

**David Papania and Scott Landry
Seafood Palace—Lake Charles, LA**

Date: September 11, 2007
Location: Seafood Palace—Lake Charles, LA
Interviewer: Sara Roahen
Length: 1 hour 12 minutes
Project: Southern Gumbo Trail

[Begin David Papania-Scott Landry Interview]

00:00:00

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Tuesday, September 11, 2007. I'm in Lake Charles, Louisiana, at the Seafood Palace Restaurant. I'm with Mr. David Papania and Scott Landry. And if I could get y'all in turn to say your name—how you say it—and your birth date, that would be great.

00:00:21

David Papania: David Papania, November 30, 1954.

00:00:26

SR: And I can hold this [microphone] 'cause it will be easier.

00:00:24

Scott Landry: And I'm Scott Landry—birthday February 19, 1957.

00:00:30

SR: And how do y'all know each other? David, you own this restaurant and I know there's—and you [to Scott] don't work here technically, but you work together sometimes?

00:00:41

SL: We work together on shows and—and some catering from time to time, but I mainly know David because I eat here every day. **[Laughs]** And then the other part is, we grew up together. Lake Charles is not that big a town.

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SR: Is that true that he eats here every day?

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DP: Just about, 99-percent of the time unless he's out of town on one of his shows. **[Laughs]**

00:01:01

SR: And what do you eat here when you eat?

00:01:03

SL: Well I eat gumbo and I eat the fried shrimp; I eat the fried catfish; I eat **[Laughs]**—oh well, David's phenomenal about bringing in fresh speckled trout or red fish or venison or duck—whatever we've hunted or fished for in the area, so our little group that meets here every day for lunch is privy to those delicacies.

00:01:24

SR: Wow—wow, that's cool.

00:01:26

DP: Yeah.

00:01:26

SR: And tell me: how long has the restaurant been open?

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DP: This restaurant has been opened 36 years. A lady had it for 30-years, passed away, and I took it over six years—and I've had it six years myself. And then, but my family has been in the restaurant business for 40 years.

00:01:42

SR: What kinds of restaurants did they have before this one?

00:01:45

DP: Italian restaurants [*Laughs*], yeah. You know, just family-style Italian restaurants.

00:01:52

SR: So from your name I—I asked if you were Greek, but it's Italian.

00:01:56

DP: Yeah, right.

00:01:58

SR: Are you Cajun?

00:01:59

DP: No, I'm a full-blooded Italian. *[Laughs]*

00:02:01

SR: Okay, and so how many generations have been in the area?

00:02:05

DP: Oh, three.

00:02:11

SR: And—and what is your heritage, Scott?

00:02:11

SL: Oh I'm Cajun. I think one—the Landry side, they traced back to 17—1470—or . Whatever it was, we go all the way back to France. And—on that side, and then on the other side I don't think they ever did a family tree because it probably only had one branch. *[Laughs]* I don't know, but anyway they're all Cajun people. We grew up—my whole family grew up within 100 miles of here, all along the Coast area.

00:02:42

DP: But I've lived here all my life. I've lived in Lake Charles all my life basically.

00:02:45

SR: Okay, and back to the restaurant: can you just briefly describe what your menu is like?

00:02:52

DP: Well we do a lot of Cajun stuff. It's like the gumbos and étouffées and different things that are Cajun-wise, and we also just do normal, like, fried fish, seafood platters, all the way to whatever—.

00:03:06

SL: But you sell yourself short. You boil crabs and you boil crawfish, and you—

00:03:11

DP: Boil crabs and—.

00:03:13

SL: And we—fried crabs. I mean it's a little bit of everything.

00:03:14

DP: Right, grilled foods, you know.

00:03:19

SR: And we just sampled your gumbo—your seafood gumbo a little while ago.

00:03:24

DP: Right.

00:03:26

SR: Which was delicious. Is that a recipe—did that come from you, or was that at the restaurant when you bought it?

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DP: Oh no, it's—well, it come from me. It come from one of my, one of my friends that their family had a restaurant for years and gave me the recipe when I first started out, and then I altered it a little bit, so it's pretty much our own right now.

00:03:44

SR: And can you tell me without revealing any, you know, state secrets what goes into that gumbo?

00:03:51

DP: It would be hard to tell without revealing secrets other than, you know, like Scott said earlier that there's just 100 different ways to make a gumbo, and this is just our way and it's worked out good, and we have a very good restaurant gumbo.

