

**MARCELLE BIENVENU**  
**St. Martinville, LA**

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Interviewer: Sara Roahen, Southern Foodways Alliance  
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs  
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Project: Southern Gumbo Trail – Louisiana

**[Begin Marcelle Bienvenu-1 Interview]**

**00:00:01**

**Sara Roahen:** This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Thursday, July 7, 2008. I'm in St. Martinville, Louisiana, with Marcelle Bienvenu. Could I get you, Marcelle, to say your own name, how you pronounce it, and your birth date, if you don't mind?

**00:00:17**

**Marcelle Bienvenu:** Okay. Marcelle Bienvenu, February 26, 1945.

**00:00:23**

**SR:** Thank you, and could you describe your own words what--how you make a living?

**00:00:25**

**MB:** I'm a food writer, food historian, cookbook author, storyteller. *[Laughs]*

**00:00:34**

**SR:** Renaissance woman. So could you start out by telling me a little bit about your--your heritage, where your people came from, how long they've been in this area and--and where you grew up?

**00:00:46**

**MB:** My father's family, the Bienvenus, my—that side of the family came to America in the 1700s through a land grant on the Mississippi River near St. Louis. And I believe—and I don't remember—there were six or eight brothers. Two of the brothers eventually came to New Orleans and were very active in the New Orleans area. They lived—I don't know if you're familiar with Bayou Bienvenu; it's Bayou Bienvenu, which is--which is near where was the Battle of New Orleans fought at—not Belle Chase, but anyway in that area. And they were big farmers and one of those two brothers was the only Frenchman to sit on the Spanish government when the Spanish ruled Louisiana. But anyway, then they were very prolific. There was a lot Bienvenus; two or three of those people eventually came to St. Martinville, probably in the early 1800s, and settled this area. My grandfather Lazaire Epiphany Bienvenu was one of the postmasters here in the 18--late 1800s. He and his brother Martial—M-a-r-t-i-a-l—and they were working at the post office and they were very bored. So they started a newspaper, and then the government—they were selling it at the post office for two-cents. And it was a little hand-press thing. And the government said, *You can't have a business on governmental property.*

**00:02:23**

So they left the post office and started a paper in 1886 and it was called the *Weekly Messenger*. And so that was the newspaper and it became the *Parish Journal* and it's still in operation. And so my father, Blackie Bienvenu, Marcel “Blackie” Bienvenu, and then my brother, Henry Clay Bienvenu took over—my brother Henry just retired. So this is the first time that we are not actively involved in the newspaper business.

**00:02:51**

And my father was one of 12 children, and the—Daddy and his brother, Ralph—he had the paper—. Ralph had the paper in Abbeville; Daddy had the paper in St. Martinville. And then

another brother, Uncle Shorty, LL, was the *Times-Picayune* correspondent or whatever in the Lafayette area. So I grew up in a newspaper family. And we all worked at the paper. I mean that was when you had to hand-fold it and all that. I used to come home on Wednesdays with our inked hands and eat sandwiches and we'd have thumb--you know, prints on our bread and I thought I was going to die from that.

**00:03:28**

Anyway, my mother's family is--is the Acadian group. She was a Broussard and she is a descendent of Beausoleil Broussard, who is one of the big leaders who eventually led the Acadians to South Louisiana. If you see the mural in St. Martinville at the Acadian Museum, he is the main--he was one of the main characters. There was a lot of them that— after they were deported out of Canada, some went back to France, and he was of a group that went back to France and he fought to come back to Louisiana. And some of them settled near Vacherie, Louisiana, and some of them came to this area. They were trying to find French Catholic areas because that's what they would do. So they settled here probably in the late 17--late 1700s, and my mother's father, Antoine Preval [his grandchildren called him Popete; Antoine has a son named Adolf, who Marcelle mentions at this point in the interview], he was one of 13 children, and he— all him and his brothers and sisters were mostly farmers in this area. They worked for-- one started Bruce Foods Canning Company; another one was a big—well-known for his time—a big horse trainer. His sister, Tee, Aunt Henrietta [Henrietta had a sister named Tacia, who Marcelle also mentions at this point in the interview], had a little restaurant in Loreauville and it was across the street from the school in Loreauville, and she was probably one of the first ones, probably in the '40s and '50s, that cooked out of--literally out of her house. She had a little shop and she made crawfish bisque and crawfish étouffée that people in Texas would send their

drivers to pick it up. So Aunt Ti was the Broussard cook, and she would stuff bell peppers. She made the most incredible pies and I know you're going to think this is horrible [**Laughs**]*—*and she was--she was 92; she was not well. Anyway, a cousin of mine called and she says, *You know we better go see Aunt Ti.* I said, *I know; she's not doing well.* She said, *I know she's not doing well but she has never given us the recipe for bread pudding.* [**Laughs**] And she made these--these triple-layered chocolate pies. To this day I've tried twice and it just--it's just not--it's not in my soul. But anyway, so Aunt Ti, she was just about on her deathbed and we all went—three of us, three cousins—to get all her recipes. Of course she never measured anything, but we talked about it.

00:06:04

**SR:** So she wasn't offended?

00:06:04

**MB:** No, not at all. No, she was a wonderful woman, a jolly, delightful fun, absolutely—she was a spinster and had no children, so of course all the nieces and nephews and all that were her--her sweeties. So she was wonderful. And my--my grandfather was married twice, so there was—he had a family from the first wife and she died, and then my mother's mother, he married my mother's mother, my grandmother, and had five children of that marriage. He was a big farmer, big sugarcane, and so what I remember about my childhood was my father, because he was one of 12 children—his wife was--her name was Leoncia--L-e-o-n-c-i-a--Tertou--T-e-r-t-o-u, and that family is no longer here. She had seven sisters, no brothers, and so that family just kind of—. But they were all incredible cooks. They had a boarding house in town and she was

known for all of her—she would make daube, daube glacées. She was an incredible pastry lady. She was--she was a tiny, tiny little person. I mean five-feet if she was, and like 90-pounds. But all of that family were big—and they claimed they were part of the Tertous, came—her--her ancestors probably came here during the French Revolution.

**00:07:30**

St. Martinville was settled by several different groups. It was first a trading post, Indian-French Trading Post, and it was called Poste de Attakapas. And then there was an influx of Frenchmen that came of course when, you know, that--when the--New Orleans, I mean Louisiana was being settled by the French. And then of course there was some Spanish that came here. Then people that fled the French Revolution, and then we had the Acadians, so we had the--the ones that claimed to be of the French Aristocrats had to live side-by-side with the low Acadians. And so I'm sure they had to trade stuff and we had a lot of Indians in this area. So there's a lot of Indian—you know that's where filé powder comes from. You know all this—it was an incredible little melting pot in this town. And so my grandmother, you know she learned all of her cooking stuff from the French aristocrats, so her cooking was oh là là. But my mother's family were all farmers; I mean you know that's what they—they cooked very, you know, whatever they had they—whatever they grew and whatever they raised is what they ate.

**00:08:41**

I can remember, and this was in the '40s, we'd go to my grandfather's farm and there were people cutting sugarcane by hand. I mean they had the blacks in the farm--in the fields and they would bring the sugarcane by a little train all the way to the sugar mill and my brother and I, my brother Henry Clay and I, were in charge. My old Aunt Grace, who just passed away at 99, would fix a meal for the field hands and she would put them in buckets and boxes and we'd get

on a horse and put that on the horse with us and go bring their meals to them in the field. And they had cornbread; she'd send black-eyed peas and rice. They had all kinds of stuff. I mean they ate well at their lunch meal because she would send it, and sometimes we had a wagon to bring lemonade and tea and all that to the farmhands.

