

LYNN ANSELMO
Prairieville, LA

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Interviewer: Sara Roahen, Southern Foodways Alliance
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[Begin Lynn Anselmo Interview]

00:00:01

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Thursday, October 16, 2008. I'm in Prairieville, Louisiana, with the Anselmos, and if I could get you both just to introduce yourself—say your names and your birth dates, please.

00:00:18

Lynn Anselmo: Lynn Anselmo—birth date is 1943, April 22nd.

00:00:25

Amanda Anselmo: Amanda Anselmo—born December 14, 1976.

00:00:31

SR: Okay, thank you. Pardon me?

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LA: The young girl.

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SR: Mr. Anselmo, could you tell me where you born and raised?

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LA: I was born in Baton Rouge, Lady of Lake Hospital before they built the new one. It was actually on the lake. I've lived here pretty much all my life. Me and my wife had a little music group and we traveled for about six years on the road from Colorado to Florida playing in restaurants and what have you, and then in 1974 we had a mishap up in Colorado and decided that the road wasn't the life for us [*Laughs*]. So we came back and bought my family business, which was Tony's Donut Shop, and it was located at--on Chippewa Street at Plank Road. And 30 years later we--we closed it and retired. Yeah, we've had as many as five locations and as little as one location. We turned it into a restaurant and tavern, I think it was around mid-'80s, and it closed as Tony's Restaurant and Tavern. So now we're just retired cooks; we have a--the new cookbook out, play a little music on the side; enjoy the good life.

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SR: What kind of music did you play and do you play?

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LA: Well we started out in folk music with the Peter, Paul & Mary/ Bob Dylan type stuff. Naturally went into rock & roll and country, and pretty much crowd-pleasers. You know, all the time we were songwriting and that's what we do now. We do the songwriters showcases. Like we play the Common Ground in New Orleans later this month; he's got to give me a date.

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SR: And when you say *we*, is that your wife?

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LA: My wife and I, yeah. She's--she was the singer and I was a guitar player. She stopped singing, so I learned how. That's all. That's pretty much it.

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SR: And so when you say you moved back to Baton Rouge and bought the family business, the business wasn't in your family before then or it was?

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LA: Yeah, my father started it in '46 and he died in 1950 of a brain tumor, brain cancer, so my mother with four children took it over and she ran it to '74 when I took it over. And so from 1936 to '74 it was--it was in business.

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SR: And so '46: Is that the year you said you were born?

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LA: I'm sorry, '46 to 2004 it was in business. In '74 I bought it, yeah. And it's been—when I bought it, it was a donut shop doing wholesale business. We had one small retail counterfront, but basically it was mixing enough donuts to satisfy probably 100-plus customers seven days a week before 6 o'clock in the morning. *[Laughs]* It didn't fit with my lifestyle. I was used to coming home at 5:00 in the morning, and now I'm going to bed at 10:00 in the morning. So we started changing it to retail. We opened three shops—two additional shops—and that went pretty

good. We tried to open two more; that didn't go too good. So we backtracked down to two, and then down to one, and then decided that—in the '80s—that we wanted to do--to cook more food. We wanted to do what we had seen on the road and so on and so forth. And I was baking bread at the time anyway so we started doing po-boys and did that and naturally gravitated to--to plates and table lunches and--and nighttime. All the time we had a little stage in the corner where people showed up and played you know. So the—I guess it was the '90s that the music really took off.

00:05:16

AA: Yeah, I'd probably say '93--'94: that's when I graduated high school and it got--it was—.

00:05:21

LA: And they--and in high school and in college they were waiting tables, you know, both girls. My other daughter's name is Toni, and Toni and Amanda were two of my best waitresses. But that's pretty much—. Then Mama got to the point where she didn't want to run around the restaurant and she went to work for the healthcare. And the girls graduated and started making a lot more money than I could pay them. **[Laughs]** So they moved to Dallas. And at--about that point the highway came through and wanted the land more than I did, so we--they made us comfortable and we retired.

00:06:04

SR: And where was that location?

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LA: One-forty-four-seventy-two Old Hammond Highway at Millerville Road in Baton Rouge.

It's towards the east--southeast—.

00:06:17

AA: Yeah, southeast.

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LA: —section of town.

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SR: Tell me a little bit about what it was like to grow up with your mom running a donut shop.

She probably—

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LA: That--that was a difficult time for her. And I didn't know about it at the time. I was seven when--when dad died, but we used to do—we used to have a man named Charlie Smith who started the donut shop with my father, and Frank Dorsey, and they were the two cooks. And then we had route men. We had the—Holsum Bakery was the kingpin of bread and they--the bread men would come by and pick up pallets of donuts and bags—six to a bag you know—and they would--they would distribute them on their route. And then we had two other route men that ran the municipalities and things of that nature. I also remember doing the rodeos here in town. That was when the rodeos were real big. We used to bag them two to a bag, and Mama would come

home in the '50--'47--'46 Plymouth station wagon with donut trays full of donuts, just big aluminum trays full of donuts, and we, the kids would sit around the kitchen table and bag them two to a bag. And then we'd deliver them out to the rodeo and they would go like hotcakes. I mean they would--they would really sell. But the business and growing up in Baton Rouge was—hell, I didn't know Baton Rouge was over three blocks, you know. I mean I went to school at St. Anthony and the donut shop was right there on North 22nd Street at the time, and so it--it was a very small world. I could ride my bike around the world, you know. **[Laughs]**

00:08:18

But the other things that I remember: I remember Alessi's Drive-Marion Alessi and his father had a drive-in at the corner of Foster and Florida and they would serve these curlicue burgers they called them. And it was a McDonald's-type hamburger that was at the bottom of a pile of curlicues full of salt **[Laughs]** and by the time you got to the burger it was just so greasy and full of salt that it was great. **[Laughs]** And Muffaletta's hot tamales was a big thing. They used to have a stand on Park Boulevard at Government Street and you would drive--stop your car right there on the street and they'd buy the hot tamales and eat them in the car, you know. So that was a big thing too, and then that was pretty much growing up. And I got married at very young, at 16, and I left home and went into the welding business. Actually my father-in-law owned the welding company and so I did that until I was about 21. And then, oh my God, from 21 to 23 I was a bachelor, and then I met my wife and we've been married for—what?—41 years now. So that's growing up in Baton Rouge.