00:04:06

SL: I mean as far as restaurant gumbos he has one of the best in the area, and—and he makes both the chicken and sausage, and he makes a seafood gumbo. And the hurricane [Rita] changed it a little bit. You used to have oysters in it, and we kind of—the oysters are not as plentiful as they used to be, so we don't have those in the gumbo anymore, but nobody noticed. [*Laughs*]

00:04:22

DP: Yeah, and the other thing—oysters right now are really expensive, and to put it in the gumbo it would drive the price of the gumbo up which is—most people kind of like a moderate priced gumbo. They don't like to spend a whole lot of money on the gumbo.

00:04:34

SL: Yeah, it's 'cause we were, like, we were talking about earlier that gumbos and jambalayas are a low-end price break because people couldn't afford to eat—the Cajun people, you know. It's like my family, they would go hand-fishing every—during the spring and summer, and then they would hunt ducks in the early fall, and then they'd hunt ducks in the middle of—I mean deer—in the middle of the winter. And then in the spring they would hunt quail, and—and that's what they ate. I mean that's—that was it and you'd cook a pot of rice, you know.

00:05:04

DP: That's it.

00:05:05

SL: You know it's like, there you have it. [*Laughs*]

00:05:06

SR: Well what—what kind of fishing did you say?

00:05:07

SL: Hand fishing. The Koasati Indians taught the Cajuns when they first got here how to actually catch fish with their hands in the bayous and the waterways of our area. So as a kid, you know—we talked about this earlier that family is everything to Louisiana people, so the guys would spend the morning wading through chest-deep bayous pulling out Opelousas catfish, yellow catfish, logger-head turtles, and the little kids like my age, when we were little would have a sack on the bank and the adults or the teenagers would throw the fish up on the bank, and you would put that fish in the bag. And God help you if the fish fell back into the bayou, because you were in trouble. So you would catch them, and at the end of the day you would make a big—a big court-bouillon dish, and then the wives and girlfriends would come out and the older people would break out their fiddles and guitars and—and you'd have a little dance right there on the side of the bayou.

00:06:07

SR: Can you tell me what a court-bouillon is for the record?

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SL: It is a fish stew basically made with the trinity, which is celery, bell peppers, and onions, a little bit of tomato sauce, and water and catfish stewed down and served over—seasonings, seasonings—red pepper, black pepper, salts, garlic, bay leaves—served over a plate of rice.

00:06:28

SR: Do you serve that for the restaurant ever?

00:06:30

DP: No—every once in a while. Sometimes during Lent, which is the big time around here. Like Fridays during Lent, Catholics don't eat meat, so our restaurant is super-busy at that time of the year. That's our biggest time of the year, the six weeks of Lent. And on Fridays and stuff we do cook court-bouillons, étouffées, different things you know for—.

00:06:51

SL: And see, court-bouillons don't hold up well, so restaurants don't serve them a lot. Because theoretically you don't stir that pot. It's a layered—it's fish, vegetables, tomato, a little bit of flour, fish, vegetables, tomatoes, a little bit of flour, a little bit of water. Because the—the juice from the fish is what makes the court-bouillon, and you shake the pot because you don't stir it, because if you do you break the fish up and then you—it's not—well to me, it's better but it's not—. And you generally make this with fish steaks or whole fishes—fish—and restaurants have gotten away due to the liability of serving fish, whole fishes, because they don't want the bones.

00:07:32

SR: Uh-hm. Do people still catch fish by hand like that?

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SL: They actually, some of them still do. You can get a tape that the Louisiana Extension Office made; it's called *Anything We Catch*, and it shows how to catch catfish and how to catch turtle and the people that did it and why. It's an excellent video.

00:07:55

DP: They still have fish traps where people set the traps out and catch the fish. And also like shrimp—shrimping around here, we catch a lot with cast-netting, and if you know you're familiar with the cast-netting we still catch a lot of shrimp like that.

00:08:06

SL: And a lot of reason the hand-fishing is going by the wayside is because of the drainage. In the old bayous the erosion would erode the bank out a little bit and you could fill up under them 'cause the catfish would get out of the current, and so you can feel them—or the stumps, you could feel them. Well now with the drainage issues and wanting to get everything out, they dredge these canals out so the water is flowing too fast or too deep, and—and you can't get in there and do them like you used to do.

00:08:33

SR: Hmm. Well there's so much to talk to you all about, but let me go back to the gumbo for one second. The restaurant gumbo—can you just describe it for me, the—your seafood gumbo?

What characterizes it, and why? I mean, I had several people before today tell me that the best gumbo in town was here .What do you think it is that people are liking?

00:08:57

DP: It's our roux to start out, I think, and then the seasonings we use, and we—we are pretty consistent on the way we do things. We measure everything out and all our seasonings and get it together, and we have excellent gumbo cooks and just start with that and just try to be consistent all the time where it tastes the same all the time.