**00:09:35**

And we--they'd let us go—we had a big Tennessee Walker; it was a big old horse, Lady, and we'd go and bring the food and she'd make us—she'd tell us to wait and said, *Bring everything back*, and she had a black cook with her all the time. Her name was La Vielle, *the old one*. She had two stoves: one was a wood-burning stove and one was a regular little gas stove. And they would cook from morning 'til night on that stove. That's all I can remember, that kitchen. They were always baking chicken. They had cows so we had butter, we had eggs, we had chickens, we had--I mean everything; they had a garden. I don't remember Aunt Grace, Tina, going to the store for anything to cook too much. For canned—I mean you know they didn't—

**00:10:21**

**SR:** Really?

**00:10:21**

**MB:** Everything they had was what they had on the farm, which I thought—when I'm looking back now I go, *Gee, I never—*. You know you'd think she went to get a can of cream of mushroom soup? I don't think. But I mean it was amazing, now that I think about it, 'cause they lived literally off the land. I mean my mother said that--I asked her if when they—during the Depression, were they poor. And she said, *Marcelle*, she said, *We didn't have money*. But she

said, *We never starved*, and she said, *We always had clothes*, because they would make clothes out of the sacks from the flour and the rice. And I--she used to make me clothes out of flour sacks.

**00:11:01**

**SR:** Really?

**00:11:01**

**MB:** And they were cute.

**00:11:03**

**SR:** I bet.

**00:11:04**

**MB:** But everything they had was from the--from their stove. But what would--when I was little my grandmother Bienvenu, her--her stove never got cold either because she had 12 children. And I was laughing the other day: I asked my brother, I said, *Do you think they had a car?* He said--he said, *Well of course not. What kind of car would you get for 12 kids?* But they lived in town so they could walk everywhere, you know. And I can remember there was a fish house by the bayou and you could go to the fish market; she would send her—her maid was Toot-Toot, and Toot-Toot and I would go to the fish market and get fish. There was two—we had a lot of Italians, Sicilians, that settled in this area and they always had stores. The Fotis, the--the Signorellis, and they always had produce. And they also had oyster bars; we had oyster bars in



St. Martinville, [*Emphasis Added*] so you could go to get your oysters in a little bag--in a little box. You know, so in town they had everything they needed as well.

**00:12:10**

**SR:** That's not so much the case now, huh?

**00:12:12**

**MB:** No. We still have a lot of farmers but they're all crop farming. Although, you know I shouldn't say that because—and even before going organic and all these farmers markets, we had a lot of little small truck farming in this area. Near Loreauville there's a lot of people that still grow tomatoes, cucumbers, bell peppers. And then you also have to remember too that in this area, Bruce Foods, there was all these—you know, this is not any longer in operation—and Trappey's were all people that canned okra, corn, Celeste figs; we have a lot of pepper companies. You know we have not only Tabasco but we have Evangeline, and we have Cajun Chef; we have several pepper--pepper companies. So there's a lot of that stuff grown here. I mean they get a lot of peppers from Texas and Mexico and Florida, but there's a lot of crops here besides the sugarcane and sweet potatoes or rice. A lot of crawfish farmers. So, and a lot of people have gardens here. I mean it's amazing to me how many people have gardens.

**00:13:17**

**SR:** Who grow their own--grow their own produce?

**00:13:19**

**MB:** Uh-hm, uh-hm. So anyway, what I can remember as a child, [**Laughs**] Mama would say, *Ah, we're going to have to go to Grandma Bienvenu's for--for dinner—woo-hoo fancy, fancy, fancy.* I mean she--big—. I mean she had two huge [**Emphasis Added**] tables that she would set. I mean we hadn't—no paper plates. I mean they had China and Mama would call it, *We have to use the fabric napkins; not no paper napkins.* But then to go to the farm was--was a very different kind of eating. I mean everybody kind of ate in the kitchen. There was a huge room; this kitchen was, I mean it was twice the size of this [**motions to her office**] and you could eat on the—they had benches and stools and I mean you could eat--I mean they had big dinners.

**00:14:03**

**SR:** So there's so much in what you just told me, but I guess I'll just ask—I'll jump ahead a little bit and ask like what the difference would be between—I'm assuming that both families would eat gumbo once in a while?

**00:14:16**

**MB:** Uh-hm, uh-hm.

**00:14:17**

**SR:** And what were the differences between the styles of gumbo between the families?

**00:14:21**

**MB:** Probably not much. My mother's family probably made more because they lived on a farm and they had chicken and—chicken and sausage. We had pigs and we had chickens. And they

also had a little smokehouse, so we had our own tasso, which is very different from what it is now. It was just the pig trimmings--pork trimmings that they smoked. Now you get all these beautiful pieces of very lean pork that's very beautiful and seasoned, but theirs was just trimmings. They also—so the gumbos that we had at--at the farm were, you know, okra gumbo with chicken and sausage. And in town I don't think Toot-Toot and them ever put okra in their gumbo. We had seafood gumbo; okra was a side dish. It was a smothered okra, but it was never joined with gumbos. And they made seafood in town. Because they--they could buy the oysters and everything at the little fish house. I mean they had access to a little bit more, and they were more sophisticated. I mean they really were. I don't mean they were more sophisticated than the Broussard--the farmers. And I don't mean—I mean they loved each other but they were just different kind of people.

**00:15:32**

**SR:** The tasso: would it be—when your family made it, was it really highly seasoned like it is now?

**00:15:40**

**MB:** Yeah, they would roll it in salt and pepper and it was usually in strips, and then of course it was—because if you—you know to preserve, you either preserved in sugar, vinegar, or salt, so they had a lot of salt meat. We had a lot of—they would make--they would call--and I have to look this up. I remembered this thing: they would put it in crocks; they would put it in salt with a cover and they'd go and cut off a chunk of salt meat. But they also had what I think is called grillades marinée. And I tried to ask one of my old aunts and all she can remember was she said

she thought it was always pork ‘cause they would salt it, but it was—and then they would cook it before they would salt it, so it wasn’t like a salt meat as they know it now. And she said they would use it to season jambalayas or to put in--put little chunks of it in when you cook green beans or, you know, vegetables. So, and I still can't figure out how that--that was done. But they did a lot of sausages at the boucheries. They smoked their own sausage. They made a lot of fresh pork sausage. They made their own gratons, cracklings. They did--they did a lot of stuffed stomachs. They’d stuffed the ponce, the chaudin, so they were very—. You know when they’d have these boucheries— they did this three or four times a year during the winter—and so they had a lot of food to last them through the--through the year.

**00:17:17**

**SR:** And they would butcher pigs and cows?

**00:17:20**

**MB:** Well Popete [conjunction of Pop Pete] always had cows that he would send to market. He wouldn’t butcher them himself, but he always did the pigs. We had the cauldron. In fact Rock, he just ordered one and put it up. We have some stored--a storeroom that we—we’ve elected his mother—. His father was a fantastic cook and my father was a Boy Scout leader and loved, loved to cook outdoors, so we have a lot of his pots and when he died that was in his will, his pots.

**00:17:48**

**SR:** Really?

**00:17:50**

**MB:** And I was so upset. My brother got the biggest one. *[Emphasis Added]* *[Laughs]* But he had this--these huge skillets that he'd cook outdoors on a wood fire; so we all got some.

