, since Vopack brought me out here, and a new IT manager came in, and he was going around. You know, he first comes in and he doesn't know anybody, and so they only came out to finally meet me where I worked out at Deer Park and he—he was like—sat in my office, you know, and was—. And he said to me, you know, “If you can't do your job, we'll find somebody that can—that can do it.” I'm like, “Wow, you just got here. You don't know me or nothing,” you know. But he might have heard something from somebody else, which happens.

00:13:38

So then this [opportunity] came up. She knew somebody that knows somebody, and then she can take the story from here.

00:13:46

NA: Oh, okay. I had a friend, my—my best friend from Thailand and she was an ex-pat here, at that time, with her husband. And anyway, her husband knows the owner, at that time, that they want to sell the business, Asia Market. So we kind of interested—it's a Thai market, and it is the only Thai market in Houston. So we came by to check it out, and I think that's how we started and being interested, so we bought the business.

00:14:14

AE: Was it a restaurant at the time as well?

00:14:16

NA: You know what? I would say probably grocery and maybe two or three dishes at the time that they served and no table. Just—

00:14:28

LA: It's not—it wasn't a restaurant in the magnitude it is now, but they did serve food. They had a table in the back. Someone could come in and order something to take out. So this has always been some kind of food preparing establishment for many years. So you know—so when we—we took over, we—we actually, I think the first time we looked at it we backed away because the anxiety, you know—a lot of money, didn't have money but—but we jumped in and it was tough. It was tough at first going from—going from what four weeks vacations and

weekends off and holidays to don't know when you're going to get a day off. **[Laughs]** You know, the hours are long, you know; you work somewhere you get—get there at 8:00 and leave at 5:00. Your biggest hassle is the traffic is heavy, you know, right? So now we're working, you know twelve, fourteen hours—twelve to fourteen hours a day, six days a week and the day off we get is—sometimes goes to work also, so—.

00:15:27

AE: Like today. **[Laughs]**

00:15:29

LA: Like today. Like today. But we—you know, we—we get our breaks and we—we find that, you know, that we have to take care of us and our people. So we—we take, you know, time during—the holidays we take time off and like just coming Fourth of July, we'll—we'll take off for the four-day weekends. It—you know, it's to regenerate us and our people because we—we have to take care of them because—. You know, without—they work hard.

00:15:52

NA: They work hard.

00:15:53

LA: Without them, there's no us, and without us, there's no them, so—.

00:15:57

AE: Well I have two questions to go back just a little bit, and one of them, as you mentioned, a web-based business. And you were—were you selling Thai dry goods or some—what was the business?

00:16:07

NA: It's Thai products, but it's all accessories, handbags and mainly they are handbags from Thailand, yeah. And we put—we order it and had it here, and we put it on the website, and we start selling it, yeah. And we did swap meat also in—Rose Bowl in California. Yeah, it was fun. It's something different. We just—just eager about the business; we want to do a business, and so we started, yes.

00:16:36

AE: Okay. And then the—the previous owner that you bought this place from, do you know how long they had been in business before you purchased it?

00:16:43

LA: Actually, we got caught in kind of a gray area from the business selling—the building whole facility selling to a person and then that person selling off a part of it. So if you look at the original owners, they had it probably twenty years. So we look at them as owners because it was only like a two-month period in between. So I would say they had—they had it a long time. Actually, they're the ones who—who built it and put it here. I guess they moved it here, yeah.

00:17:14

NA: That's the first owner, but the one that we bought it from is the other person that bought the business from that original owner. And it's a two-month period at that time that he—he had the business and we bought it from him.

00:17:27

AE: Okay, so just he was turning it over, basically, really quickly.

00:17:31

LA: Right. Right.

00:17:32

AE: Okay. And so then were you—what year was that—that you bought it?

00:17:38

LA: There—the record day for us taking over is January 1, 2008.

00:17:46

AE: Okay. Okay. And so were you doing this business—did it kind of overlap with your day jobs for a while, or did you just jump straight in from your day job to owning a market and restaurant?

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LA: No. Actually, for me, I was on vacation from my corporate job, which—end of the year, so I walked in January—first day back and I quit, cold turkey. I just walked in, took my notebook with me and walked in and quit.

00:18:18

AE: That sounds really satisfying.

00:18:18

LA: No, it was—it was anxious because I had been—I had eighteen years. I had eighteen years fully vested. You know, I had the—you know, the gold watch coming, you know, in time, you know. Some people work for it. You know, you work for that, you know, the pension, 401K, vacation, da-da-da-da. I walked away from all that and people—if people—people listen to this and they go, “Okay.” Some people go, “Why did you do that?” You know? Some people—others will go, “Oh, good. You had guts.”

00:18:45

AE: So—so why did you? If you had the internet-based business and good stable day job, what was it about kind of jumping in with both feet to this market and restaurant business that was appealing? I want to ask both of you that question.

00:18:58

LA: The Internet died. That business died kind of soon after. Well, we were in California; we didn't bring it here with us. We just—we couldn't sustain that one, just for the—for a number of reasons, mainly we just didn't know what to sell. Just ran out of vendors to buy stuff from. But, I

don't know. That's a good question. What appealed? That's—never really—never really asked that question. I never got asked that one. That's a good one. Why did we? Because we didn't know anything.

00:19:29

NA: We didn't know anyone.

00:19:31

LA: We didn't know anyone.

00:19:33

NA: For me, Thai—yeah. I mean, I don't—at that time I didn't have any—that many Thai friends anyway so I don't know why we—. I don't know.

00:19:46

LA: Well, I think for me, I think, okay. It's an established business, been here twenty years. How can you go wrong?

00:19:54

NA: We saw the potential, I guess.

00:19:56

LA: Been here for twenty years, so—or more. I don't know the exact number but, you know, we—how can you go wrong?

00:20:06

AE: So was part of it maybe wanting to get a foot into the Thai community here? Would that be—have been of value when you were thinking about the business?

00:20:15

LA: No, I think just to have a business—entrepreneurship is probably the biggest factor.

00:20:19

NA: That's a big part but yeah, I feel—and I guess because I'm Thai and this is the time I get, and I can see the potential. We have all the ingredients, you know, and we looked into the—to have more food and why just not do it, so—? Yeah; and I feel good when I see all that stuff, you know. It feels like home, I guess. [*Laughs*]

00:20:47

LA: I think she's a bit anxious, and her roots with her parents never really worked for anyone and having their own business and growing up and seeing that and being that was probably a factor involved. You know, I mean you go to school and get a good job, and that's what she did. She went to school and got her degrees, you know, and could get good jobs. But ultimately, I think subconsciously, growing up in a self-employment situation as she did was a factor to go ahead and do it for herself, you know, yeah.