00:09:12

SL: If the same lady cooks it time after time after time, it's her unique gumbo, just like when I make my gumbo it's my unique gumbo or David's unique gumbo. Each gumbo takes on the characteristics of that particular cook. I may like a little more garlic; David might not like much garlic at all—okra, you know. It's like I always say: recipes didn't come down with Moses and the Ten Commandments, so if you don't like something don't put it in there. Or if you like something a lot, add to it. But David simmers for the better part of the day, and they're cooking it every day, and it's just a good product.

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SR: We sort of met the woman who made today's gumbo. What is her name?

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DP: Stella Lavergne.

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SR: And has she been with you for a while?

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DP: Well she came over from our other restaurant, and she's probably been with us 15 years—18-years—something like that, between both our restaurants.

00:10:11

SR: And so would you say that she—does she make the gumbo often?

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DP: Yes, every day. We sell out just about every day, but what Scott also said—we do a lot of times, we cook a gumbo today and let it cool down and refrigerate it and then we'll serve that gumbo the next day, you know. That's generally how we do it, but sometimes we get so busy that the one she's making today, we get to it and we serve that also. So it just depends, but gumbo in the refrigerator is good for a couple days, you know, with no problem.

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SR: What do you like? What would you say characterizes the--the gumbo here?

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SL: It's—it's consistent; it tastes great. Like I was telling the group earlier today, I said when I eat it I add a little salt and pepper and Tabasco to it. When my cousin eats it, he adds a little gumbo filé to it. It's—each person is different; each person eats it his own way. I like a lot of rice and not a lot of soup; other guys like a lot of soup and a little bit of rice, so all that is going to affect the taste of that gumbo.

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SR: And the way that we had it today, the rice and the gumbo were separate and we added it ourselves. Is that how you serve it here?

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DP: Right, that's how you serve it. Like he said, some people may want a little rice and some want a lot, so it just—just depends how you like it.

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SL: And David—if you like a lot, a lot of rice, he'll bring you another bowl of rice to go with it. But then it becomes rice and gravy and not gumbo.

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SR: It's a pretty dark roux, I would say?

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DP: Yeah, we use the dark roux, yeah. It's not real thick, but it's between medium and thick roux.

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SL: But it's a dark roux. I mean the roux we cooked today [during a cooking demonstration] was not as dark as the roux that he uses. Now some people like a really dark, rich roux; some like a lighter roux. It—here again, 100 Cajuns give you 150 recipes on how to make gumbo.

00:11:56

SR: The roux that you showed us during the demonstration that was real dark that was made beforehand, is that similar to—is that the roux—

00:12:05

SL: Yeah, that's their roux.

00:12:07

DP: Yeah, that was our roux that we were using.

00:12:08

SR: Well that's practically black.

00:12:10

DP: Yeah, yeah, but the more water you add, like anything else in seasoning, it thins it up, and it you know turns it to more brown than black—you know, a light brown.

00:12:17

SL: Well the gumbo is a dark brown because of the roux itself. That's what gives it its color, gives it a signature taste we'll say. And the—the darker the roux, the richer the roux tastes in the gumbo. The lighter the roux, different spices will show through and not as much roux taste. So it—it varies.

00:12:41

DP: And you can thin it with water, like Scott said. You know just some people like a little thinner gumbo, some like it thicker, but we try—

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SL: And other restaurants rush their gumbos. You know there are gumbos—there are people in town that make a little bit of gumbo and put the meat in it real early and then—or don't put the meat in it at all and throw the meat in it at the last minute because they only want to make one gumbo. They don't want to have a seafood gumbo and—and a regular gumbo, so they make—or a chicken and sausage gumbo or a duck gumbo; so what they'll do is they'll make the gumbo with no meat. And then right as you order it they'll add their portion controlled meat to it, boil it for two or three minutes, and that's the taste of their gumbo. So it's not as good a gumbo. David actually makes a seafood gumbo and he actually makes a chicken gumbo, and that—and the longer it cooks together the more the meat blends with the roux and blends with the gumbo.

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SR: Well one thing I noticed is that there's a very strong, just, background seafood flavor in there.

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DP: Yeah, there's probably—'cause it's a seafood stock also added to the gumbo.

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SL: That and the amount of shrimp and crab that's in there.

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DP: Yeah, we use, you know, a lot of shrimp and crab too. I mean when we cook a gumbo we usually put a lot of meat in the gumbo. Most people, if you're going to serve a gumbo, want meat in their gumbo.