*[Laughs]*

**00:18:03**

**SR:** And I should just say you mentioned Rock. Who's that?

**00:18:06**

**MB:** Rock is my husband, Rock Lasserre--L-a-s-s-e-r-r-e--and his father and my father knew each other because they were horseman together. They used to be in parades. They had--they had all these fabulous saddles that were made here in St. Martinville, so we kind of knew who each other were but we knew—. We went to college together but we married other people and then divorced those people and then married each other about 18 years ago.

**00:18:34**

**SR:** Back to the tasso. Were you saying they would put tasso in the gumbo on the farm?

**00:18:41**

**MB:** Uh-hm. They would use tasso much like we would use salt meat or any of that kind of stuff. It was the seasoning; tasso was just a seasoning--was the seasoning. It was kind of like their bacon. It was kind of used interchangeably with bacon.

**00:19:01**

**SR:** And so I had some gumbo questions. You have--I know I have two cookbooks that you wrote. Are there more?

**00:19:09**

**MB:** The two *Who's Your Mama* books?

**00:19:09**

**SR:** Yeah.

**00:19:11**

**MB:** Yeah, the two *Who's Your Mama* books; book two was just republished. Book one was out of publication until after Katrina and I got somebody else to republish it. I also have *Cajun Cooking for Beginners*; I'm trying to see if I see one up there. It's just a small little book on—

**00:19:29**

**SR:** I might have that one too.

**00:19:30**

**MB:** Yeah, this is the--these are the two new ones that were republished. And then I did *Stir the Pot*. You know that one?

**00:19:36**

**SR:** Uh-hm, yeah. That's--that has recipes but it's also like a real history book.

**00:19:44**

**MB:** Yeah, and I'll tell you what: even writing that with Carl Brasseaux and his son, Ryan, it was amazing what we found out 'cause I think that we were--we were amazed that a lot of people are under the impression that the Acadians came down from Canada with all these dishes. But that's not what happened. I mean if you've ever been to the eastern provinces in Canada, the food is awful. Don't say I sad that. *[Laughs]* No, but it's very different. It's not awful. I shouldn't—. It's just very different from what we have here because the ingredients were different. I mean they lived in Canada, so it was far different from the ingredients that they came to use here. But I think that probably the cuisine anywhere in South Louisiana, no matter which Frenchman did it, is basically a French-based cuisine, and you know these people had to come here from France; people of Spanish [descent], the Acadians. They got here and they went, *Well we would like to make bouillabaisse but we don't have the ingredients that we had in Marseille. So what can we substitute?* And I think it became a cuisine of making do with what they got. I mean certainly the people from France came here and went, *We don't have anything that we used to have in France.* But they used--they used what they had here and made French dishes, French-type dishes. And I think New Orleans—and we were affected here in South Louisiana as well. But I think New Orleanians, I think there was a lot of—I think that probably a lot of the cuisine that developed there was because of the black slaves and because of the people that came in through--after the Revolution in the Caribbean. I mean a lot of that stuff is really bad.

**00:21:33**

You know that's where that, you know Creole—and of course everybody wants to try to define that in—you know everybody will have a different definition and everybody is right, you know. Leah Chase says, she says, *You a Creole?* And I say, *Yeah, Miss Leah.* She says, *Me too; we're different colors.* **[Laughs]** I mean a lot of people try to put the Cajun and the Creoles in these little--little boxes, and it's just so--they're so integrated with each other. And you know there's a wonderful lady here in town, Josephine, and she's the—that's a little restaurant and I go there sometimes. And you know and she'll cook the same things my mother cooked, but different—not so differently, but it's amazing to see her—like I go there on Fridays 'cause she does a shrimp stew with boiled eggs. And we were talking about that the other day, and she said that her mother who was also a good cook would use--would cook--would drop eggs and boil it in the stew, but then she'd take the eggs and get the egg yolks and grate it into the stew to make it thicker and it had this fabulous flavor. And Mama would just say, *Oh those poor people that have to make their shrimp stew with eggs.* What--what is so wrong? What is so poor? **[Laughs]**

00:22:54

**SR:** Because she seeing it as an extender?

00:22:55

**MB:** Right **[Laughs]**. You know so it's amazing just locally—in fact she and I, Josephine and I are going to do this thing at the Acadian Memorial in October. You know: *she said, she said, she said, she said.* Because they'll take the same ingredients and they'll just—you know, we just do it differently. Both—I mean we both do. And I think that when they say, *the Creole food of New Orleans*—you know when we were little we'd go to New Orleans and Daddy would take us



everywhere from, you know to the lakefront, to Antoine's, to Galatoire's, to the corner grocery, to you know, to get muffalettas and po-boys. So, and of course you talk about a melting--melting pot. You know you had Italian Creole and you had French, Spanish; I mean it--it is just amazing that the end result of the development of the cuisine has become so—well it's just, I don't think you can find it anywhere else.

**00:23:47**

**SR:** So you mentioned earlier that you're Creole. Are you Creole on one side and Cajun on the other?

**00:23:55**

**MB:** I don't think—. Do you know Peter Patout?

**00:23:59**

**SR:** No, I don't.

**00:24:00**

**MB:** Yeah, well anyway he was friends—his--his uncle was married to one of my aunts. Anyway he comes every once in a while and we were talking and he said, *Do you think you're Creole?* I said, *I never thought of that.* I mean I don't know how—how does one define that? And of course, you know if you are a descendant from anybody who came from France or Spain or whatever and came to America and kept the--the traditions and the culture and the cuisine alive, then you're Creole. If you want to take that definition. Now, you know in town, if

you're—like Josephine, she's Creole; she will tell you, and she is not a descendent from a slave. St. Martinville was settled by a lot of free people of color and they came here—the Catholic Church offered them to come and settle some of the land around and they rented from the Catholic Church. But they were milliners; they were tradesmen. And they all had businesses in town and they'd tell you that they're—those are the Creoles here. So you know you have—and then you go to New Orleans and it's maybe different.

**00:25:01**

**SR:** Well do you consider yourself Cajun?

**00:25:03**

**MB:** More Cajun than anything I guess, only because—you know I did an article years ago because we have a lot of Germans that live in this area, and Italians. And I asked this little guy—his name was Schexnayder. I think that sounds pretty German to me, and I said, *Mr. Brad*, I said, *Do you think you're a Cajun?*

*Oh yeah*, he said to me. *Yeah*. I said, But you have a name like Schexnayder. He said, *Now that don't make any difference*. He says, *I can dance Cajun, I can cook Cajun, and I talk Cajun, so I'm Cajun*. And I went, *Okay*. **[Laughs]** And I think the--the culture of the Acadians and the French people that settled in New Orleans and here were so--was so strong that they kind of absorbed the—. I mean the Italians will never say that they're Cajuns but they—you know the Italians that live here, I cook with them sometimes and they add a little bit of a Cajun twist to some of their stuff, only because that's what they have. I mean that's what they cook like; it's amazing.

**00:26:00**

**SR:** Seems like sometimes Germans will say they're Cajun.

**00:26:02**

**MB:** Uh-hm, and--and in New Iberia, which was all Spanish—was settled by the Spanish land grants, and it was the Sagreras and the Seguras, and the Ramirezes and the—I mean it's all Spanish and they'll tell you they're Cajun at--with no problem. But I just think it was just a strong—you know the culture was just so strong that it just kind of grabbed them all in. And of course the Spanish—the Spanish, the Italians, the Germans, the--they just kind of broadened it because they brought their own little twists and turns and ingredients and preparations to all that.