00:21:23

AE: So what kind of business did your family have or do they still have in Bangkok?

00:21:27

NA: No, they're already retired, so the business that we—that they had is the building, like metals and builder business for a long time. But finally they retired and just at home, and I see that growing up. I helped them, maybe not so much but I—I see them doing that and it—I never seen them have to go out and work in the company or go out, you know, to be employees. Maybe that's why. We tried to find something that it's—hopefully it works for us and—yeah, we found it here, so—.

00:22:03

AE: And was working together attractive to you both?

00:22:07

LA: No, not at all.

00:22:09

NA: It's hard because we have to be with each other like twenty-four-seven, really, here, go back home still, so it's—it's hard. It's hard.

00:22:19

AE: Tell me how this business differs from your previous IT jobs and what you were doing before.

00:22:27

LA: Oh, wow.

00:22:28

AE: And maybe also too how they're the same, if anything.

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LA: Well IT is involved so—it's limited, though. Once you set that up, there's really not a lot there, but this is more—I don't think the similarities—it's dissimilar if anything, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Well, anything you got to be adaptive and responsive, so if you—if you use that as something that's a commonality between the two that could be—. You have to be—whatever happens, you have to face it and make a quick decision and solve the problem. And that—that—yeah in my—and if something stumps you, give me some time, and I'll think it through and find a solution. Many times I have. **[Laughs]** Yes. Yeah.

00:23:11

AE: Can you think of an example of that?

00:23:12

LA: Oh, jeez. I don't know. Come up with something. You got anything?

00:23:19

NA: Can't think right now. **[Laughs]**

00:23:21

LA: Yeah, I—I—well, if something breaks down, let's say, which—because we have so much refrigeration, you know, what do you do? It's—usually, it's on a Friday or, you know, and Friday late afternoon, so then you got to respond, you know. And what's the level—what's the—what kind of—is it a refrigerator or a freezer? What do you have to do with the product, and how much product do you have? Do you have space to put it where you got—you know, can you—what can you do with what you have to preserve it? You know, how long will it last in this current situation? When—who can—who is your repairman that can be here that can fix the problem, and can he get here early enough? Is the parts place open tomorrow, you know? That's, you know—if it's a simple problem, I can, you know, identify the problem—can I fix it? No. If not, then you got to call—you know, you got to have a Plan A, a Plan B, you know.

00:24:05

AE: That makes sense. So when y'all got the market, I wonder, Noi, if there were things—talking about the inventory here that you miss from home that you wanted to make sure to stock or kind of talk about what you sell and what you added when you got here?

00:24:21

NA: I think we go by what they already had, which is good, and then since I know the product, I've been in Thailand, and I know what I think is good for Thai, so I tried to add that too to the market, not just wholesale. There is the one Thai wholesaler in Houston that I talk to, so I get to know what they have and maybe they have some specialties that not other wholesales has. And then also we look to the—in L.A., that's a big community and business in L.A.—Thai Town that can provide us with a lot of products that are probably going to be unique and is going to be good for Thai people here, yeah.

00:25:06

AE: Yeah. So you have a lot of dry goods in the aisles here, and this is a very small store, by the way, so maybe three or four aisles of shelved goods and then a lot of fresh ingredients in the refrigeration cases and whatnot. Could you tell me maybe some of the most popular dry good item that sell?

00:25:25

LA: Well, a lot of sauces, for sure, definitely a lot of sauces. Yeah, sauce, noodles, yeah.

00:25:31

NA: Noodle, curried paste, coconut milk, all day. And right now Americans are, you know— whoever wants to cook Thai food can come here.

00:25:40

LA: Yeah, they come in with their cookbooks. After going to Thailand and taking a class or just interest and having never been there but still have interest in Thai cooking, come in with a cookbook or ingredients they got from somewhere, “Do you have this or do you have that?” “Oh yeah, yeah.”

00:25:53

AE: You have it all, huh?

00:25:55

LA: It happens almost daily. Almost daily, you know.

00:25:58

NA: We have pretty much everything in what they're looking for.

00:26:01

LA: Well, we do because—well, we have probably—we find that recipes are—are stacked with unnecessary items to get the results you want. That we get—with what's here because we use it. So if you take away unnecessary items that—that the author has put in a recipe, you can still get the same result.

00:26:24

AE: I wonder if—because, I mean, that strikes a chord in me because I'm thinking about how, probably, a lot of people who want to attempt Thai food think it's too complicated and that it's inaccessible. But then you were telling me that a lot of these recipes are overcomplicated, unnecessarily.

00:26:39

LA: I know what we do to get our results and people try to get the same results with more items, and I don't know if it's actually necessary. **[Laughs]** But, like I say, back to what our results that we get that keep us—that we do daily that is our business, so—.

00:26:57

AE: Can you think of an example of that?

00:26:58

LA: Oh, like—like *pad see ew* [flat rice noodles stir fried with vegetables] or—*pad see ew* or *pad Thai* [thin rice noodles with special sauce, green onions, and cilantro]. *Pad Thai* is, I think there's noodles, sauce, maybe onions, maybe five or six—let's say seven items, let's say that much, just not knowing exact right now. The recipe might call for ten or twelve items and people—some people will say, “I got to have it. I got to have it.” “Well, okay. This is what we use.” That's what I tell them, “This is what we use. We use this and this is—,” you know. And some people are okay and other people are like, well, they're determined to get those twelve items, and I'm saying, “Well, okay. You don't really need them.” But, you know, they're driven, you know, to accomplish this goal, so—.

00:27:39

AE: Do you agree with that, Noi?

00:27:41

NA: Yeah, I think and—and again, there's so many recipes and, you know, they come in with a different one, and we have a different one, and we know what we have and we know what it should work, so a lot of times that they brought in with their recipes it's over-complicated and probably you're going to get the same results anyway.

00:28:05

AE: So where do the recipes that you use here, where do they come from?

00:28:09

NA: We kind of work it out with the cook, a lot of things, but there are a couple things that the cooks—since the previous, the original owner and we—we keep that and people know that we're good like that—the papaya salad and that's how they already have it. But the rest, we kind of work it out. We—I work it out with the cook and come up with the menu and test it and try it and see what it works, yeah.

00:28:36

AE: Is the cook the same from the previous owner or is she different?

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NA: Yes, she's one of the ladies, she's—she works with the—the original owner for a while and then, yeah, she is still working with us since then, yeah.