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SL: And the other thing is, it's like we talked about with making your stocks. If you use the shells of the seafood, if you use the body parts that—that aren't—and you strain that, that's going to give you a wonderful taste that most people throw in the garbage. And that's a mistake.

00:14:15

DP: Oh yeah.

00:14:17

SR: Well did—does Miss Stella, or whoever is making the gumbo—do they make the roux daily, or do you make the roux in a big batch?

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DP: A big batch usually, yeah, unless—it depends. In the wintertime when we're serving—serving more gumbo, we'll have to step it up you know. And in the summertime when it's a little hotter we don't serve quite as much, although we do serve a lot of gumbo in the—in the hot summertime, which is kind of unusual but we serve a lot because our gumbo, we feel, is good. And so she cuts, you know, proportionate to what the time of the year is and what—what we need. And like I said, during the six weeks of Lent our shrimp and crab gumbo just flies out, so we're every day on it, you know.

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SL: Well you know, David, the other thing is, it's so hot down here in the summer that you can get a cup of gumbo because people can't eat as hearty as they eat during the winter, so a cup of gumbo sticks to your ribs, fills you up, and you can go on about your business. That's the other good thing about the cups of gumbo.

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DP: And another thing about gumbo is, I even eat it a lot of times without rice. I just eat it right out of—you know just the juice and the meat.

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SL: Soup.

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DP: Yeah, like a soup you know, but—.

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SR: You mentioned filé earlier. There's filé powder on the tables here. Is there filé in your gumbo?

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DP: Yes, there's some filé in the gumbo, uh-hm.

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SR: And what is—

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DP: It's one of the spices in the gumbo, or flavors.

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SR: Do you all add extra filé to your gumbo at—at the table?

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SL: I don't, no, I don't.

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DP: I will once in a while during the wintertime if it's real cold and stuff, but it's something—I'll dab a little filé in there, but not particularly, no. But a lot of people do.

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SR: What do you not like about it, Scott?

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SL: What, the—?

00:15:50

SR: The filé?

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SL: Oh well the taste that it gives it—different. I don't care much for the taste, but it also kind of stringies it [makes it stringy], or if—if you put it in and you don't get right to it, which is unusual for me 'cause I eat like a machine—well in the restaurant business you either eat fast or eat cold. And so that's where that came from. But it just—it's a thickening agent also, and I just don't care for it much in my gumbo.

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DP: And it's got a pretty strong taste. If you do put it in there you just put a little dab, you know. Some people overload it, but if I put a little bit, it's just a little bit in there and not a whole lot.

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SR: How would you describe the taste of filé?

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SL: Have you ever eaten sassafras tea? 'Cause that's what it's made out of. It's a sassafras root, and it—it tastes like sassafras tea. One of the ladies earlier was eating it off a spoon, and I'm going, *Whoa, what kind of stomach do you have?* You know, but she seemed to **[Laughs]**—she kept trying to pinpoint the taste and never could get it. She even mixed it with her rice; ate it with some rice. I'm going, *Lady, later this is not going to be good.*

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DP: Yeah, you don't want to overuse filé. **[Laughs]**

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SR: What will happen?

00:17:02

DP: I don't know, but you know—.

00:17:06

SL: It's—it's a tightener. [*Laughs*]

00:17:07

DP: Yeah, mess your taste buds up. [*Laughs*]

00:17:11

SL: It's a tighten(er). [*Laughs*]

00:17:13

SR: Have you—have you had sassafras tea, 'cause I haven't heard of that?

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SL: I have had it, and you know that's one of those—depending on where you're at and when you're at as to what you get. Like raspberry tea or peach tea, it's just another one of those long lines of 5,000 different teas. That's your next story, I'm sure, is tea. [*Laughs*]

00:17:32

SR: What about—well I'd like to ask you about gumbo on the road. But can you explain first, for the record, what your profession is right now?

00:17:40

SL: I am an entertainer. I do a comedy cooking show, and I promote the State of Louisiana, and I teach people Cajun cooking. And we've practiced the theory that Disney had, that you teach through education. You—that's not true; you enter—you teach by entertaining, and if you entertain people will learn. And so that's what we do, and we do about 120 days of shows a year, which means I'm doing about 360—or 80 different shows a year, and I make gumbo at almost all of them. And we take it on the road, like you said. I've performed in 42 states and seven foreign countries, and I've served gumbo in all of them. And the response is phenomenal, because what happens is most people eat gumbo in New Mexico, for instance. I did my flight training in Tucson, so they took us to eat at this wonderful Mexican restaurant, and the food was good and they says, *And you've got to try their gumbo*. And I'm going, *Please, I'd rather not*. And it came out, and it was called gumbo, and at the end of it I said, *Guys, this would be called soup in my part of the world*. And we dispelled the myths that Cajun cooking has got to be so hot you can't eat it—that it's got to have a lot of red pepper in it. That's my job, is to make people like Cajun food. And a lot of people, when they taste it, they say, *Oh I don't like Cajun food, but because you were so good and—and we like the show, let us taste a little bit*. So they taste it and go, *Oh this is good*. And I go, *Thank God*. **[Laughs]** You know, so they'll invite me back, and—and that's what we teach.