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SR: That's great. What kind of—did your mom's shop make just one kind of donut, or—?

00:09:57

LA: We made--the glazed donut was the wholesale item and it also was the biggest retail item we had. We would box them in cake boxes or in cellophane bags from Unger, the bread man--the bag man. We did a chocolate covered donut; we did honey buns, which was—

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AA: God they were huge.

00:10:22

LA: We would take--we would take the end off of—we would cut the dough three times, and naturally the first dough was the most tender and greasiest, and then the--the last cut was the toughest, and you know it's like three different donuts really. But the end product we would take and make honey buns, and it would be a--similar to a flat cinnamon roll, which was about nine inches in diameter. And the funniest thing in the world was watching the--the kids come by, and these little--these little black kids would walk out with a honey bun [*Laughs*] bigger than their shoulders, just eating it you know down the street going to school. But I think that sold for about 25-cents apiece back then.

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SR: Wow.

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LA: Then when--when I got in, I expanded the product line to cinnamon rolls and brownies and things of that nature, and the jelly donuts. I think we did have jelly donuts back then but not--not a whole lot of product. Mostly--90-percent of the original donut shop was wholesale—wholesale glazed donuts, you know.

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AA: But you have to understand, these donuts were not like regular donuts. These were the most—they were handmade. I mean he made the batter himself, no machine, rolled it out himself, and fried it himself. They weren't individually cut, so when they were--they were cooked, they came out in not a regular—

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LA: Odd-shaped. [*Laughs*]

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AA: Yeah, they were odd-shaped, but they had pockets of just sugar and deliciousness, oh.

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LA: Yeah, Charlie--Charlie Smith used to call them sugar pockets.

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AA: They were amazing. They were the best donuts in the world and I still today can't eat any. There's no point.

00:12:19

LA: Yeah, actually the old *Gris Gris Magazine* that Baton Rouge used to have—I think they restarted it again, but anyway they did a donut contest and we won first place.

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AA: Yay! [*Laughs*]

00:12:31

LA: And their--their tag on the end, *better because they're greasier*, which just deflated the whole prize you know. [*Laughs*] But anyway it was--it was a very popular donut; in fact people still ask about it all the time, you know.

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SR: Whose original recipe was it?

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LA: My father. He was--he was trained as a bread man for Holsum Bakery. He did the--the big, you know, multi-gallon doughs, and when he was laid-off from Holsum he went to work at a place called Duke's Donut Shop on Perkins Road at the old--at the overpass, where if you're from Baton Rouge you know where that is. Well Duke was a fisherman and a hunter and he decided he didn't want the second shop, so my father bought it from him and moved it to North 22nd, and then Tony's Donut Shop was born.

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SR: Can you tell me for the record what you mean by *three cuts*?

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LA: Three cuts. The original dough was handmade. It was six gallons of water, probably 50 pounds of donut mix, and then of course the yeast. We used a cake Budweiser used at the time. And you would mix that up and it would ferment. You would pour that onto the table and cut it into pillows. The pillows would be maybe eight or ten five-pound pillows; I don't know how many, you know, pillows--around the table. Well you would pat that out and cut it; that's your first cut. Take the scraps, put it together from several pillows, and that would be your second cut, after it proofs, and then put that together again and that would be your third cut. So naturally the dough would be tougher, you know, from the first. And then the—of course the trimmings you would use for the--for the honey buns and bear claws--whatever you want to call them--cinnamon—.

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AA: Like those apple fritters?

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LA: Apple fritters, and—

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AA: That too. *[Laughs]*

00:14:41

LA: And then Grandma Anselmo used to come by and pick up whatever we had left to bring it home and mix it to make bread. *[Laughs]*

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SR: Oh, with the dough?

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LA: With the dough, yeah. They'd pick—they had animals so they would get leftover donuts for the pigs and they'd mix them, and then she'd take some of the dough and actually mix it with more flour—and the yeast was still active—and make these big Italian domes. They used to have--she used to have an actual wood oven in the back—you know what they call the honeycomb oven? Okay, well my cousin Lyman would build the fire in the morning and she would--she would rake the fire out and put the bread in there and go in the field and work, and come back and the bread would be ready. So that's--that's my memories of way back, you know.

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SR: So that's very—the honeycomb oven is very old-fashioned.

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LA: Very.

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SR: Can you talk about that a little for the record?

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LA: Well it's nothing; it's similar to the Italian wood-fired oven that you see in the restaurants except it didn't have a chimney. It was actually just a concrete dome built on some type of a structure and it would be--it would look like a honeycomb and it would have a wooden or steel plate that you would close the door with. So when you built quite an intense fire in it and it would get the mortar, the brick, very hot. And then you would rake the fire out and put the product in and shut it. And over a period of two or three hours it would make your bread.

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SR: Did you ever get to see that, Amanda?

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AA: I did not. That was--that was just a little bit before my time, yeah.

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LA: [*Laughs*]

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SR: And so are both sides of your family Italian?

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LA: No. I'm a French and Italian. My mother's people are the Bourques from Gonzalez so we're pretty familiar with this Prairieville area, you know.

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AA: Cajun-French.

00:16:54

LA: Cajun-French.

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SR: And so what about—so your father's family is from where?

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LA: Well the--my great-grandfather is originally from Sicily, and my great-grandmother, but they came over and bought some land on what is now Anselmo Lane. Just--it runs from Jimmy Swaggart's ministry to Essen Lane. And he bought probably, I'm going to say 50 acres you know, and he--they raised livestock and had a garden and sold vegetables. That's my grandfather. She was a Rapolla, and of course he's Anselmo, and they--that's the way they made a living until later in life when my other grandfather started driving a school bus and he--they had three sons. My father was Tony, and they had Sam and Joe, which is the way Italians name their kids. **[Laughs]**

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AA: Tony, Sam, and Joe. [*Laughs*] Yeah.