**00:26:43**

**SR:** You know one thing that's interesting to me on the topic of gumbo is, it seems like from what I've heard and read that Cajun cooking and ingredients didn't really make its way into New Orleans until relatively recently. And a lot of people out here didn't make their way into New Orleans and sort of vice-versa, and yet there's this statewide dish: gumbo. I'm just--do you have any theories about why something with so many preparations in so many different areas of the state has the same name?

**00:27:26**

**MB:** And all kind of different?

00:27:28

**SR:** Yeah.

00:27:29

**MB:** I mean if you like go to North Louisiana and [*Laughs*] —North Louisiana, they'll put—. I'm kind of a purist. I don't want chicken in my seafood gumbo. And, but if you go to North Louisiana—it's not that it's bad; it's just that they'll put chicken, crabmeat, shrimp, sausage, tomatoes... And I'm going, *Oh okay*. And it's—hey, I mean Emeril makes a wild mushroom gumbo. I don't know about that. I mean, but, hey you know, and everybody—and if you talk to a Creole or a black, they'll tell you that a gumbo is not a gumbo unless you have okra in it, okay. And of course you know the word *okra* is the word for *gumbo*—African word for *gumbo*: *okra*. And so, hey. And I will make okra gumbo. I'll make chicken and sausage okra gumbo, or seafood gumbo with okra, but I never put the two together. And I think [the reason] that gumbo became so universal is that everybody—not everybody, but I think that it was such a—now I hate to say *easy*; it was a dish that most people could put together. You could use anything. There was no rules, right, except it's supposed to start with a roux. So if you wanted to put anything in it, it became your gumbo. I mean, how many gumbo recipes have you seen? And who--who is right? Who is wrong? As long as they taste good they can put anything in it. But I just think it became--just like jambalaya. It became a universal dish for everybody in Louisiana to make and there's all kinds of different theories on it. I mean Leah Chase and I go round and round and round about that, which is fabulous.

00:29:11

**SR:** Although you just said that it's supposed to start with a roux, but I've met people who—

**00:29:17**

**MB:** No.

**00:29:19**

**SR:** —Italians especially who don't make a roux.

**00:29:20**

**MB:** Yeah, and a lot of people that will tell you if you use--if you use okra they don't use a roux.

So, hey, who are you going to believe?

**00:29:29**

**SR:** Right.

**00:29:30**

**MB:** And so you know it's one of those un-definable things. That's—and I'm sticking to that.

**00:29:38**

**SR:** [*Laughs*] I think that--I think you're probably right. Do you ever make a gumbo without a roux?

**00:29:45**

**MB:** No. And I remember asking my mother ‘cause I remember when I moved to New Orleans in the ‘60s I lived next door to a delightful old lady in the Garden District. And she was very nice to me and I’d go sit with her every once in a while and she would make this wonderful gumbo with—it was a shrimp and okra gumbo and she never used roux and she used a lot of tomatoes. And Mama would go, *Oh my goodness*, because Mama would never do that. And so you know Mama said we never put tomatoes in our—any kind of gumbo. Any kind except that--except if she used smothered okra to put in her chicken sausage gumbo she would smother that okra with some tomatoes. Oh so everybody would go, *Well it’s just a little bit*. So--so there was always this—and I was always enamored by gumbo because my aunt--my aunt Belle would make gumbo like you and I would--we would brush our teeth. Gumbo was just her thing to do all the time, all the time, all the time. And she would make gumbo with all kind of stuff and my daddy would go, *Hmm, it’s not really a gumbo*. ‘Cause my daddy was also of the opinion that chicken and sausage, seafood and okra, or chicken and—. And Belle would make it with—if somebody brought her a rabbit she made a rabbit gumbo and who cared? It was good. And Daddy used a lot of wild game in his, you know. He was a big hunter. So there’s no rules. It--I don't know how else to describe it.

**00:31:17**

**SR:** What about—so many questions here, but what about the Native American influence? Did you grow up eating filé gumbo?

**00:31:29**

**MB:** Yes, but we never—it was always at the table in a little bowl. In fact I still have Mama’s little bowl that she used to pass the filé powder around with. She never would put it into the pot of gumbo and she always got--she used to get it from the Indians in Charenton and they’d always have it in a little—in more recent years it was in a baby food jar. But she had a little bowl with a little spoon and she’d put the filé powder in there and she would tell everybody just to add their own according to taste. And as far as I’m concerned it has no taste. I have yet to find—I mean I don’t think it has a taste and I really don’t think that it’s that much of a thickening agent, and we were told never to put it into the cooking pot ‘cause it would get gummy. Have you ever done that?

**00:32:18**

**SR:** I have; it’s never gotten gummy.

**00:32:19**

**MB:** Me neither, [*Laughs*] so maybe it was different. I mean I don’t know.

**00:32:21**

**SR:** Right, I don’t know either. I can taste it if I just taste it alone. And I’ve had at the Gumbo Shop in New Orleans. The chef there will make an all-filé gumbo with no roux and no okra. And then I feel like I can taste it, but when there’s so much going on in the pot I can’t really taste it.

**00:32:43**

**MB:** Yeah, I don't think so either. And I keep a jar. I have—my brothers like to add it themselves or whatever and I'm—. And of course after two years it gets kind of old, so I go buy another little baby food jar at the local market--at the little market.

**00:33:00**

**SR:** So is that—so it's still sold in a baby food jar, or do you—?

**00:33:03**

**MB:** Uh-hm. Well there's a little fellow that comes to--sometimes he's at the farmers' market in New Iberia and he is from the Charenton Indian groups and he comes to the market and he still puts them in the little baby food jars. I don't know why. Maybe it was just the right size.

**00:33:18**

**SR:** When is the farmers' market here?

**00:33:21**

**MB:** I think it just—well it didn't stop but it's usually on Saturday mornings at 7:30 'til noon, but it's usually all gone by 12:00--by 10:00. And then sometimes on Thursdays at night from 5:00 to 8:00 in New Iberia, and then there's one in Lafayette.

**00:33:37**

**SR:** What are some of the other Native American influences you see in the cooking around here?



**00:33:42**

**MB:** You know what? I think that's where we got maque choux because *maque choux* don't mean anything. Well it means--cabbage? Is *choux* cabbage? And you know what I think about it? I think that at one time probably it was just a spinoff from succotash. I think that they probably, you know they didn't have any lima beans or whatever else and they said, *Oh, we're just going to cook the corn.*

**00:34:10**

**[End Marcelle Bienvenu-1 Interview]**

**[Begin Marcelle Bienvenu-2 Interview]**

**00:00:00**

**Sara Roahen:** This is Sara Roahen back with Marcelle Bienvenu. We're just going to pick up where we left off. So could you describe for me, Marcelle, again, what a Cajun courtbouillon is?

**00:00:09**

**Marcelle Bienvenu:** A Cajun courtbouillon in South Louisiana is made with--with the base of a roux, dark roux, onions, bell peppers, celery, and then tomatoes and fish stock. My mother used to make fish stock with using the fish heads from the fish market. You can use shrimp stock; you can use water. And it's cooked long and slow, and then after it's cooked for about an hour and a half, this stew-like thing—you add fish and just let the fish poach in it for 10--15 minutes. So it's a little bit different from a courtbouillon; it's a poaching thing. It's just a fish stew. It's a little bit

different than what we know as a bouillabaisse, which is not—a bouillabaisse does not have a roux and it's just layers of onions, bell peppers, tomatoes, fish, and layers in a pot and cooked without a roux. It's just like a brothy concoction.