00:19:17

SR: Who—yeah go ahead.

00:19:19

DP: I was going to say it's hard to describe it, but in South Louisiana, just the way we use the seasoning and cook gumbo is different than North Louisiana. It's different than Texas. Like Scott—different than any other state. It's just something about—from New Orleans to Lake Charles to Lafayette to, you know, all through this area it's just the gumbo—.

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SL: Even North Louisiana will make gumbo different.

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DP: That's what I'm saying. It's just—it's got the roux we make, and the way we do it is just totally different than anywhere I've ever been either, you know.

00:19:43

SL: Yeah, 'cause if you're in New Orleans and they serve you gumbo it's got tomatoes in it, and in this part of the country you'd go, *What's a tomato doing in there?* Or if you eat a Creole gumbo you're going to have okra in it. And that's one of those things that Mikey don't eat, is—is okra. **[Laughs]**

00:20:01

DP: But we do occasionally—occasionally still here, some of the old French ladies still cook a lot with the okra in their gumbo.

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SL: Or they'll even do a stewed okra with tomatoes and okra, 'cause they—they both come to ripen at about the same time of the year.

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SR: But when y'all make gumbo, I mean at the restaurant and at home or on the road, you don't use tomatoes—or what was the other thing—okra, okra?

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SL: No, we don't use either one of those.

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DP: It's all with the roux.

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SL: Yeah, it's all with the roux.

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DP: Roux and seasoning.

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SR: And pretty much, you would say that's standard for this area?

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DP: Right.

00:20:34

SL: I would think so. You know—you know, David said you start with the roux. That's—that's the base for all gumbo, is the roux. But like when I make my gumbo, I will sauté the meat and vegetables and then add my stock and then add my roux. There are some chefs that will start with the roux and build into a gumbo. It's—it's a preference.

00:20:59

SR: And some, yeah, some people will just boil their vegetables and not sauté them—but you sauté yours?

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SL: Right, and I—I have a cook that works for me that, when he makes his own gumbo he starts with the roux. He makes his roux, and then he adds his vegetables, and then he adds his meat, and then he adds his water, and then he has his gumbo. To me, I think that's backwards. I think you sauté your meat with your vegetables and then build to the roux. But who—who am I to say, you know? He eats his, I eat mine; I eat his, he eats mine. I mean we just eat, you know.

[Laughs] As you can tell, we're not under-nourished.

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SR: David, you have a New Orleans cook or chef in the back also.

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DP: Yeah, he came after the—Katrina. He was one of the evacuees that came over here and lived in Lake Charles for a couple of months, and then he come ask me for a job and we hired him, and he's been very excellent help. Very good.

00:21:54

SR: And does he ever have a hand in gumbo, or do you know what he thinks of your gumbo?

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DP: Yeah, he does, but he—you know he follows the recipe. When Stella is off sometimes, or if she happens to be sick for a week or something—somebody has to fill in. So he does—.

00:22:07

SR: He doesn't secretly throw in okra—a piece of okra in there?

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DP: No, no, no. He—he knows what we—we pretty much consistently stay in the restaurant and do it the same way all the time.

00:22:14

SL: And that's the thing about restaurant food. You don't care who cooks it, but it better taste the way you ate it last week or be better. And—but you eat food at a restaurant because it's consistently good, or the atmosphere is fun or whatever, and—and if people—if 12 people are

making gumbo and you don't know who is going to make it on Friday, you're going to shy away from that restaurant because you may not like that guy's gumbo. So we use uniform recipes. It's the only way to stay in business.

00:22:45

SR: What about when you go on the road? Generally what type of gumbo do you make?

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SL: Chicken and sausage because it's—it's not as expensive. Also Tyson is a sponsor, and so we help the chicken people. We will make seafood gumbo if they ask for it, but shrimp in Wisconsin is not cheap. And so—and also, you've got to understand that when I do a show we're giving away about 800 to 1,000 samples per show, which means we're giving away about 3,000 samples per day, which gets to be a pretty expensive project.