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LA: Joe was a policeman and Sam worked in the plants and my father was a baker, so that's—. On my mother's side, my grandfather—same--pretty much the same thing: they were farmers and then he went to work at Exxon, and then they opened Esso here and he retired from there.

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SR: So with Cajun-French on one side and Italian on the other, I'm guessing there was some good food in the family—some good cooks.

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LA: Real good, but in my memory everything was pretty much gray. [*Laughs*] You know they-- they had on my mother's side, my grandmother would put rice on before she decided what she wanted to cook, and a gumbo was strictly a roux gumbo made from chicken carcasses, you know. It was--it didn't have the sausage in it, and it didn't have the tomato in it. It was a Cajun gumbo, what I would classify as a Cajun gumbo. My mother still makes that same gumbo, and as I got into food I--I just tend to go with the Creole cooking. It's more flamboyant. There's more taste involved and the colors, you know. The eye appeal is much better.

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SR: From what?

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LA: From the Cajun gumbo; from the Cajun-style cooking.

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SR: But, I mean, what makes it more colorful and flamboyant?

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LA: Well the tomato; the--the vegetables; the celery; the--of course I use red bell pepper for the color; and the sausage—everything that's in it gives it just more eye appeal, you know, than the gray gumbo I call it.

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AA: Well her version, I think, is more—the vegetables are more minced. They're smaller and they're cooked down.

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LA: It's cooked to death.

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AA: Far more, like completely cooked out to where like the onions would become clear. I mean there's no crunch to the vegetables, where your version, I feel like, has a little more hearty vegetable pieces.

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LA: That's what I strive for. I try to--I try to give a crunch to the vegetable instead of cooking it. The onions are cooked down more than anything else, but the celery and bell pepper still has a little life to it—.

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AA: And retains nutritional value.

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SR: *[Laughs]* And did you like your mom's gumbo growing up?

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LA: I did; I still like it every Christmas Eve. Every Christmas Eve she cooks a big gumbo. She's 88 now and she lives by herself on Airline Highway in a house that was paid for 30 years ago. And she--she still cooks a gumbo Christmas Eve every year and the whole family gets together and opens presents and eats gumbo and potato salad. *[Laughs]*

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SR: And what color is her gumbo? Is it--is it still gray or I guess what color is her roux?

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LA: She makes--she makes a copper-colored roux and then cooks the onions down quite dark, and that gives it a--a dark-gray color, you know—brownish-gray, yeah.

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SR: And so the potato salad with the gumbo—is that pretty typical?

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LA: That's very typical in our family. It's--it's traditional. I mean you have the rice in the gumbo, and actually they put the potato salad in the gumbo.

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AA: Yeah, I put mine in there.

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SR: You put it in yours?

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AA: I put it right in the middle, yeah.

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LA: Yeah, they--not really mixed but just a bite of gumbo, a bite of potato salad, you know. I don't do that; I use it as a side.

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SR: And is the potato salad like a yellow mustard potato salad or—?

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LA: It's got a little yellow--well a little Creole mustard in it and a little yellow mustard; mostly mayonnaise. And it's got the bell pepper, celery—.

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AA: Eggs--boiled eggs.

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LA: Yeah, eggs--boiled eggs in it, so it's a—it's actually my wife's potato salad. She the potato salad maker. So I make the gumbo and she makes the potato salad.

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SR: So when you make gumbo, you also serve it with potato salad, mostly?

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LA: Yeah, you'll have some today. [*Laughs*]

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SR: You know I wasn't hungry when I got here, but now this conversation.

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AA: I'm telling you, you will have been so happy to have eaten it.

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LA: You can't eat much. Look at you. [*Laughs*]

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SR: It's in there. So what about the Italian side of your family? Was there gumbo-eating on that side?

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LA: Not that I remember, and actually I didn't do a lot of eating on the Anselmo side. My father died; like I said, I was seven. And we spent more time with the French side than the Italian side. They had a lot of fried fish as I remember, a lot of pasta, and of course the homemade bread—every meal. My little Grandma Anselmo was about—if she was five-foot she was barely five-foot, and she was almost two-feet wide, so she was--she was the lover in the family. She just--all the kids were around her. And my grandfather was the bull of the family, you know. And every girl—I remember, the first time my wife met him, he walked up to her and pinched her right on the butt. [*Laughs*] And said, *Hey Honey, how you doing?* Scared the hell out of her. [*Laughs*]

But he just--he was that type of man, you know. He just—you know Grandpa Anselmo, Sam Anselmo.

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SR: Did they have--did you ever have Christmas with them? Did they have a Christmas meal?

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LA: No. We had family reunions and birthdays; you know, cousins—that type of thing. And I do remember several Christmas dinners over there, which you know, when the Anselmo family gets together you're talking about 40 people and they would--they would put folding tables through the living room, through the dining--the kitchen and dining room, and everybody would sit around and all the kids would get a plate and sit on the steps outside. But that was—like I say, we did a lot more socializing with the French side than the Italian side. Later in life I gravitated towards the Anselmo side. Of course everybody called me Dago. I mean, you know I had--I had to take up for myself, but that's pretty much the family scene.

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SR: So was there anyone in your family who inspired you to cook or who you think of when you cook?

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AA: Yeah, I mean I kind of think you take it from both your parents, but I think he—you know your dad was with the bread, and then your mom cooked out of necessity to feed four kids.

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LA: Mama cooked every day and like—but, like Amanda said, from necessity. It was put the food on the table and eat a donut, you know.

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AA: Right. I think his cooking comes more from a love of the art of putting things together and -and pleasing people. [*Laughs*]

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LA: I like to cook. The cooking actually took off after I married Lynn, my wife. We have the same name, okay: Lynn and Lynn.

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AA: FYI: it makes it very difficult when people call the house.

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SR: Are they both with two Ns?

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AA: Yes.

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LA: Yeah, spelled the same.

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AA: And my name is Amanda Lynn and my sister's name is Toni Lynn.