**00:01:06**

**SR:** Did you ever use, or did anybody in your family ever use, fish in a gumbo?

**00:01:11**

**MB:** No. If it was seafood it was shrimp, crabmeat, oysters.

**00:01:19**

**SR:** Funny, huh? And can you tell me a little bit about the bayou that your—?

**00:01:25**

**MB:** Bayou Teche begins at Port Barre north of us and goes--and empties into Burwick Bay near Morgan City into--into the Gulf. *Teche* is the Choctaw—or is it the Chitimachas? Anyway, it's an Indian name for *snake* because it wiggles. The Bayou Teche wiggles so much as it goes down through this path that—you see I live about eight miles--nine miles from New Iberia. I would have to go through, I think, seven bridges to get there because it wiggles back and forth. We have friends that live—there's a dam also here. That was built in the 1900s--early 1900s to keep the flow going. But we have friends that live on the other side of the dam; we could get to them in no time except we'd have to go through all these--under these bridges 'cause it wiggles around. But it was--it was the Indian name for *snake*.

**00:02:23**

**SR:** And is there any fishing done in there?

**00:02:26**

**MB:** Yeah, they do some freshwater brim, sac-a-lait—maybe not sac-a-lait; brim. We can catch perch; we can catch some bass every once in a while. There used to be a lot of alligator gars that were caught here.

**00:02:38**

**SR:** A lot of what?

**00:02:40**

**MB:** Alligator gars. They--they're very prehistoric-looking. They're awful but they would catch these gar fish and they would make gar fish balls.

**00:02:51**

**SR:** I've heard of that, but did you say alligator gars?

**00:02:52**

**MB:** Yeah, because they have like a snout. You don't see them as much. And there was a lot of canning factories along—like the Pine Oak Alley was along here; one or two of the pepper plants; and we used to have a lot of cane traffic, barges that would come up to pick up the raw

sugar at the mills to take it down the river, down to the refineries. So we had a lot of barge traffic. We still have some but not nearly as--as much as they used to.

**00:03:28**

**SR:** So a lot of times--a lot of times during our conversation you've mentioned how things used to be. What is your—are you optimistic about or pessimistic about the state of the cooking in this area, and I guess the permanence of the food tradition?

**00:03:47**

**MB:** I used to worry about it because I used to—my nieces and nephews who are now probably in their 20s and 30s, I used to get—I was afraid that they would get stuck in the drive-thru thing and they'd go round and round. But I think because we have such a great big family and so many family traditions, that I'm--I'm not as concerned as I used to be. A lot of my nephews and nieces are very--want to learn or have learned how to cook a lot of things that my parents did. Some of them don't. Well my--my mother died 10 years ago and my father died, hmm, almost 23 years ago, so a lot of them didn't remember Papa. But Mama was certainly an influence on them, and--and they--they are very aware, and maybe because of me—that whenever they come here we always cook something. And I've told them that they cannot cook everything in 15 minutes, you know, and—. So it becomes natural. It's--it's a thing, you know. Like Benjamin. We just called him. He came the other day and he wanted to learn how to make a bouillabaisse and a courtbouillon and everything, and he brought his wife who--who is here, and she knew what that was. But I think that because we live in such a fast-paced world they don't--they don't think they have the time to cook everything. But Benjamin, his brother Jeffrey, his other brother Nicholas—

they all cook and I'm very happy that they are wanting to cook. They like to do new things. They--they're aware of making rice dressing and maque choux and everything, and so I think probably it's up to my generation to instill that into them.

**00:05:33**

But because, you know, we're still--not isolated anymore in this area, but a lot of what we do revolves around food. I mean it's a--it's an entertainment thing. I mean look at all the food festivals we have.

**00:05:48**

**SR:** What about you? You transitioned into the digital age, you've written a couple books, you have promotions to do. You have a lot going on. Do you ever feel like there isn't time to cook anymore?

**00:06:00**

**MB:** Oh no, no. I'll always cook. *[Laughs]* My poor husband, he used to be thin. *[Laughs]* No, I cook a lot. We cook a lot at night. We don't cook on the big scale of making gumbos and jambalayas all the time, but we cook and you know like even the other night Rocky said, *You know, I haven't had smothered pork and turnips in a long time.* And I said, *We'll do that when the weather gets colder and we have turnips.* And his mother was not—she was a Yankee; she was from Ohio, but his father's family, as I said, were big cooks. And there's a lot of things that every once in a while he'll say we've not made. Like somebody brought us some eggplant, so we smothered--we have like 10-quarts of eggplant, so you know he has great plans to make and eggplant and shrimp something. Or Mama used to make eggplant rice dressing, so and his sisters

are pretty good cooks. I mean they still do a lot and they have families. So, no. I find a lot of time to cook. I entertain myself a lot with cooking.

**00:07:09**

**SR:** What occasion would cause you to make a gumbo these days?

**00:07:14**

**MB:** Whenever it gets cold. [*Laughs*] I don't make gumbos during the summer, and I know that people still do. Everybody said, *Well don't you have air conditioning?* It just doesn't feel right unless it's cold outside and it's--it's a big joke. When there's the first cold front, Rocky, my husband, says, *You better get to the store 'cause there's not going to be a chicken or a piece of andouille south of I-10, you know.* And it's true: you can just see everybody going to get their stuff for gumbo. But you know I made--I had some food writers not too long ago from Milwaukee, so I made gumbo for them. We made jambalaya. We did--I made some *les oreilles de cochon*, the little pigs ears. So yeah, I mean I—I do a lot for the kids because I think that they are charmed by that because I--I don't think they get as much of that as they--on a daily basis, because mamas and daddies don't have time anymore. And they like to cook from the little cookbooks. I mean there's nothing exotic about them. They get the menu--I mean the ingredients. No, I think cooking is well-engrained in South Louisiana.

**00:08:32**

**SR:** Good. What kind of gumbo will you be making in October at the [Southern Foodways Alliance] Symposium?

**00:08:38**

**MB:** Well I'm supposed to--that is one of the things I'm trying to get straight. I think that what's her name—is it Michelle?

**00:08:44**

**SR:** Michelle.

**00:08:46**

**MB:** Is going to make their [Mr. B's Bistro] gumbo Ya-Ya, which was really something that Paul Prudhomme really created when Mr. B's first opened. They're trying to convince me to make the gumbo z'herbes, which is made with all the greens, so we're just going—I guess that's what's going to happen, the gumbo z'herbes. Of course, Leah Chase always says, *Now tell them that yours is not as good as mine.* **[Laughs]** She's something else. And I said, *Well no, we just make it differently.*

**00:09:18**

**SR:** And so I noticed in your cookbook that you have a recipe for gumbo z'herbes that is with a roux and then without a roux.

**00:09:23**

**MB:** —without a roux. Mama always said you can add--you know, make a roux on the side and if you wanted a thicker type of gumbo just add a little bit of roux to--when you're cooking it. My

Aunt Grace, who was the--the big cook that I've told you about, she never used a roux in her gumbo z'herbes.

**00:09:42**

**SR:** Do you usually? What's your preference?

**00:09:42**

**MB:** I like a little bit of roux. I like that flavor.

**00:09:46**

**SR:** You know I--I wrote down all the different gumbo recipes you have in your cookbooks.

There are quite a few. Do you make the same shade of roux for every kind of gumbo?

**00:09:59**

**MB:** I make really dark ones for chicken and sausage or if I'm making one with wild game like ducks and geese; rabbit. But seafood gumbos I usually make a little bit lighter. It's more like the color of peanut butter, and I just think that a darker roux can be sometimes a little bit strong for seafood. So that's about the two colors I use, dark and medium-dark.