00:28:52

AE: Could you be able to maybe speak for her about the transition to being more of a restaurant when y'all took over, and did she like the opportunity to serve more Thai dishes?

00:29:03

NA: I guess first, I guess, she likes it. First, she likes to cook and at that time she—she can—only can cook probably three dishes or so. And not so much, you know, mostly probably just the grocery side that they been doing. So now we—she gets to cook more and I—you know, we talk. I ask her, “Is this good? What do you think?” We—we respect her opinions a lot. She's a good

cook. So we kind of work it out what we have or, you know, what—what we're going to do or, you know, like how much we're going to serve and stuff like that, yeah, so—.

00:29:40

AE: Are you ever in the kitchen?

00:29:42

NA: Yeah, pretty much. Actually, when we first started, we just only—me and him and then her and then another lady, so I was in the kitchen a lot, but now since we kind of set up a lot of things, we have quite a bit of help in the back, so I was—I'm always in the front right now, yeah. But I used to be in the kitchen a lot.

00:30:05

AE: So tell me about expanding the menu from the original handful of items that were here. What did you want to make sure to serve or what did you want to serve?

00:30:14

NA: I think what we looked at, at that time, is what we have here like the ingredients that we already have, the vegetables that we always pick up every day. What can we do with it? So I guess we started from there like they said—they only did noodles, maybe a couple noodles, so why not? We just add—before we never had like mung bean noodle or clear noodle. But we have the clear noodle here for sale. We have all the vegetables, and then we just add that. And curry. Not even—do we sell curry? Oh, yeah, only one curry that they did, so now since we have everything else, we just added more curry, so that's how—how we started.

00:31:04

AE: So Lawrence, I remember when I was here with Chris Shepherd [of Underbelly restaurant] before—my first visit—and I was talking about the—I kept calling it the gravy, I think, with the century egg dish and how much like just the sauce is so flavorful and I think—I may be misquoting you, but I think you said you're the sauce man.

00:31:18

LA: I'm the sauce man. [*Laughs*] Right, because I get the task of making the sauces. We have, I don't know how many, five or six, but we need this sauce, we need that—okay, okay, okay. Yeah that's what I do, one of my tasks, almost daily, yeah. Yeah.

00:31:35

AE: And tell me how you got to be trusted with that task.

00:31:37

LA: Wow, it came about gradually, and I didn't realize it until I became—. Yeah—

00:31:45

NA: I guess people were surprised that he did all the sauces, even the sauce for sale here and the sauce for cooking, and he did all that since—. I guess I did that at first maybe not too long, and then he took over, and then after that he did everything. He just does everything.

00:32:03

LA: All the sauce. All of it. Yeah.

00:32:06

NA: People trust.

00:32:07

LA: I got it all here in my brain.

00:32:10

NA: It's come out good, so no question, right. *[Laughs]*

00:32:13

AE: And it passes muster with the cook and with your wife?

00:32:16

LA: Yeah. Yeah, no one complains. They're not—they can say—they're not afraid to complain either, trust me. They get told what to do all day every day, "Go do this." "Okay." Yeah, they let me know, yeah.

00:32:28

AE: So is there something about your IT brain that is kind of transferrable to mixing of ingredients in the kitchen? Is there something about that?

00:32:37

LA: Maybe it's my cooking. I helped my mom years ago, and also my ability to—. When I—as a single guy, I didn't eat out all the time. I'd cook. I'd go to the store, I'd buy, and I'd cook. So that has—that has to play a role in it; that has to. I just—I'm very dynamic in doing things. I can do many things, many things.

00:33:00

AE: In your bachelor days, what was your favorite dish to cook at home?

00:33:02

LA: Oh, that's a good one. Probably like to grill some steak, and I like chicken. I liked spaghetti. I make a mean oxtail, yeah, yeah—secret ingredient and I'm not going to ever tell anybody. *[Laughs]*

00:33:18

AE: Do you like his oxtail, Noi?

00:33:20

NA: I have to say yes, right? *[Laughs]* Yeah, but it was good, it was good, yeah. It took like two days to get it right.

00:33:28

LA: Not to get it right; to prepare it, yeah. Yeah. Catfish fillets, yeah. Used to do a lot of fishing in California. Go off the boats and get fish and see the guys charging the—I can do that, you know, just—oh, yeah.

00:33:45

AE: So what is your favorite Thai dish? Do you have one?

00:33:47

LA: Oh that's a good one. Oh, I like the—I like the *kang karee*, like a yellow curry with fish.

Eat a lot of *pad Thai*. What else—.

00:34:02

NA: You like my *kai pa lo* [spiced pork and egg stew].

00:34:04

LA: *Kai pa lo* is good. I like the fish curry too, the—the *ka nom jeem nan ya*, I like that—I like that, the combination of the fish curry, the cabbage, bean sprouts, and the noodle. It's really—it's really good. I like that, yeah.

00:34:20

AE: What is the *kai pa lo* that Noi says you like?

00:34:21

LA: It's—it's—let me say this—see if I can say it. I said it the other day. It's the Thai version of the Chinese five spice; there we go. [*Laughs*] That's the best way to put it because it's a five spice.

00:34:37

AE: Okay. And tell me—I want to ask you about the dish that you gave me in the kitchen on Friday, the cold—it was maybe a dried fish with the galanga [root] and something.

00:34:48

LA: Yeah, that's more Laos. *Som pa noi*?

00:34:51

NA: *Som pa noi* or *som pa chom*.

00:34:53

LA: That's more Laos.

00:34:55

NA: More of like a Laotian Northeastern-style food. So basically, it's the little silver fish and then mix it with the galangal, lemon grass, yeah. Pickled, I guess, yeah—.

00:35:13

LA: Yeah, they use the *khao khoua* [dry-fried and powdered sticky rice] that helps to ferment it.

00:35:19

NA: Yeah, the rice.

00:35:19

LA: Yeah, the rice. And it ferments it, and she puts a little chili in there. Yeah, it's good. I like that one.

00:35:25

AE: Yeah, it was really good. And so it's supposed to be served cold?

00:35:27

LA: Yeah. Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

00:35:30

AE: And you made that prepared to sell from the refrigerators here?

00:35:35

LA: Right, right. Actually the—Pumee [Khammany Phengsikeo], our ace number one [cook], she does that for us, yeah. It helps her—she likes to do it, so, you know, and people like it and you know you had a sample and it's good. It's unique; it's unique you know. It's no—you know it's really good, yeah.

00:35:54

AE: So how do people know that you make that and you can get it here?