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LA: But—

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AA: That's right.

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LA: —we started cooking for family and friends, you know, but mostly just picking parties and things. We would barbeque. And it kind of took off from there. And then from the shop we started making bread and started getting into cooking more and more—.

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AA: *The shop* is Tony's.

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SR: Right.

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AA: We called it *the shop* because it was originally the donut shop, but we still called it that even after we stopped serving donuts.

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SR: Thank you.

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LA: But that's actually, I guess around I'm going to say 24--25 years-old, I actually started liking the kitchen you know and really getting into it. And then of course through Tony's Restaurant and Tavern I honed it down to where I was a chef, you know, and I—when Lynn and I first got married and we were successful in business, we started going to the finer restaurants and really understanding what food was and what food could be, you know, and tried to imitate that. The Yarboroughs here in town were a big family. They had a place called Dajonel's, which was a collaboration of the three owners' names. They--John Yarborough was the chef and he would cook some of the finest quenelles and some of the best paté you ever ate in your life, and so we'd go home and try to do that you know. And we still do it today. The pizza in town is the Fleur-De-Lis; it's a pizza restaurant. A very old family, and in fact you go in and you can't move a chair, [*Laughs*] you can't--you can't buy a drink unless you have food. They set the rules, okay, but it is the--the best pizza in town; it's packed every night. And so what we've been doing lately is trying to reproduce the Fleur-De-Lis pizza, and we're pretty close to it--pretty close to it.

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I think the trick that they use: they use an Italian sausage, but then they put a--they put salami in the mix and that gives it a distinct taste and smell. If you walk out of there after a

night's pizza eating you smell like the Fleur-De-Lis, you know. **[Laughs]** It's a musky-type thing. In fact, I had a customer, Greg Landry, walked into the restaurant one night and he came up and shook my hand. And I said, *You've been to the Fleur-De-Lis.* And he said, *How did you know?* I said, *I smell it on you.* **[Laughs]**

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SR: They put the salami in what mix? In the sausage?

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LA: The way--I don't know how they do it. I don't know whether they buy a processed pork mix, pork sausage mix, or whether they cook it down themselves. And the way I do it is I buy a fresh Italian sausage and I chop the salami up very fine and then I process the whole thing as--as a spread on there, and it's pretty much the way they do it. It's not chunks of anything. It's a--it's a very, very thin crust square pizza, and then they have a--of course what we get is called the World Pizza, and it's got just about everything on it. You can get the fish on it if you want, you know, and then they have a thin layer of, I'm going to say that it's Parmesan and mozzarella. It's not Fontina or anything like that; it's a semi-hard cheese, you know. And they bake it until it's done; I mean it's done, you know. It's very crisp. And it's--it's a delicious pizza, it really is.

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SR: When you were teaching yourself to cook, basically for the restaurant, so you ate out? Did you have favorite cookbooks?

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LA: My wife has a--had a grandmother named Marie Fadley, and she had a--a cookbook called—

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AA: *River Road?*

00:30:46

LA: No, it's the--*A Way to a Man's Heart*.

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AA: Oh, right.

00:30:50

LA: And it's the classic cookbook that I started cooking from. Of course I collected the *River Roads*, the [Chef] John Folse [cookbooks]—and a lot of people don't know but John Folse started out in a place called the Rathskeller. He was a bar owner and I still remember those days. Right now it's--it's a pub called Dalton's right across from—what is it? First Street, Second?

00:31:19

AA: Third?

00:31:19

LA: Where is Lafayette Park? Oh right--right there at the Shaw Center, just right there. But I'll never forget when you walked in, it had plaid carpet and I had never seen that before in my life you know. And John Folse was a barman, and then he taught himself—then he--well everybody knows what Folse is.

00:31:45

SR: Right. So tell me a little bit about the menu at the restaurant in its later days, before you sold it.

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LA: We did sophisticated and common fare. We did the muffaletta, the French dip, and I guess the ham and cheese—was it?

00:32:06

AA: Muffaletta, French dip, ham and cheese, turkey, Reuben—.

00:32:09

LA: Yeah, but the most popular was the French dip.

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AA: Oh French dip absolutely; hamburger; muffaletta.

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LA: Hamburgers. That was the bread fare.

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AA: He made all the bread for everything that came out of that restaurant, he handmade it himself.

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LA: We did the potato bread for the hamburger, the muffaletta buns, but the—beyond that we did a roasted duck which was not very popular but die-hard for the people that wanted it, you know. We did specials every night but we had probably 20 items on the menu I guess other than the sandwiches, you know.

00:32:45

AA: But steaks and seafood. He had this amazing way of making fried seafood that wasn't greasy, you know. It wasn't like this thick, greasy—. It was a very thin crust that somehow made the shrimp or whatever so perfect.

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LA: Whole milk--whole milk dredged with corn flour and white flour, and it was seasoned and it gave it a very thin crisp coat with the corn flour.

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SR: And what kind of oil did you use?

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LA: We used peanut oil to fry you know, but back in the donut days we used MFB lard [*Laughs*] to fry. Oh yeah, they came in 55-gallon drums. And they would--I mean if you have to move it—me, as a kid I couldn't, but those big guys they could move them. But we used vegetable oil, and then when peanut oil became the cooking oil—what, about 20 years ago? — then we switched to peanut oil for the health factor. You know, if there's a health factor to donuts. [*Laughs*]

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SR: Or any kind of oil. And a little bit about the roasted duck that made--that people loved.

00:34:07

LA: The duck was—then again, getting back to Didee's duck, it always impressed me. His was a sweeter duck than mine was. It's Didee's Kitchen that we're talking about—Herman Didee. He was actually a very flamboyant Creole and he had a restaurant called Didee's. He did what was called a King Duck, which is a very large duck—half-duck, and it was a Polynesian-type duck. It was a sweet duck. Well I didn't do that with mine; I put the sweet off to the side. What I did with mine is, I buy smaller ducks for one thing and I halve them, cut them in half and roast them on a bed of stewed tomatoes and rosemary. And then that's the prep. Actually, when you would order the duck we would take it and put it in the--in the broiler and broil it until the skin was very crisp. And then we would turn it over and when it was warm we would debone it except for the--the legs and the wing. And then serve it on a rice pilaf, so to speak, and serve it with an apple

syrup on the side to drizzle. It was delicious; it was delicious. I still do it today every once in a while, you know.