00:23:25

SR: What kind of sausage do you put in your chicken and sausage?

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SL: [*Laughs*] I use—I like Rabideaux's sausage, which is what David uses, but it's hard to—it's hard to be on the road three months and carry local sausage, so I use a lot of Hillshire Farms, the kielbasa, the beef and pork. I also shop a lot at the Sam's stores across the country, and I use that Cavanaugh sausage.

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SR: I noticed here, and also in a couple other places I've seen around Lake Charles, that there doesn't seem to be sausage in seafood gumbo, whereas in New Orleans I've had sausage in seafood gumbo a lot.

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DP: Yeah, they can do that. We have a lot of customers come in believe it or not and want chicken and sausage and shrimp and crab gumbo—all mixed—and we don't mix it for them, but they'll order like two cups as if it's equal to one of our large, and we'll give them a cup of chicken and a sausage and a cup of shrimp and crab. They'll go home and mix it. Some people put everything and the kitchen sink in their gumbo; they'll put chicken—

00:24:26

SL: Well the reason—

00:24:27

DP: —sausage, shrimp, crab, oysters—

00:24:30

SL: But if you put smoked sausage in a seafood gumbo, you defeated the purpose of your seafood because the smoked flavor is going to—in my opinion, my humble opinion—is going to override the seafood tastes. Just like when my brother made that seafood gumbo and he put

yellow and red bell peppers in it, and I'm like, *Man, you ruined the gumbo*. But in actuality it wasn't bad.

00:24:54

SR: Yeah, can you tell about that again when your brother did that?

00:24:58

SL: Well when my brother did gumbo I was like, *What are you doing? You're ruining the gumbo*. And he's like, *I'm doing this; you just be quiet*. It's not a traditional gumbo, and you know I'm paid by thousands of people to make gumbo. And he goes, *Shut-up*, 'cause older brothers are pretty vocal. But I have to say that when he got done making it the sweetness of the yellow and red bell peppers accented that gumbo, and it was delicious.

00:25:23

SR: That was a seafood gumbo?

00:25:23

SL: It was a seafood gumbo. He had crabs and shrimp and oysters in it, and all of that—those extra vegetables made a difference in that gumbo.

00:25:32

SR: Who knew?

00:25:32

SL: Yeah, who knew?

00:25:34

DP: And a lot of times the older Cajuns would make just like a chicken and okra gumbo.
Nobody even put the sausage in it.

00:25:39

SL: That's right, yeah.

00:25:41

DP: That was the old-time gumbo with just chicken—

00:25:41

SL: Or chicken sausage and okra gumbo.

00:25:42

DP: —and okra, right. A lot of them just did chicken and sausage—I mean chicken and okra gumbo.

00:25:47

SL: But see, here in this part of the country we grow a lot of okra for home use, and they pickle it—the small ones, they pickle it. The older riper bigger okra they'll dice and fry—which I like

fried okra. And then the medium-sized, or even some of the large ones, they will dice up and cook it down with stewed okra—stewed okra, which is tomatoes and okras cooked together, and they serve that on a rice. Everything down here is served on rice.

00:26:16

SR: Do you eat okra in that way, or—?

00:26:18

SL: I eat fried okra, and I will eat a stewed okra if I'm at somebody's house and that's what's on the menu, you know. And like mama says, *If it goes in the mouth it doesn't come out.*

00:26:31

SR: What—I'd be interested to know what the gumbos were like in your households when you were growing up.

00:26:36

DP: Mainly we ate chicken and sausage gumbo, I'd say. My mama, I'd get home from school and she'd have a pot of chicken and sausage gumbo on the stove. One thing about a gumbo, you just leave it on the stove. And if I ate at 4 o'clock from school—I got hungry and my brother came in at 5 o'clock and he ate and he's fine too. And my sister came at 6 o'clock from work, and she ate—. I mean it just—it's something that kind of stays. It doesn't spoil and it doesn't—you just keep it warm and eat it all day long really.

00:27:04

SL: Yeah, keep it above the danger temperature. And—and the other thing about gumbo that’s different than restaurant gumbo is like I was telling the group earlier: traditional gumbo is made with hens or the old roosters, and they were boiled because the Cajun people didn’t have a lot of money and they cooked a chicken ‘til it was tender and it fell off the bone, and so that’s how they got rid of some of those older birds. Or back in the day when they had the cock fights, they used to take the losers, and they became gumbo. And so that’s how that worked.

00:27:39

DP: They thought of all kinds of ways to use, you know, the gumbo, and gumbo was something that could stretch and feed the whole family. Like Scott said, when the people were poor gumbo would last two, three days you know, after you cool it down and refrigerate—

00:27:50

SL: And it didn’t cost a lot.