00:35:58

LA: Oh, they just come and walk through and see it. They just know because the store has been here so long. The real—the people who—they just walk through and they see it, and they know what it is, and they grab it. Yeah, they—they walk around. They don't say anything, quietly look

and, you know, ah, there it goes. And the next thing you know, they bring it up to the counter and, yeah, okay.

00:36:17

NA: For Thai-Laos, I think they talk, you know, what is good here or what to get here. They know.

00:36:23

LA: Right, right because they might—“Oh, I was at the Asia Market,” you know. “Someone the next day such and such, and had they this and they had that.” And the next thing you know, people are coming in and buying it, and it’s gone, you know, yeah. Oh, yeah.

00:36:34

AE: So is that something she makes every day or is that a specialty item?

00:36:37

LA: More as a specialty, infrequent item, yeah. Yeah.

00:36:41

AE: Good. I’m glad I had it, then. It was—it was really different and, yeah, it was really good, especially with the sticky rice. *[Laughs]*

00:36:47

LA: That’s how it’s eaten with sticky rice, yeah, yeah. That’s a good one, yeah.

00:36:52

AE: So tell me, since you—we got back to refrigeration and that kind of pre-prepared to-go item, tell me about some of the things that you have in the refrigerators back there that you sell, some of the fresh items.

00:37:04

NA: If it's the freezer, probably mostly a product frozen from Thailand, so we have good like dried catfish, dried monkfish, which is really popular, dried black fish, and steamed mackerel. That just stuff that's coming from Thailand. But for the prepared one that we put in the refrigerator here, *nam phrik*, which is the chili paste that you can—it's ready to eat. You can just warm it up or not or just eat it with the sticky rice. And we have some other like sour pickled cabbage and like the pickled vegetables, *pak sien*.

00:37:51

LA: There's many other things, too. There's—there's—we've got—well, you got the dessert and you got the banana, roasted banana, *khao tom madt*. You got the desserts from Thailand, the bananas, sticky rice, the sticky rice with taro; there's ice cream, coconut ice cream with fruit—it's fruit, with fruit. There's sausage; the thing that—that really you realize as a small business is the way the business supports others and because we have about four vendors in Dallas that we get sauces from and meatballs and other frozen items and sour fish, I mean, these are people we support in Dallas. And then we have local people that—that we couldn't make everything. It would just be—you know, you'd have to be here eight days a week, you know, twenty-six hours

a day—that supply us with some of our desserts and other things. You really—you really, really realize man how small—we're small. We're a micro-business probably, compared to even a small business because we're under twenty employees. How even at this size the number of people that or we affect their lives, you know. Yeah, it's interesting, you know.

00:39:16

Our—our—even our vendors are probably small business; they have less than fifty employees. But they're doing \$1,000,000 a month probably, just because they're wholesale. But—but you really see—you really see that. That's one thing that I don't think people who are corporate don't realize the—some people do it and maybe others don't, but the effect that—that one business really has on a—on a, you know—on so many others, you know.

00:39:47

AE: On a community.

00:39:50

LA: On a community, you know, and that's—you know community, when you say community I think people think locally, you know, within a certain radius. But I think community is the whole—whole shebang, you know. Yeah. Yeah, because, you know, we get stuff from Dallas, you know, so that's—that's 250 miles away so, you know, we affect—we affect them. And Thailand, I mean ninety-percent of our product is probably imported, and it comes by ocean-going vessels. It hits California first, in many cases, or it comes straight into Texas. So you know, it has to come from all the way over there to here, so—yeah.

00:40:24

AE: Well and tell me about some of your farmers that supply you. You were talking about the place where the morning glory greens come from when I was here on Friday.

00:40:32

LA: Right, that will be—I guess it's Alvin or Rosharon [Texas]—well Rosharon, the little community down there, mainly Cambodians, there's some Laos there but they've been here for a while, and they grow the morning glory. They bring us—the summertime is really an abundance of vegetables. You know, the morning glory, they bring us chilies, eggplants—

00:40:55

NA: Some unique—some unique vegetables that normally you can't find anywhere. But they don't do as much like big wholesale. They just kind of grow it, and then they just bring it to us, I guess. We're the only one who is selling that for Thai or Laos communities.

00:41:16

AE: So do you sell it as much as you cook with it? And your menu changes seasonally with what's available also?

00:41:23

LA: Mainly—mainly we only use, probably, basil for cooking and the morning glory. And if we can use—if we can get Chinese broccoli from them, we'll use that, but some of the other things people want they come in looking for it, in the summertime. Yeah, “Do you have this?” “Not yet, right?” They really come looking for it because they know we—we bring it in, you know. People—and it's another thing. We affect, you know, the little—some lady at her home grows

something, you know, we take that in, you know. It helps—so that’s another way we affect, you know, a smaller scale. But yeah, a lot of—summertime we give—well Rosharon, you should go down there, yeah. It’s amazing. You know they—they work hard. They work hard—ooh.

00:42:09

NA: Work, yeah.

00:42:11

AE: Yeah, I’d love to pay a visit down there. Speaking about taking things in and community that’s a good segue, I think, to talk about Chris Shepherd at Underbelly [restaurant in Houston] and his relationship with—with y’all. Could you talk about how you met him?

00:42:25

NA: I guess what, four—no, more than that—I think maybe five years ago, I guess. He usually just comes in by himself to sit and order a dish to eat, and then he bought a lot of papaya. That’s how I remember him.

00:42:40

LA: Right.

00:42:42

NA: Big guy.

00:42:43

LA: Big guy.

00:42:43

NA: Yeah, nice. And that's it. And, I don't know. After that, I guess, the big thing that he brought to us is the—what he did about where the chef's eat, and I guess that's how we started going to have like a—a big group of people come in and have the food here, like a lot of them at a time.

00:43:06

LA: He had his food tours, I think, with the Greater Houston Visitors Bureau or something like that.

00:43:13

NA: People would come and we—we have a chance to prepare food for them and I guess—.

00:43:19

LA: I think the main thing is it's all—it all seemed like it was happening kind of—it happened gradually, if you look back it all makes sense from a standpoint: okay, you got Chris Shepherd coming in and the food, with him getting Houston on the map for—him and others getting Houston on the map for food and the multiculturalism that you spoke of earlier that people become more aware of and us being here in this area and this—you know, the clientele here are pretty—pretty affluent clientele dynamic, all this has come together with the foodies coming in. You got the websites. People put their opinions on it. It all—it all—it all makes sense to where it

is now, you know. And Chris, you know, what he's—he's done for us it's—I don't know; it's incalculable from a standpoint of, you know, the effect, yeah.