00:35:43

SR: What about the gumbo at the restaurant?

00:35:44

LA: Gumbo was a big, big thing. We did, we called it the gumbo Ya-Ya, and basically the recipe you have is the gumbo that we did. And it pretty much was never labored. Every day the-- you'd make a fresh pot and put the old pot in it, you know to recycle. But the gumbo was a big thing. We also did a shrimp and corn soup.

00:36:15

AA: You had Zydeco gumbo too.

00:36:14

LA: Hmm?

00:36:16

AA: The Zydeco gumbo had that—jalapeno peppers.

00:36:19

LA: The Zydeco gumbo with the—but actually the Zydeco was the gumbo Ya-Ya with oysters and seafood added, and jalapeno peppers. It was called the Zydeco gumbo.

00:36:34

SR: And the gumbo Ya-Ya I'm looking at here was—it's basically a chicken and sausage gumbo?

00:36:38

LA: Chicken and sausage gumbo with okra added. We never used filé. At times--my mother does. That filé is a condiment that you put on after. We don't use it as a thickener and we don't use it as—we don't cook it with the gumbo. It's actually something that we add to the top after, just for a taste.

00:37:08

SR: And what is that flavor? Can you describe it?

00:37:12

AA: The filé?

00:37:15

LA: The filé: herb-y, musky herb-type flavor. Of course filé—I guess if you're not from Louisiana you don't know filé, huh? It's a round sassafras leaf and they still have an old man at

the market, Baton Rouge [farmers'] market, that pounds it fresh every Saturday. But that--the taste of filé is, I would say, a musky herb taste.

00:37:42

SR: Would you have that on the table at the restaurant or anything?

00:37:48

LA: It was on-call; you could get it. No, we didn't. We had the Louisiana Hot Sauce and that's what they wanted more than anything else. We tried not to—except for the Zydeco gumbo, we try not to burn them up. We try to give them a lot of flavor and put the bottle on the table, and if they want it it's there, you know.

00:38:06

SR: Can you take me through the process of making your gumbo Ya-Ya?

00:38:14

LA: Sure. Actually we start in a cast-iron skillet with browning the meat first. I brown the sausage first and the rendering from the sausage I use to brown the chicken. I never take the oil out. I put the onions in after I've removed the meat. I put the onions in and brown it, the onions, in the rendering from the sausage and chicken. Then after the--the onions are pretty much charred on the edges I dump the rest of the veggies in and I get them to a point where they're starting to brown.

00:38:57

SR: And what veggies are those?

00:38:59

LA: The veggies are the celery, bell pepper, onion and garlic. But the onions come first; I like to get them a little darker than the rest of the vegetables. And then I--I put the rest of the vegetables in and when they start charring but they're still crisp, I put my stock in. And I do the roux a little bit different: I--I build my roux on the side, and I guess this comes from the restaurant, and then once the stock and the meat—I put the meat and the stock in and bring it up to a boil and I put the can of stewed tomatoes in (that is very chopped up with the liquid). Once all this comes up to a boil, then I add my hot roux to it slowly to where I get the thickness I want. Then it's--that's pretty much the gumbo other than salt and pepper. You know, you get the heat from the sausage; it's hot sausage. We use Manda's exclusively. It's something that I love; it's hard to beat it, it really is. And that's pretty much the gumbo. If--if I think it's a little too red I might touch it with a little Kitchen Bouquet, but most of the time if I get the onions right, it's done.

00:40:19

SR: What about the okra?

00:40:23

LA: The okra is the last thing. I cook the gumbo for 30--45 minutes and then I add the okra and cook it for another 15--20 minutes. I like the okra to be green; I don't want it to be black, and—but I want it cooked. So that's the finished product.

00:40:41

SR: So do you add the okra in raw?

00:40:43

LA: Yes, cut okra in raw—about two cups to, I'd say if I'm using, say, three cups of chicken stock to what--to what I'm doing, I'll use about two cups of cut okra.

00:41:02

SR: And does that really thicken it up a lot?

00:41:06

LA: It helps, it helps, but at the end product you can add more stock to get whatever consistency you want, so it's not a--not a death-type thing you know.

00:41:19

SR: What about your roux? Can you tell me what oil you use?

00:41:24

LA: I use canola oil. Canola, all purpose flour, and I tend to be a little heavy on the flour to--to the oil [ratio], and I cook it down to where it's pretty much a copper penny look and then set it off, and then it naturally darkens a little bit more than that.

00:41:41

SR: And so it's a similar color to your mom's?

00:41:49

LA: She would do--she would use a much darker roux.

00:41:50

SR: Really?

00:41:53

LA: Yeah, she would use a much darker roux. I guess that's the Cajun way. I don't know whether it comes from the game that they used way back then or--or what, but with the products we have today I just don't like a real heavy roux taste. It's not something that I enjoy, you know.

00:42:13

SR: How long does it take you to make your roux?

00:42:16

LA: Not long at all. [*Laughs*] It [my technique] comes from the restaurant. Making a roux at the restaurant, your oil gets blistering hot; you throw your flour in and mix it. And if you--if you think it's scorching, you take it off the fire and continue mixing. But I guess at home and this type of atmosphere, I would--it would take maybe 10--15 minutes; you know, at the restaurant, five. [*Laughs*]

00:42:49

SR: And what occasion these days do you make gumbo for, now that you're retired?

00:42:52

LA: Any time, any time—

00:42:57

AA: When I come in town. [*Laughs*]

00:43:01

SR: So it's on the menu, then?

00:43:04

AA: I have specific requests.

00:43:07

SR: What are some of the other ones?

00:43:08

AA: The last—

00:43:10

LA: Seafood.

00:43:08

AA: Yeah, the last time I was here, is it—

00:43:13

LA: Crawfish étouffée.