**00:10:26**

**SR:** And what kind of fat will you use for your roux?

**00:10:30**



**MB:** I just use regular old vegetable oil and cheap flour. I don't know why I said that. My mother used to say, *Don't buy any of that fancy flour*, and I'd go, *What kind of fancy flour?*

**[Laughs]** We used to have Red Ball Flour, and I think it was very similar to what people use in South Carolina--what—Mary—?

**00:10:52**

**SR:** White Lily?

**00:10:53**

**MB:** White Lily? I think it's a little bit finer or something. But we don't get Red Ball, so I just use whatever flour is out there. I have to tell you this: I was up in New York in my 20s working for *Time-Life Books* and I did not know who—what's his name? Everybody goes up to cook at the place in New York?

**00:11:15**

**SR:** James Beard?

**00:11:16**

**MB:** My mind just went. James Beard. I didn't know who James Beard was, but anyway he turned out--he was in the test kitchen one time in New York when I was up there, and I don't know how but we were all— they'd give us little stations and we'd have to take a recipe— everybody had the same recipe—and see if it would all work. And I don't know what happened but he must have gotten some self-rising flour and his roux started growing. **[Laughs]** I was

going, *Poor little man. What happened?* **[Laughs]** And I didn't even know who that poor little fat little man was. But anyway his gumbo had to be thrown away and I went, *Oh, I'm so glad those Yankees didn't make it.* I mean it--it screwed up—but then I found out who he was—but I think somehow he must have just gotten ahold of it by accident.

**00:12:02**

**SR:** I've never wondered what would happen if you used that kind of—.

**00:12:03**

**MB:** **[Laughs]** Well you just kind of grow--it just kind of gauffrées--it just kind of poufs up, and we kept looking at it. But poor thing. *What happened?* **[Laughs]**

**00:12:11**

**SR:** That is so funny. What kind of pot do you use when you make gumbo?

**00:12:17**

**MB:** I use a black iron pot. I have one of my father's old black iron pots. It's--it's--I guess it would be called a—it's about this big around and about six inches deep, eight inches deep. I can't--well I don't think you can make a roux, and I've never tried to make a roux, in a non-stick skillet or something. I have some Magnalite that I use, but usually the black iron. You know when I was working for--doing the book for Eula Mae [Doré], when we were testing—she didn't want to do it but anyway—Mr. McIlhenny said, *I want you all to go out and buy some pots; ya'll go buy some new pots.* And she said, *No, Marcelle, I don't need any new pots.* She said, *I'm not*

*cooking in any pots I don't know.* So I have my--my gumbo pot and that's what I use it for. Now you know somebody did give me a Le Creuset, so I'm going to try that but I don't know.

**00:13:10**

**SR:** That's what I've used.

**00:13:12**

**MB:** Okay. And it's okay?

**00:13:13**

**SR:** Well, you know I'm not--I'm not a native. *[Laughs]*

**00:13:17**

**MB:** But you've made gumbo, so—.

**00:13:18**

**SR:** I've made gumbo.

**00:13:21**

**MB:** Well I may try it.

**00:13:20**

**SR:** Just for the record, could you say who Eula Mae is, and your relationship?

**00:13:26**

**MB:** Eula Mae Doré, and in fact she just passed away last week and she was one of the most delightful ladies. She lived at Avery Island and she was--she cooked for the McIlhennys; she cooked for a lot of people. And so Paul—it's 10 years ago 'cause she--my mother had just passed away—and he called me and said, *Why don't you make friends with Eula Mae and do a little cookbook with her.* But anyway she just recently passed away last week and she taught me a lot of stuff. You never know everything. And she taught me some tricks 'cause she was a self-taught cook. She could--she could hardly--she could barely read and write but she could cook.

**00:14:04**

**SR:** And y'all did a cookbook together?

**00:14:06**

**MB:** Uh-hm, called *Eula Mae's Cajun Kitchen.*

**00:14:09**

**SR:** Oh I'm so--I'm sorry that she passed.

**00:14:12**

**MB:** Yeah, it was—she was a delightful person and she used to say, *Cook by seeing, smelling; use all your senses.* And I used to go, *Well how can you hear something?* And she'd go, *Well when you fry chicken you hear it, or when you put a steak on the grill you hear it,* and she was

right. You could smell it, hear it, taste it, all that--smell—everything. She was an incredible little person.

**00:14:35**

**SR:** Hmm. What kind of—when you add your flour to your oil and then make your roux, what implement do you use to stir?

**00:14:45**

**MB:** I have an old wooden spoon that was my mother's that probably the—the food police would probably come and get it and destroy it, but it's just an old wooden spoon. My husband says, *Oh, use a whisk*; I went, *Well I guess I could*. And you know I never knew that there was so many ways to make a roux. There was a guy from *Cooks Magazine*. Is that the one that's in Boston, I think? This is several years ago and he came--he called me and he said, *I'm flying down to watch you make a roux*. And I said, *Honey, it's only flour and oil. I don't think you need to see this*. [He said] *Oh yeah, I'm coming*. And I thought about it and he came and we made two or three rouxs. But then he--and then he called me later when he was doing the article. He visited Leah Chase; he went to see Paul Prudhomme; he went to see Emeril; he went to see, you know, several cooks in New Orleans. He went to see a little cook in Breaux Bridge, and everybody makes it differently. I never thought that. I knew--I knew my way. I thought, *Well hell, everybody makes it that way*. And you know some people heat their oil before they put the flour. I always put the flour and the oil in cold. You see, so you never know. And Miss Eula used to say--she put less oil--she used to use more flour than oil. And my mother said equal amounts of. Now my father was one of, you know—I mean Daddy used less oil and more flour 'cause he

liked thick--thicker stuff. And you know somebody said, *Well does it really take about 20 minutes--20 or 30 minutes?* And I said, *Well I guess you could make it faster*, but we always made it slow and I think it was because my mother had--always had a cocktail or so when she was making it. It was part of the evening. You know she'd start—you could have died at her feet when she was making a gumbo—a roux—and she wouldn't pay attention to you because she was there slowly cooking that. But it's a little wooden spoon; that's what I use to make a roux.

**00:16:28**

**SR:** And now what level of flame will you use?

**00:16:34**

**MB:** Medium-low. I do it really slow. I'm afraid always to burn it so I'm one of those slow people.

**00:16:41**

**SR:** Have you ever burned it?

**00:16:43**

**MB:** *[Laughs]* Oh a couple times; too many cocktails. *[Laughs]* Yeah I've burned it several times, but I think it's--slow is good, and I think that if you cook it slower there is a fuller taste. I mean and--and God save me, and Paul Prudhomme used to say, *No, it'll--it tastes the same and you can cook it fast or slow and it tastes the same.* So what do I know?

**00:17:05**

**SR:** Quite a bit I think.

**00:17:07**

**MB:** Right.

**00:17:09**

**SR:** And what about the holy trinity? When you're making gumbo do you use celery, onion, and bell pepper?

**00:17:16**

**MB:** Uh-huh. I use more of onions. Well if I use, say if I use two cups of onions I use about a cup of celery and about a cup of bell peppers. And sometimes I'll put the onions and the bell peppers in first for just three or four minutes and then I add the celery.

**00:17:32**

**SR:** How come?

**00:17:32**

**MB:** Because I think sometimes the celery gets cooked too fast in the hot roux when the roux is hot, and I never use garlic in gumbo. We never used garlic. We didn't cook with a lot of garlic when I was growing up.

**00:17:47**

**SR:** That's interesting.

**00:17:48**

**MB:** Uh-hm, and we never used black pepper. My sister was asking me that. She said, *The only thing I can remember Mama and Daddy using black pepper for was when they made mayonnaise or they put it in a salad*, but she said--she said, *I don't remember them cooking with it*. And I said, *I don't think they did*.