00:44:11

AE: And what do you think—how would you verbalize what he's done for you, exactly?

00:44:16

LA: Oh, it's definitely been a positive—positive thing for us. Just recently, you know, we—we got voted as the Best Thai Food in the U.S., and when you see something like that, it's like how did this happen? Because we don't know—all the sudden we'll get busy, because we don't—we don't you know browse on the Internet looking for articles about us. We're not—we're not obsessed to that point, so if things happen, it's like, what happened? Why? And then all of the sudden somebody will come in, “Hey, you've been mentioned—.” “Oh, okay. Where? Oh gosh, that explains what happens,” you know. It's like effect, delay, reaction, action, you know, so that's—.

00:45:00

NA: A lot of times dishes that—that we got mentioned on is the dish that we did for him, Chris, [the century egg dish] because we—we don't—we don't put that on the menu, so people who knows, I guess they know it from him because, I guess, at the time we're kind of like, “Oh, what do you want?” “Something different.” “Okay, let me try this.” And he—he kind of—he liked that dish. And somehow it—it goes out and a lot of time on the media, the newspaper or Internet, they always mention that dish, and we know where it's coming from. It's from him.

00:45:34

AE: Is that the century egg dish?

00:45:36

NA: Yes.

00:45:36

LA: One of them, yeah. That one and the *kai nam tod*, yeah. Papaya sells, too. He really likes that and we—.

00:45:45

AE: What's the *kai nam tod*?

00:45:48

NA: It's the dish that he—.

00:45:50

LA: The *khai yiao ma*. *Khai yiao ma*, right?

00:45:51

NA: Yeah, in Thai we call it *Khai yiao ma*. So we serve that egg or a the 1,000-year old duck egg, and that's the dish that we never put on the menu but we always got mentioned because of that dish and we know that's why—it's from him.

00:46:08

AE: Yeah, when he brought me here the first time, we had that, and it's very unusual. I'm still fascinated by the whole idea of it, much less eating it. But do you know like the history behind the dish and where it came from and what—and why?

00:46:22

LA: I think in Asia, having spent time there like with kimchi. I know kimchi, well we eat it probably every day, people think, you know, it's just this one version of kimchi. They got stuff, they probably do like the preserved duck egg from a standpoint they'll make it and put it in the ground and let it ferment for who knows how long. But it's a delicacy there. So with the eggs that's just something over time, like the salted egg, they probably put it in salt and let it sit for a long time so it goes all the way through—it has to go through the shell, permeate and get into the yolk.

00:46:53

The duck egg, the same thing. They soak it in sodium carbonate and green tea. That's why the color—it's just an egg. And people look at it and go, "Ah, they look scary." But it's—take—you know, and it's black. You ever seen a black egg that wasn't something wrong with it?

[Laughs]

00:47:11

NA: It makes the texture of the egg different the outside. It's kind of like jelly kind of thing, Jell-O.

00:47:17

LA: It changes the yolk and the—the white part—whatever. It changes in both, and I think visually it's—it's more this, you know, not so appealing as it is anything, because you—you know. The eggs are always white and yellow inside. **[Laughs]** So we see that and it's like—there's something wrong with it, but it's not. It's okay.

00:47:38

AE: And the thing about that dish, again, is the sauce, like I could have eaten that on everything all day long, it was so good.

00:47:44

LA: That's secret sauce. **[Laughs]** That's secret sauce.

00:47:48

AE: So with all the attention that's coming your way because of Chris talking about you and sharing the love and trying to give back, I know he's—which he's doing—is that something that you think will eventually go on the menu because people are asking for it more?

00:48:04

LA: That's a good one because when I wait [tables], I can kind of—you have to see if people really want to try something. Some people come in and say, "I want to try something really different." Okay, da-da-da. I'll throw that on me. You got to kind of sense the person because some people—I don't want them to have a dish—unpleasant, you know, encounter or—or time, so it—if we put it on the menu, we have to see. We might have to. We probably—yeah, and—and once people that have heard about it, will order it. And if they're with somebody that's not

so—not so positive about it, they might try it and go, “Oh, I like it,” or you know, it’s like anything. You like it or you don’t, or you could be in the middle, you know, so—.

00:48:48

AE: Well I think though, too, there’s some intrigue about something off the menu that not everybody gets, but if you’re in the know that you can have it—I think people like that a lot.

00:48:57

LA: Right, and it’s also—yeah.

00:48:59

NA: And keep it that way, maybe.

00:49:01

LA: Kind of a hidden menu? Someone made a suggestion to have a hidden menu, you know, because there’s all—basically anything in the freezer we can cook, from the silkworm larvae. We got crickets. So if someone really wants crickets we’ll go ahead and, you know, fry them up for them, no problem. It happens from time to time. But a duck—the egg, silkworm larvae, they’re not too bad either, you know, yeah. What other bugs we got? We got some cockroaches?

00:49:27

NA: Grasshoppers.

00:49:29

LA: We've had grasshoppers, they're not bad either, yeah.

00:49:31

AE: Do you sell a lot of those in bulk?

00:49:34

LA: No, usually we—we—around Thanksgiving is when we get the people who want to do like the fear thing, fear factor. Yeah, “Let me have some of that,” you know, “and cook them up and let's, you know, take them—.”

00:49:45

NA: Other than that, probably Thai or Laos will eat that.

00:49:46

LA: Thai/Laos, yeah.

00:49:47

NA: Yeah.

00:49:51

AE: So the Thai and Laotian people know to come here, if that's what they want, and they don't do it at home, if they can get it here. That's so great.

00:49:57

LA: Yeah. Yeah, that's—that's the factor that brings them here, plus they get—I think for—for their—I think it's once they're inside here and they get that ambiance, you know, like they're closer to home than they were, you know, when they're outside.

00:50:10

NA: Right, that's what I love. People say, "Oh, when I miss home I come here." Because we kind of start talking Thai, the waitress, or the server, or the cook, you know, we can talk to Thai and to hear that all the time and for them, I guess, it's when they miss home they come here to get—they can get to eat the meal that is—I would say close to what they cook at home and—and yeah get to talk Thai and speak Thai and talk about movie stars and we have Thai magazines here that they can buy it or look at it and we have movies, so—. I guess that's why they come here for that also.

00:50:51

AE: Hints of home. Well and speaking about servers reminds me I want to ask you about Xavier whom I met on Friday, and tell me about him. He said he started coming here as a customer.

00:51:02

LA: I don't remember him as a customer. I really don't. And just, you know, but we put an ad in the paper "Needed help," and he answered, so we interviewed him.