00:43:13

AA: It was shrimp Creole or something.

00:43:16

LA: Shrimp Creole, shrimp Creole. That's it.

00:43:18

AA: Shrimp Creole. I think the last time I was here that's--that was one of my specific requests. Obviously I love when he makes bread, so any time I come in pretty much he makes bread. And crawfish étouffée I love; any kind of seafood I can get because it's hard for me to get it in Dallas. Gumbo; jambalaya is always--I mean easy to pack and take home. Anything that I can get that I can take with me because it's—I can't get Papa's food anywhere else.

00:43:48

SR: Do you make gumbo yourself?

00:43:50

AA: Occasionally. I have my little--my little bible of stories and cookbook, and—I live by myself so it's harder but sometimes I'll occasionally have friends over and—.

00:44:05

LA: She's cooking very good now, she is.

00:44:07

AA: Yeah, I love it.

00:44:10

LA: My other daughter does not know how to.

00:44:10

AA: No, she does not want to. [*Laughs*]

00:44:12

LA: She is the corporate person in the family.

00:44:12

SR: She knows how to order well?

00:44:17

AA: That's right, yeah.

00:44:20

SR: That's an important skill too.

00:44:21

AA: It is, it is. Especially [because] she's got a brand new baby, just got married, so—.

00:44:24

LA: Do you cook?

00:44:28

SR: Oh yeah.

00:44:28

LA: Oh yeah? What do you cook?

00:44:30

SR: This is about you! [*Laughs*] I cook whatever I'm in the mood for.

00:44:40

LA: Do you cook a lot from your northern roots?

00:44:43

SR: Less and less the longer I live down here.

00:44:46

LA: What was your first impression [*Laughs*]--what was your first impression of the spice down here? Were you turned off by it?

00:44:57

SR: No. I had worked in restaurant kitchens for about six years before I moved down here. And I--I hadn't gone to culinary school or anything, but I worked with a lot of people who had, and there were a few people I worked with who talked a lot about this guy Paul Prudhomme, who talked about the layering of seasonings. And I didn't—

00:45:22

LA: Yeah, he is king.

00:45:23

SR: —I really didn't know what that meant until I came down here. And then first I could taste that there was just--there were dimensions to the food—to the flavors—and now that I'm getting more comfortable cooking I understand, like what that means.

00:45:40

LA: Have you--have you ever experimented with his sweeteners?

00:45:45

SR: Uh-um.

00:45:46

LA: The sweeteners that he uses?

00:45:47

SR: Uh-um, what do you mean?

00:45:48

LA: Well he'll--in fact the sauce for the duck came from Prudhomme. He takes concentrated apple juice and boils it down to a syrup—that's it. But he'll take that--that sweetener and add it to a gumbo. He'll add it to various dishes and it gives it a whole new dimension. If you ever have a dish that is, I'm going to say flat, or you can taste the salt, you can taste the pepper, but it's not quite there, sweeteners; just--you could use honey, you could use Sweet-n-Lo, okay, but his sweeteners—. He has a book out on it. I think it's *The Flavors of*—or one of the books I have, he has a whole deal on sweeteners in it.

00:46:42

SR: I have never explored that.

00:46:43

LA: Yeah, it's really interesting, but a little sweetness to--to a savory dish just changes the whole complexity of the dish. It really does. Try it.

00:46:54

SR: Yeah, I think that's true. I mean I believe that that's true, but yeah, I will. I'll check that out. I mean I've cooked a lot from his cookbooks because he's good at explaining things.

00:47:03

LA: Very good, hell of a teacher. I did a--I went to a synopsis on American cuisine in New Orleans, oh God, 20--25 years ago, and he was one of the teachers and he did a jambalaya and it was a red jambalaya, which I'm not used to, okay. I'm not--I'm used to a brown jambalaya, and I asked him a question about--about why the jambalaya was red and he didn't like the question.

[Laughs] He didn't--he put me off but his TV shows—you running out?

00:47:43

AA: No, uh-uh.

00:47:45

LA: His TV shows and his books—I like to watch him more than I like to read him. I really do. But that--that was my, you know my culinary upbringing, I guess I'll have to say. I have a very good friend, Jean French; he's from Normandy, France, and he--he's probably my mentor as far as learning how to cook. When I was--when I was opening donut shops and making bread, he

had a little restaurant called the La Normandy just off of Florida Boulevard. In fact, it was right around the corner from one of my donut shops. And a good friend of mine, a doctor in Hammond, had eaten there and told me to come by: *Go by. You've got to go by and eat some of this guy's food.* So we went by, and from that night to now he's probably one of my best friends. He was the Chef of the Year back in 19—early '90s—in the Louisiana Culinary Association, and he's--he's got all the letters behind his name and all that stuff and he—but he's just a Joe. I mean he's just a good ole guy, you know. And he never—I mean it's not like, *Oh, I don't want to tell you this; it's, What do you want to know?* Right now he's teaching at the Culinary Institute—what is it? Vo-tech here—and he is the instructor over there. He's the head of it you know. But he's--he's one of my good friends. He does--a last thing we had at his house was the couscous, the Moroccan couscous, yeah, and so he spends hours on it—hours on it.

00:49:31

SR: And so when you were you know learning to cook and, you know, meeting him and other people, and you would want to go out to restaurants, did you—you said that you liked the Creole-style gumbo. Would you gravitate more toward, like, Cajun country or more towards New Orleans?

00:49:53

LA: No, right now I'm pretty much Italian Creole. I'm heavy--and in fact if I did another restaurant it would be upscale Italian. We spent--we lived in Italy for, I guess what, about four months, and we've been back—we've been three times. We've been to France once. And in fact the last time I took my baby with me. But the Italian cooking and the Creole cooking is where

my heart is. That's bracioloni or bracoli, or whatever you want to call it; I'm a student of the ragu—just a student of the ragu. I spent some time in Bologna, but basically from all areas—we spent most of our time in Liguria, which is on the coast, because my wife loves the beach and I love the mountains, so we split the difference you know. But the Italian cooking is just something I can't--I can't get away from. It's just, it's just so robust; it's so there, you know.