**00:18:05**

**SR:** Did they use white or red pepper?

**00:18:06**

**MB:** White, red cayenne pepper, and salt.

**00:18:10**

**SR:** Huh, I'm learning all kinds of stuff.

**00:18:13**

**MB:** I know it's amazing. Those little pockets.

**00:18:14**

**SR:** Yeah.



**00:18:16**

**MB:** And if you go--this guy, he teaches at John Folse--at Nicholls [State University]. What's his name? We call him Big Daddy, and he said that his father did not put garlic in a lot of things but that his mother did, but his mother was from New Orleans you see. So it depends on the hand that was stirring the pot; it was just whatever they had--whatever they did.

**00:18:42**

**SR:** Sorry, what's his name?

**00:18:43**

**MB:** Randy Chermie, who's--who's a wonderful professor at Nichols, and he is incredible. He knows anything about anything cooking down the bayou. He said that, you know they--most of the time they had seafood gumbo but his father had a little restaurant called Randolph's, and he said that if his father didn't cook chicken and sausage gumbo on Sundays that we would hang him [*Laughs*] 'cause he was about the only one that had chicken and sausage gumbo on the bayou.

**00:19:12**

**SR:** Why is that, 'cause everybody had seafood?

**00:19:12**

**MB:** Everybody had seafood gumbo because that's what they had. [*Laughs*]

**00:19:16**

**SR:** Is gumbo a part of your holiday celebration?

**00:19:20**

**MB:** Yes. We used to always have gumbos. Well we always had gumbos around Thanksgiving, and then Mama would make a gumbo like three or four days before Christmas because you could have it to eat on during the holidays if you were busy. So she'd make huge pots of that stuff and you could either put it in the fridge or the freezer. Yeah, we had gumbo, yeah. Your house didn't smell--wasn't right if it didn't smell like a gumbo cooking.

**00:19:44**

**SR:** I like that philosophy. What about tomato? Do you put tomato in any of your gumbo?

**00:19:52**

**MB:** No, no, no. [*Laughs*] Unless you're making okra gumbo and you have tomatoes in your okra. No, we never had—and I had an aunt who lives in New Orleans now and she's one of Daddy's sisters. She's still alive, Daddy's sister, and she said that when she moved to New Orleans her--her cooks used to add a little bit of tomatoes and she said, *I guess it's a city thing*. A little—she said even if--if you put as little as a tablespoon of tomato paste or as much as a cup of tomatoes, so she said I don't know.

**00:20:20**

**SR:** I wonder if the Italians around here do that.

**00:20:21**

**MB:** I don't know. I've never eaten an Italian gumbo.

**00:20:26**

**SR:** Can you tell me, before we run out of time, a little bit about your career trajectory? It's interesting to me: I didn't know about the newspaper background in your family, and then it also seems like you had a lot of food people in your family. How did you bring it together?

**00:20:44**

**MB:** I did not have any intention of going into the food business. That was an accident. I went to school in the '60s so I was a big liberal arts—. I graduated with--well my father said it was a worthless degree. **[Laughs]**

**00:20:57**

**SR:** A what?

**00:20:59**

**MB:** Worthless. I had a liberal arts degree: history and English. And when I got out of college he said, *What are you going to do?* I said, *I haven't a clue.* He said, *Well, you have about 30 days to figure it out.* **[Laughs]** So I went to New Orleans. I was married to somebody before [Rocky], and I went to New Orleans and I worked for a while as a legal secretary. And then I marched

myself over to the *Times-Picayune* and filled out an application. And I got hired working on their--on the Sunday *Dixie Roto Magazine*, and of course my name was not Marcelle Bienvenu then; it was Marcelle B. Wright. It was Wright with the first husband's name. And after I was there for about, oh I guess--oh six or eight months, Mr. [George] Healy, who was then the editor, called me and he says, *Who's your daddy?* I said, *My daddy is Blackie Bienvenu.* He said, *Well why didn't you tell me that?* And I said, *Well why would you need to know that?* He said, *Well you know,* he says, *I covered the--the flood of '27 with your father.* I said, I know. *We have a picture of you and my daddy on a roof with y'all pirogue and y'all camera.* He said, *Well that--I thought you would have—.* I said, *Well I didn't think it was necessary to go, Hey my Daddy was Blackie—you remember Blackie?* So he said, *Well look,* he said, *Marcelle,* he said, *Let's get rid of that Wright business and go back to Marcelle Bienvenu,* which was fine with me 'cause that name didn't sound—Marcelle B. Wright sounded so wrong. So then he said, *I'm going to give you a raise.* I said, *Oh, because I'm Blackie's daughter?* He said, *Yeah.* I think it was \$5 more a week, which was fine. **[Laughs]**

**00:22:28**

So I worked at the *Picayune* in the '60s, and then quite by accident when the *Time-Life* people started doing these *Foods of the World* series, Sarah Brash, whose father was I think Dean of Men at LSU, she was down here trying to figure out if they were going to put a chapter of New Orleans--Louisiana cooking in their Southern book. And she and I kind of started talking and there was a couple other people that got on and pushed to have a whole book, their *Cajun Creole Cookbook*. And so when that got kind of pulled together she asked me if I would come to do--be their local researcher. I liked that. Well I convinced her that I knew everything there was to know about—I was 22 **[Laughs]** —that I knew everything there was—I was like 24 or 25—

that I knew everything there was to know about Cajun cooking, you know. Nothing. Well I knew--I knew I ate it.

**00:23:24**

**SR:** Right.

**00:23:26**

**MB:** And so I--I worked with them for about a year and a half and, well then I went onto their-- they did--they did the wilderness section, so I did the bayou book for them. And then I went to work—then of course I had a little stint at--at UNO in public--doing their community relations, but I had become friendly with Ella Brennan during--working on the *Time-Life* book. She and I just hit it off. So I went to work at Commander's [Palace] in '73. So I worked at Commander's in the catering department. And I didn't want to. I told Ella I didn't want to work in the food business because everybody had to work at night and on weekends. And she says, *I would never make you do that*. And she lied. **[Laughs]**

**00:24:14**

**SR:** Of course.

**00:24:14**

**MB:** What? The only day I had off was Monday **[Laughs]**, so—. But anyway she became a great mentor and a very good friend. And then she sent me to Houston in '77 to be there at the Brennan's of Houston. And then I left them in '79 and opened a place here in '80: Chez

Marcelle; closed that in '84 and went back to New Orleans and worked--started working at the *Times-Picayune* again and worked for Paul Prudhomme for a few--couple of years.

**00:24:42**

**SR:** What did you do for Paul Prudhomme?

**00:24:43**

**MB:** I worked on special projects. That's when he was doing some of his videos, and he was working—he and what's-her-name was working on that first book, his first cookbook. So I did kind of everything, kind of jack-of-all-trades. And then, let's see, and I worked also for Louisiana Blue Plate; I did a--a whole lot of things. **[Laughs]** And then I met Emeril in '85 when he came to work at Commander's and I said, *Ella, do you realize he's a Yankee? He's never see a roux.* She said, *But he's so cute and he's so good.* I said, *Go ahead,* and look what happened. And then, let's see, I came back here; I was back--I lived at the Oak Alley Plantation for almost three years working there, and then I came back here in '89 and got married in '90, and I continued with the *Picayune* and I worked for this private club in—like a country club—in Lafayette. And then Emeril hired me in '92 to work on the cookbooks, and then I worked with him until the storm [Hurricane Katrina in 2005]. So I've had a good ride.