00:51:15

NA: Just what—I mean what I'm going to say is just his first day or second day, is that right—?

00:51:24

LA: What?

00:51:24

NA: For him to start working here.

00:51:26

LA: Yeah, he just started this past week, so—right, right.

00:51:30

NA: So I guess that might—the first or second day that he worked here, so—

00:51:33

AE: Okay. Because when I saw him on Friday, he was—*[Laughs]* he was my buffer between, you know, where I was standing and the women in the kitchen because I was getting in their way. But he said that he was a customer, and then he started cooking Thai and then started working here, and it blew my mind. Like he just has totally fallen for what y'all are doing here and loves it.

00:51:52

LA: He's pretty good. He's—he's pursuing a degree in social work, so I looked at his resume. He's got a lot of experience waiting [tables]. He's—he's determined to be something, you know. I can see that just, you know—and his resume says a lot about him and what he's done. He's waited; you know, he's working two jobs now. He—he lives with his grandma, grandmother;

he's from Centerville [Texas]. He's—he's a local to Texas so, you know, just—just as a customer, you know, that's what happens a lot of times. We—we get people that have been customers that work here, yeah. He's the latest one. **[Laughs]**

00:52:29

AE: Well, and I'll say for the record, he's a young African American man and so that brings me, too, to ask the question about that kind of dynamic and being an interracial couple here in Houston and if that was a hindrance or a help when you got here.

00:52:46

LA: I don't know. I don't think of it as a—a negative or—that's a good one. I just—I know you know the—the country is pretty, pretty—pretty torn. The world is, not just the U.S., but, you know, about—about who can and who shouldn't do this, that, and the other, you know. And from my perspective, you know, we—we just have to go out and do what we have to do every day to get things done, Noi and I. being an interracial couple, there are times when—when it—it—I don't know, not just interracial so much as, you know, if people would stop looking and gawking and go okay. What is that? Don't judge. We're just so judgmental, I think. I know we are because everyone does it, you know. They look at me and you know—a lot of people look and they don't realize, you know, that I'm not from the South. A lot of people see that when I start talking. They may look at me and go, “Yeah, he's from the South.” But when I start speaking, they go, “Oh, gosh. Where is this—this guy from,” you know? “He's not from the South.” I'm from Cincinnati. You know, I've spent time in Boston, which is the Northeast. I'm a Yankee. I guess. Am I a Yankee—Yankee at heart but Cincinnati is not really but, you know,

regardless, but I'm determined. You know, I got a business, and we want to be successful, you know.

00:54:13

You know, we are—we're okay, you know—you know; we just want to make a positive impact and represent it well. You know, just, you know, not just—represent me and us well you know, yeah. Against all odds, you know, yeah.

00:54:28

AE: Do you have anything to add to that Noi?

00:54:30

NA: I think—I don't know. I think for a perspective of Thai people look at him and I guess since he—he's not Thai it—it takes some time for them to—to get to know them, that he knows the stuff. And a lot of times it gets—you know, like they want to talk to me, just because they think that only me know it, but actually he knows it, too. So it kind of takes some time. People who come here a lot, they will know that he knows stuff, so—anything that they want to order or anything that they want to ask they can just ask him, so I guess that's—that's the only part that raises my concerns sometimes. But not a big deal. So when people get to know him, they will know that he knows.

00:55:23

AE: And I think that's the beauty of it is that you do know and I do—you're a font of information. I mean everything you say, you're so quick to say what it is, what it goes in. I mean

it just—it's—you have a way about you and your business that you're approached with. You can tell you're curious about it, which you said at the very beginning, and it's so endearing. I love it.

00:55:42

LA: When I was doing something some years back this one guy said, “You stick—you're throwing wet spaghetti against the wall, some it is going to stick.” So if you add to the fact that also that I'm—I'm pretty—you know, I'm not the sharpest knife in the dishwasher but, you know, this is what I do daily. So someone that doubts me that I don't know something, in a sense, to me, shows their ignorance about just being wise enough to realize certain things, you know, so—. It's their flaw. That's the way I see it. I have to view it that way because I—I know what we have.

00:56:15

I order it. I buy it. I pick it up. We pay the bill. I write the check, so—. I have to know this.

00:56:24

AE: How well do you know Thai language? Are you fluent?

00:56:26

LA: No, not at all. I just can't get the tones down but the menu—I can't get the tonal down, and it must be tone deaf. It just you say something wrong—you say something long and short, emphasis on the end it means—it changes the whole world and you might say something not—somebody would want to bulldoze you. *[Laughs]* I try not—

00:56:46

NA: I think it's pretty good in terms of the food and yeah, it's a simple conversation, I guess he's good.

00:56:56

LA: But the ladies in the back, they—I say something, they laugh. They know what I mean and we go on to the next time I say something. You know it—you know, yeah.

00:57:04

AE: It gets you by.

00:57:04

LA: Right, right, right. I laugh at them and they laugh at me, and we go on our way, you know.

00:57:10

AE: Well two more questions back to Chris, because I know—I went to one of his Off the Wall dinners [at Underbelly restaurant] and y'all were there, and I know y'all have been featured in his Off the Wall dinner. So can you talk about what he's learned from y'all and how you see him interpret that at his restaurant?

00:57:25

LA: Oh, wow. He's—he came in for four or five days before he opened up Underbelly, and I don't know. I mean, being there was—was pretty—I was pretty anxious, but it turned out to be

not—not—not that—I didn't need to stress or be as anxious as we were at that time. His influence—why would you say we influence him? I don't know.

00:57:49

NA: I guess it's in his food and somehow I don't—I don't think we—we can say it, you know what—what but I guess in his food that he is going to create, I guess he took some from everywhere he went and probably from us also.

00:58:08

LA: Spices—the spices I think he does papaya salad sometimes. You know and he—he probably got that from us. He already knows the cook—how to cook, so I would say more or less the spices and how he—how he prepares it, yeah.

00:58:28

NA: Products and stuff.

00:58:29

LA: Product, yeah. If he does a curry or something, you know, we'd have to think that came from here, you know. *[Laughs]* Yeah. Yeah.

00:58:36

AE: Yeah, because I've been out with him a few times and he—he loves ingredients and he loves touching things and figuring them out and so I can just see how his head is always working to put things together, and—. But I want to ask you, too, what your experience eating at

Underbelly has been and what do you—what do you think about what he’s doing—trying to do to tell this story of Houston through food?

00:58:56

LA: Oh, gosh. I think he’s done a stupendous job, you know, because to bring—his—his concept of bringing people together, a different—let’s say competing restaurants, even though my product is differ from yours, we shouldn’t be competing because no one is going to eat this every day, and no one is going to eat your food every day. If anything, we’re all in the same street and get one person every day, we all get the business, you know.