00:51:08

SR: Uh-hm, and the products over there are so amazing.

00:51:10

LA: Oh yeah. The--well she saw the market—the daily market, in La Spezia, Italy, which was five miles--ten miles from where we were living, is a city park under a pavilion and you have down one side of the block is fresh fish, one side of the block is cheese, you know. It's--it's amazing; it is amazing the product you have there. And you go into a little alimentary, just a little grocery store, and they have just the most unique things. Like they have little herb bundles that they sell for pennies. It will be sage and thyme and rosemary all tied in like a bouquet, okay, and--but it's there for the taking. You don't find that here. You know you've got to buy \$2.00 sage; \$4.00 worth of—you know, or grow it. But it's just unique. I know when--when Amanda and I went to get bread one time, she said, *Don't they have soft bread here?* [**Laughs**] And they found it. They did. they had some little soft rolls, but I mean it was like, you know—

00:52:25

AA: I was spoiled. I mean he--his bread—I'm so spoiled. I can't have anything else. It's all I want.

00:52:32

LA: The bread you'll have today, the flour came from Italy. It's called Integrali and it's a--it's a whole-wheat, whole-grain flour, but it bakes so much different than American whole wheat. I think it's just not ground as fine and I don't--and I'm sure it's a hard wheat. It wouldn't bake up like it does if it was a soft wheat. But it's got a taste—well it's the taste of the flour is what you'll taste today, you know.

00:53:09

SR: I can't wait. Tell me a bit about your cookbook—when you published that. And what was the inspiration?

00:53:16

LA: Well originally, Jones--Greg Jones, my cousin's husband—what is that to me?

00:53:26

SR: Your cousin's husband.

00:53:27

AA: Your niece's husband.

00:53:29

LA: My niece's husband.

00:53:31

SR: Your nephew-in-law.

00:53:33

LA: Anyway Greg Jones, he's a--he's an insurance man out of Dallas, and we're sitting around at one of the family Christmas parties three or four years ago and he said, *You know somebody ought to write a book about all this stuff.* He says, *You guys cook. You know y'all cook so good.* His mother-in-law is an excellent cook and he is an excellent cook. He said, *Hell, in my family we don't do none of this,* you know; *You need*—and that started me thinking. And so when I retired I devoted pretty much the first year to taking pictures of everything we ate and--and collecting recipes—I mean from the restaurant, from wherever.

00:54:19

AA: He's always been a big connoisseur of finding things that he likes that other people do and having a sample and--and just analyzing that sample to figure out what's in it. It's this amazing ability that he has to say, *Okay well this is made out of this and this and this.* My favorite thing--one of my favorite sauces that he makes is the Caesar dressing because it's hard to find a good Caesar that doesn't taste too much like mayonnaise and doesn't taste too much like fish. It's a little spicy but it's not too grainy-tasting, and he went around to—how many restaurants? Twenty probably?

00:54:53

LA: Oh, we said, *Can I have some more Caesar?* And take it and put it in the purse.

00:54:58

AA: And then go home and taste and, you know, *Oh this has too--I want--*and that's how he figured out how to make his own. And it's like I know when you were—

00:55:03

LA: Well every cook does that.

00:55:05

AA: It was great.

00:55:07

SR: That's above and beyond though.

00:55:09

AA: Yeah, I think it's a little—I mean you really have this innate sense to taste and pull out what flavors are in things.

00:55:16

LA: That started the cookbook, and then reading. Okay, you get all the trades you know; you get burned out on one, you leave it for a while and then it comes back. But you get all the trades all the time and see where it's going, what's happening and what's popular, and you try this and you try that. That's pretty much what started the cookbook. And then the--me trying to find a printer. Oh my God. First printer out of--out of California, San Diego: \$47 a copy, yes. So I bought 1,000 books and gave away most of them trying to, you know, get something going. Sent them to publishers. Well I got 128 colored pictures in the book and they--they couldn't print it; they couldn't make money out of it. I finally, Digital Press here in town, a guy named Joel Ditman has become my bosom buddy. He prints it for \$22 a copy and I sell it for \$28, you know. And so the--it's published, self-published book, and through interviews like this, I have some friends at the TV station and I do--I've done cooking shows with them. And through just word of mouth—I think that's going to be the vehicle for the book. I don't think it will ever be John Folsie, you know, or Paul Prudhomme. *[Laughs]*

00:56:44

SR: You have to have a whole PR arm for that.

00:56:45

LA: Right, right.

00:56:47

SR: But when did you publish this first?

00:56:49

LA: It's about two years old now.

00:56:53

SR: Oh okay. And is it mostly recipes from the restaurant?

00:56:57

LA: No, it's--it's mostly home recipes and things that have, you know that gained my curiosity. It does have the restaurant salad dressings and it has maybe 10 or 12 of the recipes like the duck, you know; the muffaletta. Things like that.

00:57:19

AA: Soups?

00:57:20

LA: Hmm?

00:57:22

AA: Some of the soups?

00:57:23

LA: The soups, right. But mostly it's **brucialoni**, the perfect meatball you know, and it's funny. Like when you're into cooking, the—you know what I'm talking about: you can talk food just

about any time anywhere. And I'm shooting pool with a guy named Sonny Verdi, and he was the mayor of Baker, which is a little town not too far from Baton Rouge. In fact I think it's attached to Baton Rouge.

00:57:55

AA: Yeah, uh-hm.

00:57:58

LA: And so he tells me one day about how he cooks a perfect meatball [*Laughs*]. We were shooting pool and we were talking about meatballs so the recipe is in the book. But things like that. That--that's what the book is all about. It's just--I got one going now called *The Pantry Cookbook* that I'm working on, and it's basically about opening the refrigerator and the pantry and deciding what you want to cook, you know, and turning leftovers into something else—that type of book. I don't know. That will probably take me five years. [*Laughs*]

00:58:28

SR: They take a long time.

00:58:31

LA: Yeah.

00:58:32

SR: What about the gumbo recipe in here?