00:27:51

DP: —right.

00:27:51

SL: It didn’t cost a lot, you know.

00:27:52

DP: Right.

00:27:54

SL: And that's the thing, and you—the Cajun people, on a pig the only thing that got away was the squeal and the tail. They used every part of him and everything that—that they used, they ate. For instance, on the road when I'm doing media deals like this, I will make what we call rice-o-rie, which is you take leftover rice, you take eggs, you take the vegetables, you take the sausage, you take chicken if it's in your refrigerator. You cook all that together with your scrambled eggs, and you've got a rice casserole-type dish, and it gave you all the—the get-up-and-go you needed for the day or the weekend after that Friday night.

00:28:36

SR: Two questions: one, is it possible still to buy a hen in the grocery store versus a chicken?

00:28:41

SL: Yeah, you can. Down here you can.

00:28:45

SR: And then, what was the gumbo like in your household when you were growing up?

00:28:49

SL: Well my mother, like I said—my father died when I was very young and my mother worked almost round the clock, so when we ate gumbo we ate it at grandmother's house. And it

was not uncommon for me to spend, well, a great deal of time at my grandmother's house. And I had 11 uncles and aunts on one side, and it was not uncommon that every Sunday or every other Sunday the entire family met for lunch. Or during the week, we met during the week. In fact, my uncle came back from World War II and he had so many brothers and sisters that they never got to sit all at the table at the same time. So he bought a dining room table with his muster-out pay that all of them could sit at the table. So as we grew up, you made it when you got to sit at the big table. And this thing I—as a matter of fact, I still have it today. It's going to be my dining room table in the new house we're building right now. We're just going to refinish it.

00:29:50

SR: That's a great heirloom to have, huh?

00:29:52

SL: It's—it's really neat, and it was funny; it's funny what people want to keep and what they remember. For instance, when my grandmother died I wanted the table. Well my uncle that bought the table wanted it for my cousin. She said, *I don't want that table, but I want the red birds over Mawmaw's sink*. Well the red birds were what I made when I was five in—at daycare or whatever—we painted the ceramic. That was her grandmother's kitchen. That's what she remembered. I remembered the table where everybody ate at, and so that's what she wanted. And I said, *Well they're a gift from me*. And so we're all happy with what happened—especially me. I got a big table. **[Laughs]**

00:30:32

DP: Yeah.

00:30:34

SR: What kind of gumbo would Mawmaw make?

00:30:36

SL: Mamaw would make chicken and sausage. She would—and the funny part is she would clean the chicken. I mean we had them in the backyard for a long time, and she would wring their necks and—and clean the chicken and make the gumbo right there from start to finish. Like from farmer to the—the market, right there.

00:30:54

DP: That's the way it was done. They'd go out in the backyard and wring a chicken's neck, put it in a boiling pot of hot water, clean it, pluck it, and get it ready for the gumbo.

00:31:04

SL: They would boil it 'til the meat fell off the bone. And it would be tender and ready to go.

00:31:08

SR: Did y'all ever see the wringing of the neck?

00:31:10

SL: Oh yeah.

00:31:10

DP: Oh yeah, of course. **[Laughs]**

00:31:12

SL: It was being boys. We—you know like for instance, the traditional Mardi Gras was a time to make the rich and the poor all equal, so—and today Gueydan and Breaux Bridge and all those places still have the chicken run where the revelers go into the country. There's a band on a hay wagon; the revelers are on horses or on foot; the captain of the crew goes on and says, *Please Mr. Boudreaux*—or whatever—*do you have something for the gumbo or the Mardi Gras?* And they normally would throw a live chicken up. All the revelers would catch the chicken and put it in the pan to take back to where a group of people— after these guys went through the entire countryside, they collected everything they needed for the gumbos: potatoes, eggs, for the potato salad, the rice, the gumbo; they'd make a big gumbo. Everybody is in costume for the Mardi Gras; that way a rich person and a poor person on that day were equal because nobody knew who anybody was—had a big dance and they had the gumbo. And it was at a religious time in the year, and that's just how Mardi Gras started. Then the foreigners came down, and now it's, *Show me something*—Oh, *Throw me something*. I forgot. **[Laughs]**

00:32:21

SR: Kind of both, huh?

00:32:22

SL: Yeah, I guess so.

00:32:21

SR: What is it—this is sort of off-topic, but what is Mardi Gras like here in Lake Charles?