00:59:22

So to bring people together like that is really awesome, you know. It—it tells that—the dynamics, the dynamics of food first of all and the number of different ethnicities that bring it to Houston, you know. And Underbelly, man, the food he puts—puts together down there is really—it’s pretty good, yeah. We’ve eaten there a few times. I like it, yeah.

00:59:46

NA: It shows how passionate he is about food and about Houston. He wants Houston to be a—a center of the different food, how you call it—varieties so, yeah, I can see that. He can see how—what he does—I mean what he does, you know, to just to bring all the different food together and make Houston a best place for food.

01:00:14

LA: But many times—a lot of first-timers come here, and yesterday we had a guy from Colorado, and it was his first time. Wow, you know, it makes me wonder. Sometimes I’ll ask,

“How did you find us?” Somebody either tells them or an Internet search, Asian Food, you know, Thai Food, yeah. That’s—

01:00:27

AE: Yeah, because I think that, you know, as much Chris wants to tell the story of Houston food at Underbelly, as much or more so he wants people to come to places like Asia Market and experience the bigger picture that is Houston and support businesses like y'all’s.

01:00:44

LA: Oh, without a doubt. We get support, you know, from—from—you know, we—for me, I like to think—I appreciate everybody that comes through the door and, you know, and frequents our establishment and comes in. We have a pleasant encounter, “Hey.” We laugh and we tell a joke and everything is good. You know, we really appreciate—really, really. I mean you cannot understate that, you know. You know, especially those who come and, you know, it’s the best Thai food. You know, they want the simple authentic and to come here, we got it. Just watch what you select for spice. [*Laughs*]

01:01:18

AE: Yeah, the Thai spice is really Thai spice.

01:01:20

LA: Thai spice is spicy, yeah.

01:01:22

AE: So I came here Friday, and I was going to have lunch, but your eight or nine tables here were packed. So what does it mean to—for y'all to get all this attention for being so successful and so good at what you do, but then have this choice maybe on the horizon to expand or not? What do you think about that?

01:01:44

LA: With that comes anxiety because whatever we do, we want to keep the food the same. And I hope should we make a move that people—you know, it's got to—it's got to look better because that's something in my mind. I really want you know to come in and people go, "Oh, this is nice," and sit down and the ambiance will be great. You know, the—it'll look nice; everything will improve, but the food won't change. And I hope people will—will not think we've gotten too—too big for our britches, if you will. Some people will but, you know, that's okay. A few will always, you know, disagree with what you do, but for the most part, as long as we improve the encounter or the—the—the—improve the—the time that the person is here, wherever it is to be better and that—that news will travel because then the foodies will pick up on it, and the internet buzz will come about and it—everyone will be happy.

01:02:51

AE: So it sounds like you do have plans for a full-scale restaurant in mind.

01:02:55

LA: Did I say that?

01:02:57

AE: Not in so many words. [*Laughs*] But that you would like it to be nicer and a different experience and more restaurant—.

01:03:04

NA: We want to do it nicer; we want to—yeah, a nicer place, always clean, but we’re going to keep food the same, and we’re going to set it up the same way and cook the same way and hopefully it’s—

01:03:19

LA: We—we know—we know that our customers are asking for that. We—we know; trust me. We hear it, “When are you going—when are you going?” “Okay, we know.” We’re being pushed by customers. We’re being pushed by Chris, you know. It’s—you know. It’s—it’s a big move; it’s a big move, you know. It means more of everything. Everything has got to double, basically.

01:03:48

AE: Well, and I have to say, just the charm of this place, the scale that it is—is—it is so much about the experience, you know, and—but I know that that’s something that you’re definitely up against because people are coming.

01:03:59

LA: Right, right. I mean, yeah. It’s quaint and small and that’s kind of—people get up and walk around and go, “Oh, it’s so nice. Look at all this,” you know. And part like, you know, back to the people with the recipes, they come through and they’re like, “Oh, it’s so nice and small.”

They—we—if we do—we do something—I'm going to try to make sure that it stays, try to retain that, you know. It has to be—we have to retain that and how to, you know, something that, you know, to talk to the right people, you know, how—how to retain what we have, you know.

01:04:29

AE: Well and I asked Chris on Friday when I saw him after being here if he had any questions for y'all when I met with you today, and he said that he just wanted to ask you if you like what you do and what about it you like?

01:04:46

LA: Wow, she can answer that first.

01:04:49

NA: Yeah, it just—it's like from the previous job that at least for me, what I had and—and here it takes a lot of time to get used to it and but I would say right now, I love what I do. If I don't have it, you know, I don't do it here, I don't know where else—or what else to do. It's kind of like it's a part of my life now; it's a routine. Every day I'm going to do this, and I'm going to do that, and every time if I have time I will think of something I want to add to this and what product should I get, and I don't know. It just gets to me now and I love it, and I'm happy to be here.

01:05:39

LA: For me, it allows me to—to help my family financially. You know, it really does. I'm not a big flashy guy but, yeah, it's rewarding. You know, you come in, and I can't go backwards to the

corporate world, you know. That's not going to happen. I'm too old, you know. And—and I've been doing this so long I don't know if I could have somebody tell me what to do. That would be another thing. And it's—it hasn't been that long but long enough to realize that independence is great, you know. Yeah, yeah, yeah I like—there's some rewards and there's some—there's some downfalls, you know. You know, but does the positive outweigh the negatives? That's kind of day-to-day, you know. But for the most part, at the end of the day, when I go home and I see my little deaf dog, you know, and it's—yeah.

01:06:38

NA: I think another thing is the people who we work with, like all the ladies you know, the Pumees [Khammany Phengsikeo], —she's been with us for a long time. It's just like part of the family now. And it's just like come here, it's no pressure, just come here, and then it's like part of the family. We talk, we eat; sometimes they brought food and we eat together and, yeah, I think that's a good part of it. That's why we love it here.

01:07:07

LA: Yeah, we share—we share with them. It is—she is part of the family because she has something she brings and we—we share stuff, you know. And yeah, it's—it becomes a real close association, yeah.

01:07:22

AE: So Houston was a good move for y'all?

01:07:24

LA: Yeah. Oh, yeah. I would say—I would say—I would say it was a good move, yeah.

01:07:29

NA: Yeah.

01:07:30

LA: Yeah.