00:58:35

LA: That's a mock Ya-Ya gumbo—gumbo Ya-Ya. And I—who knows what *Ya-Ya* means? I mean John Folse said it, and he thinks it comes from the rice, but I have no idea what *Ya-Ya* means. I think it's more or less an expression—*Ya-Ya*, you know *good*, and something like that. But Herman Didee, he actually did a--he had the restaurant here, closed it, and opened a restaurant in Aspen, Colorado, doing the duck up there. I think when that folded he came back and done a little restaurant here. But he was--he was a colorful fellow and he loved the social scene. And he was a—oh just a person that...he talked very—he had a wide vocabulary, I'll put it that way. But he did the gumbo Ya-Ya and I remember it being very good, very spicy. It was heavy tomato, chicken and sausage, and very spicy with a--pretty much the same roux you'll taste today. It wasn't a dark roux; it was more of a reddish-brown gumbo. And the gumbo—I asked him, you know, if he'd tell me--show me how he made his gumbo. And he showed me the secret to his gumbo. He said the secret is never tell anybody how you make your gumbo. **[Laughs]** And so I kind of put it together from what I remembered from his gumbo; that's the recipe in the book.

01:00:14

SR: The gumbo Ya-Ya to you—does that mean a gumbo that has chicken in it and sausage, or—?

01:00:23

LA: It means a chicken and sausage gumbo that's spicy. That's what it means to me, and a tomato—Creole gumbo. That's what it means to me.

01:00:32

SR: So he never told you any of the secrets?

01:00:34

LA: He wouldn't tell me about the duck, wouldn't tell me about the gumbo. He's--*[Laughs]* just-- he thought that he cooked like nobody else and that nobody else could cook like him and he wasn't about to let them know. *[Laughs]*

01:00:55

SR: And is he still alive?

01:00:56

LA: No, Herman died. Herman died 10 years ago--15 years ago, yeah.

01:01:03

SR: Well good thing you're preserving some of his recipes.

01:01:07

LA: Well I think a lot of people have. He was--he was quite a popular person in town, you know.

01:01:13

SR: So you mentioned that if you were to open another restaurant it would be an Italian restaurant.

01:01:19

LA: Yeah.

01:01:21

SR: Do you have fantasies of opening another restaurant?

01:01:24

LA: I look at places all the time and then I talk myself out of it all the time. I don't know whether I have the hours in me anymore. The restaurant was 60--80 hours, you know, and if I did it, it would have to be in conjunction with somebody else. It would have to be a younger person.

[Laughs] And I could—you know I'm a kitchen person; I'm not the front person. I stay in the kitchen and I would waltz in and waltz out, you know, when I got tired. I tried to—when I got out of the restaurant I went to work at Raffino's Restaurant here in town. And it was a—what an eye-opening experience.

01:02:14

AA: Yeah. **[Laughs]**

01:02:15

LA: It was--it was something that opened my eyes to whether I wanted to do that again, okay, because it was—I was making 12--15 cheesecakes at a time, and I was—

01:02:31

AA: Right, mass production.

01:02:32

LA: —making five, six, seven gallons of Caesar or Sensation [dressing] you know. I was doing 30 or 40 crème brûlées at a time. I was chopping 50 to 60 pounds of meat at a session, and I don't want to do that; I don't want to do that. You know what I'm talking about. **[Laughs]** The only thing I didn't do was wash dishes. So that didn't last very long. I decided that I wanted to retire.

01:03:03

SR: Well let me ask you one last question. What did you like most about running the restaurant?

01:03:12

LA: The people, the people. I have some of my best friends that came from the years in the restaurant, that were customers you know, and my lawyer is a girl who—well was raised in the restaurant, and she's--she's a devoted cook. We have a recipe together in the book. But the people and satisfying the people; you know, them telling me that, *Man, this is good; this is it.* You know that does it for me. It wasn't the money for sure. I mean the restaurant—unless you're, you know, Raffino's or Antoine's or something, you're not going to make a lot of money

at a restaurant. I mean you're going to make a living, that's it, and hopefully the State comes by and buys the land. [*Laughs*]

01:04:05

SR: Yeah, that helps, huh?

01:04:05

LA: Yeah. Yeah, it does. But that--that's what I love most about it: the people.

01:04:11

SR: That still must have been a bittersweet day when you saw the restaurant go down.

01:04:15

LA: Well what do you mean? You're talking about—.

01:04:23

AA: Losing—leaving the restaurant behind but—.

01:04:26

LA: I don't think it's ever behind, you know, it's—. I've got a friend in Houston that keeps saying, *Let's do something together*, but he's as old as I am. And it would have to be--it would have to be something that we could both put money in, both put time in, and I could pretty much pull out when I want to. You know, that type of thing. I would get back into it, but that's--it's not

open right now. I'm not even thinking about it right now. But it's just force of habit. You go down the street and you see this place for rent and you call up and say, *How many square feet? How many bathrooms?* **[Laughs]** And if that ever hits and I find another person, I'd probably do it again, but like I say it would have to be more or less on my terms. I won't--I won't get a place and go in and be the kingpin in it again, no.

01:05:24

SR: Okay, well I just want you say for the record the name of your book.

01:05:26

LA: The book is called "*Baton Rouge*" *Style*, which was the logo inside of our restaurant. We had it in neon over the bar: "*Baton Rouge*" *Style*. We--everybody wanted to do it New Orleans-style; everybody wanted to do it Orleans-style, and I like New Orleans-style—I do. But why--I'm in Baton Rouge; I mean it should be "*Baton Rouge*" *Style*, you know, so that's what the cookbook is about. It's about growing up in Baton Rouge; it's about Baton Rouge-style cooking the way I do it. **[Laughs]**

01:05:58

SR: Well thank you both so much for talking to me.

01:06:00

AA: Thank you.

01:06:02

SR: I look forward to getting some pictures of you and tasting some gumbo.

01:06:03

AA: Yeah.

01:06:04

LA: You're welcome. That little thing holds some talk.

01:06:08

[End Lynn Anselmo Interview]