**00:25:54**

**SR:** It's all the big wigs.

**00:25:54**

**MB:** Yeah, I have. I was very lucky, uh-hm.

**00:25:58**

**SR:** Wow, and so now you write for the *Picayune* and freelance?

**00:26:02**

**MB:** I do some freelancing. I'm working on a pecan cookbook for Pelican Press. I just finished a beer cookbook, Abita Beer. And I did--I have a book that's going to be put out by LSU Press next year, which is a very strange marriage. This friend of mine from college is--he owns--he and his son own [www.cajungrocer.com](http://www.cajungrocer.com), but he also has turned out to be an incredible wildlife photographer. So it's a book called *Wild Wings Over Louisiana*. So I wrote the copy for his wild birds which was kind of different from—but I wrote it from his journals, which was kind of fun. And it turned out [**Laughs**] the editor—and it just kind of happened—in fact they delayed the—it's supposed to be out in a couple months but they're going to wait 'til the fall of next year because at the end we decided to put stories from the hunters; it's little anecdotes and vignettes and stuff from—. I started interviewing people that were hunters, from men and women, and then of course they had to give me a recipe. So [**Laughs**] I have recipes.

**00:27:11**

**SR:** In the—?

**00:27:12**

**MB:** Yeah, but we don't have blue buntings on toast. It's--it's in the ducks and the geese.

**[Laughs]**

**00:27:20**

**SR:** Too bad.

**00:27:23**

**MB:** So LSU Press said that was the first time they've ever done something like that, but I think it's going to be a neat book.

**00:27:29**

**SR:** Sounds neat. Another couple gumbo questions just dawned on me. In one of your cookbooks you have something that I don't know how to pronounce: *grimilles*.

**00:27:38**

**MB:** *Grimilles*.

**00:27:39**

**SR:** What's that?

**00:27:39**

**MB:** *Grimilles* are the--the leftovers of the bottom of a pan, like if you roast a chicken or any kind of birds, or if you had—you know how at Mother's [Restaurant] they have debris? Debris is



kind of like a *Grimilles*. And Mama used to save all those *grimilles* at the bottom of the pan and we used to make gumbo with it. They never wasted anything; they never threw anything away. It was just whatever you had.

**00:28:04**

**SR:** That's really something to learn from. That sounds delicious. Do you ever make that?

**00:28:10**

**MB:** Yeah. Well the other day I had--I roasted a big pork roast and there was a lot of *grimilles*. And then my husband has been--he's on a *crise* to roast the perfect roasted chicken. So we've had a lot of little pieces and stuff of his—not bad, but you know I don't know what he's doing. So I just keep that in the freezer.

**00:28:27**

**SR:** What was that word you used? He's on a what?

**00:28:28**

**MB:** A *crise*, a mission. [*Laughs*]

**00:28:34**

**SR:** How do you spell that?

**00:28:35**

**MB:** I think it's c-r-i-s-e--it's like a craze but it's French. Yeah, he gets on these toots.

**00:28:42**

**SR:** So can you understand any of the French that's spoken around here?

**00:28:45**

**MB:** Yeah, my sister still speaks French and every once in a while—not every; a lot. You know we still do it when we want to say something in front of children that they--we don't want them to understand, and of course there's a lot of people that still speak French here. And I'm involved with Acadian Memorial here, and of course when we—at the Memorial we try to speak French. I'm not a very good conversation—I can usually reply to you; I can read it very well. My sister tells me the other day that I do everything in the pluperfect, **[Laughs]** so my conjugation is not always great. But I can understand it, and if I speak with the people at the Memorial we can converse.

**00:29:25**

**SR:** So she just told you that now?

**00:29:26**

**MB:** Yeah, she said, *Marcelle you say everything in the pluperfect.* **[Laughs]** Or the other day she said, *Now sometimes you switch to the past.* I said, *Well, the past is good.* She said, *Why don't you try the future?* But she has her little children speaking it. I mean her great--her great-grandchildren, they'll come in and say *la table, la fenêtre*; you know, they know--they know how

to say *my name is; I'm so and such years old; I live at—*. And they're very good about that. She said conversation in French is very good.

**00:29:55**

**SR:** What about, before we run out of time, can you tell me what kind of gumbo you served at Chez Marcelle, and what that restaurant was like?

**00:30:02**

**MB:** Chez Marcelle was--the building--it was in an old--it's still there; it's beautiful. It's a beautiful building. It was an old late Victorian house. Well it was built, in 1888 I think it was built, and we redid it and it was—. Little children said it looked like a wedding cake 'cause it was kind of Saharan sand pink with a white trimming. And we did kind of--'cause that was in the '80s; I wanted to be a baby Cajun Commander's. We had very--it was a very small menu; we didn't have a lot of stuff. We did--we used to do soups one-one-one much like at Commander's. We did a turtle soup, a chicken and sausage gumbo, and a cream of onion soup. We did soft-shell crabs; we did it on--served on a bed of—well Juban's now stole it; I mean she asked me if she could do it—it was served on a bed of jambalaya. It was a soft-shell crab with a Creolaise sauce. I can show you some of the menus. It was very simple but it was kind of—it was a time that when, you know, after Paul [Prudhomme] had gotten on the scene everybody wanted to make Cajun a little bit more haute cuisine, so it was haute Cajun. We used a lot of local stuff. We didn't do anything real exotic or really fancy.

**00:31:25**

**SR:** Were you in the kitchen?

**00:31:27**

**MB:** No, I was always at the front of the house. I had two great chefs. One was from New Iberia and one was from Opelousas. We did very well. We did—if the oil business hadn't flattened out I'd hopefully still be there, but it really did us in after four years. But we were solvent, so we closed it down.

**00:31:46**

**SR:** That's a good way to end. All right a couple more little gumbo questions before this runs out. You add your seasoning vegetables to your roux?

**00:32:00**

**MB:** Uh-hm.

**00:32:00**

**SR:** Is that how you stop it from cooking?

**00:32:02**

**MB:** Uh-hm, yes. And I always say go a little--just a little bit darker than what you think you want it to be because as soon as you add those vegetables it'll lighten up a little bit. And I usually cook that for about 10 or 15 minutes.

**00:32:16**

**SR:** And then do you add your stock to that or do you add that to your stock?

**00:32:21**

**MB:** No, I add the stock to that—warm.

**00:32:24**

**SR:** So your stock is warm and the--and the roux and the seasoning vegetables will still be warm as well.

**00:32:31**

**MB:** And I usually eyeball it, but I usually put more water than I think I want to put in it because first it will cook out and I have—that was another big thing that Eula Mae—I'm sorry.

She always used to cover her gumbo as soon as she'd get it going and I never do. I always keep mine open.

**00:32:50**

**SR:** Yeah.

**00:32:50**

**MB:** And I prefer a little bit thicker than a real thin gumbo. And I'm not the best one to make a seafood gumbo unless—my husband is very good about making chicken--I mean shrimp stock; he won't throw a shrimp shell away. I mean I think we have 10 quarts of shrimp stock in the freezer. And I do think that a lot--I think a lot of places that make seafood gumbo—and there's some places that do well—it's that you know you should add that seafood right at the last minute. If it's--if those oysters or shrimp or crabmeat stays in there it just falls apart and it's not good.

**00:33:31**

**SR:** I'm going to have to end this even though I could talk to you a lot longer. Thank you so much for taking the time.

**00:33:37**

**MB:** Thank you. This has been fun. I enjoyed it.

**00:33:43**

**[End Marcelle Bienvenu-2 Interview]**