01:07:31

AE: What about Houston as a—as a city and your impression of it as relative to the rest of, maybe, the South? We were talking before we recorded about a lot of people not necessarily thinking of Houston as Southern or as international as it is; could you think of something to maybe explain that or your experience with it for people who don't live here?

01:07:53

LA: I haven't spent a lot of time—and I was in the South and, you know, during the Service time I really wasn't—didn't feel it, you know. I guess now do I feel it? I don't know because—because I guess we're so inundated with our daily activities, you don't get the feel for it, you know. Do you—do you see it in people's behaviors and their personalities? What's the difference than any other place? Yeah, they may think Houston is not part of the South because of what's going on here, you know, the—the modern, the people that are here because I know you look around in just this area, it's like, man, this place is pretty—pretty buzzing, you know, and a lot of places have their historical districts and everything, trying to conserve, which is

beautiful, you know. I like those areas. But I don't know. That's—that's a tough one because I don't feel—I haven't really been in the Deep South to feel, you know, the—

01:08:49

AE: Well what about just in like your—your customer base, the people who come through your door, like do you see that as a portrait of Houston at all?

01:08:57

NA: I would say that for—I don't—*[Laughs]*—for—for me, like Thai community here is bigger than I thought. That's the first thing that—I didn't expect to have a lot of Thai people here. And for us to be here all the time, you see all the customers coming in sometimes, and we look at them and say they're coming from different places, totally different, some like that they have—a guy from France and Russians. It's so—so many cultures that, you know, I think it's happening here in Houston and that's why we see those people at least, you know, coming here that I can see that they are coming from different places, and they're willing to try new things and learn a different culture, at least on the food. I think that's Houston.

01:09:49

LA: Yeah, a lot of them have been to Asian. A lot of them are just eclectic people who—“Well, let me try this.” “I like this; I've had it before.” “Let me try this particular place and see how it is.” We're described often as a—what's that—a hole in the wall or local dive. It's kind of—a guy said that the other day and I was kind of like ah—kind of got to me, but, you know, it's like okay. You know, we can be a local dive, but—or a hole in the wall and that—that's fine, because that's, you know, as—as people often describe this is where you get the good food and that's

what they find out, you know. But, you know, back to your question, you know, you can come in and, like she said, you know, he's from France and she's from Russia. The people come in and they speak different languages and like, "Where are you from?" "I'm from here or over there in Europe."

01:10:32

NA: A couple Sunday they were from Spain and he's from—

01:10:36

LA: She's from Mexico, right, right, right. And they're return customers—frequent customers that come in. These are people that—that either we have attracted or they live in the area. Some people drive a long way—a long time to get here, a half hour, forty-five minutes, an hour just to have our food. And they pass up many places in between, so—

01:10:58

AE: So that, to me, begs the question that you have—you know, you met in school, you have this IT background, you learned to cook at home, you have these Thai recipes; what does it feel like to be known for your food at this point in your lives and your careers and business owners—for food to be that thing that you're hanging your hat on?

01:11:16

LA: Surreal really. [I] never—never thought in my life that I'd be known for this—never. I don't know how to put this in—that's a—yeah. It's unbelievable.

01:11:28

NA: Yeah, beyond a dream. Yeah, when we—the first time we saw the—it’s like for me when I saw the review on the website, that’s just when we first opened, that’s the first time I saw it and the people loved the food. And I said, “Wow, for real? They like it.” And it’s a—it’s more and more coming, so it’s—it’s nice. It’s been a dream. *[Laughs]*

01:11:54

AE: Well that brings to mind another question. There have been about five times when I thought okay, we’ll end it with this, but I keep thinking of more things, but we really can end it after this because you’ve given me a lot of your time. But I wonder, you know, when you were talking earlier about the cookbooks, people coming in with the cookbooks and that if recipes are more complicated than they really need to be, and I’m thinking about eating Thai food in Houston and there have been Thai food restaurants here for a long time. But do you think that now because of so many people having access to so many more cultures and cuisines through travel and through the changing face that is Houston that—that maybe before Thai food was a little watered down for the American tastes and now that maybe—and I’m assuming a lot here but this is what’s coming to mind, but that now maybe since you’re doing this authentic Thai that that’s what people are responding to because it’s so honest, and it’s not changed at all?

01:12:48

LA: Yeah, I would say—I would say because like you mentioned people have—have traveled, the world has gotten smaller and people’s curiosity is there. They’ve been to Thailand. They’ve, you know, they might know somebody who knows somebody that cooks Thai and they bought some, brought a sample to work or whatever to some kind of event they had and so, yeah. It’s—

it's like Chinese food. Do we really get real Chinese food, because it's been here for so long? You know they Americanized it, because can the Americas really handle real Chinese food? You have to—are we giving real Thai food? I would say compared to the other places—and people like them, which is fine, but people want real—more flavors, more intensity and that's what we give them, yeah.

01:13:39

NA: I would say that's—the food we have here that's how we, at least for me, when we cook at home and even in Thailand my mom would cook this way, just how the food comes out, so I guess that's—that's the part that we're known of, yes.

01:13:56

AE: Well, I think y'all are doing it right. And I appreciate your time on your day off. Really, I can't thank you enough so thank you. But I will ask you if there's anything that you would like to say that I haven't asked or known to ask or a parting thought?

01:14:14

LA: No, I really can't think of anything. I just think this whole experience is—like I say, surreal. My background, I've never worked fast food in my whole life. I always have done stuff with my hands and but never—this is almost surreal to be in this situation, you know. And I think sometime in life you have to take some—when things come to you and—and go with it. You know, this chose us. I don't know if we chose it, but here we are and we—and it may be the right time for—for this. Maybe it's because of Chris and what his efforts—without a doubt, that's a contributing factor to put Houston on the map for other than—other things that it is on

the map for. And—and we just happen to luckily be part of that—that tidal wave, you know, that is here. You know, hopefully this is the ground floor and we can just go and go with it. But I think the interest is there for people. They want—people want—they want—food is such a—a social and pleasure event. We have to eat, and we want it to be something enjoyable. You know, I think that’s—that’s where we are, you know, so—.

01:15:21

AE: Anything to add, Noi?

01:15:25

NA: Just everything he said that—and just I want to say thank you to Chris. He’s a big part of what we are right now, and even we cook the good food, but if nobody knows, nobody would come and eat. So he’s a big part of it and—and yeah, we appreciate that.

01:15:43

AE: Well, good. Well, thank you again for this time on your day off. I appreciate it.

01:15:47

LA: No problem. Thank you. Thank you very much.

01:15:49

NA: Thank you. Thank you for coming.

01:15:51

[End Lawrence & Noi Allen-Asia Market]