00:32:27

SL: Well it's—about 25 years ago it started here, and we've gone to I think 35 or 40 krewes. A krewe is a group of people that throw a ball, and we've got I think five parades now—

00:32:39

DP: Yeah, like 150,000 people that day, double the population of Lake Charles. We're normally at like 75,000 people; we'll have another 75,000 people come in just to line up to watch the parades.

00:32:49

SR: Wow.

00:32:49

SL: And—and every—all along the parade route the different krewes—like a krewe may be 300, 400, 500 people—well they're not all going to be in the parade. Some don't want to ride in the parade but they want to do like a tailgate party. They'll make a gumbo or they'll fry fish or they'll do a barbeque or they'll do whatever and line the parade route. So as you walk the parade

route there's gumbo, there's barbeque, there's ribs, there's whatever, and it's a family deal—
three and four generations are at the Mardi Gras.

00:33:20

DP: Big time. I mean right now it's turned big time in Lake Charles. You've got a lot of people
from Texas, and they come over and visit that day.

00:33:28

SL: Yeah, and line the route.

00:33:28

DP: And like Scott said, we shut down our main road, and from the Civic Center to the
college—

00:33:33

SL: For the whole day.

00:33:33

DP: —for the whole day. And that's where the parade route goes, and everybody lines up and
they're throwing the beads and everybody is eating and drinking and costumes and—

00:33:39

SL: Dancing and. yeah.

00:33:42

DP: —yeah it's—.

00:33:43

SL: The restaurants will—I mean they can't—on the parade route they can't make any money, so they put their bars outside. They serve appetizers outside. They hire DJs, and their bars make a lot of money, and their Cokes make money, and their tea make money.

00:33:58

DP: It's a big party. [*Laughs*]

00:33:58

SL: It's a party.

00:33:59

DP: It's a big party yeah. Yeah, it's a big party. [*Laughs*]

00:34:02

SR: Do you work on that day or—?

00:34:04

DP: No, we close. That's one of our holidays. It's one of our holidays.

00:34:07

SL: The whole city closes.

00:34:07

DP: It's one of our holidays. If you're not on the parade route, you close.

00:34:10

SR: And when y'all were growing up, did you ever go to the country for Mardi Gras, or did you have—was it enough of a thing here that—?

00:34:19

SL: No, we went to the country.

00:34:19

DP: Yeah, and—or we drove to New Orleans way back then. We'd all drive to New Orleans, or Lafayette—Lafayette had—.

00:34:25

SL: Yeah, New Orleans wasn't—the Mardi Gras 40 years ago wasn't the Mardi Gras that you see today. It—it didn't have the violence; it didn't have the nudity; it didn't have the—it had the drinking.

00:34:37

DP: Oh yeah, always had that.

00:34:37

SL: But you know, and—and that’s a big part of our festival, is that—the story here is when we work we work very, very hard and long. When we party, we party just as hard and just as long, you know. Our bars didn’t close—until just recently they never closed except Saturday night at 2:00 a.m., and reopened at midnight on Sunday, because the priests wanted to make sure you were at Mass. So they’d shut it down so you could make Mass a day. Now they got Saturday Mass, so we don’t even have to shut down anymore.

00:35:08

SR: When you’re traveling the country, do you—I mean it seems like from your personality, I can see you trying to loosen people up a little bit that aren’t quite as fun-loving as the people down here. How does that—is that true?

00:35:21

SL: Yeah, my shows are a lot of fun. I’ve been criticized a time or two that I’m not as technical about the cooking, and—and I tell them in a 30-minute show you’re not going to get the technical aspects of cooking, or half the audience is going to be asleep because it’s going to bore half. And now my shows, they’ll start at about 300 people and grow to 400 or 500, because usually we add a home show or a fair or a women’s show or something. And my shows build—nobody leaves. They build because of the humor, because of the talk, because of the story, and

it's not unheard of when we're serving samples at the end of the show, for them to come over and say, *Did you hear this joke?* Or, *Tell me about this.* Or, *I was in Louisiana,* or, *My cousin's aunt's brother went through Louisiana*—you know that sort of thing.

00:36:08

DP: And most of the Cajun restaurants like this one really kind of have a laid-back atmosphere. People want to be able to come as they are. They can be in a pair of shorts and a tee-shirt or just—

00:36:15

SL: Or jeans or whatever they've got on.

00:36:16

DP: Yeah, just got the lawnmower and the grass and they'll walk in here and eat. You know what I'm trying to say? It just—and that's what they like, and that's kind of a Cajun—I don't want to say tradition, but they like to be comfortable, you know. They like to be—

00:36:25

SL: It's like our group that eats lunch every Monday. We sit at the exact same table. It—and our group will vary from—from 2 to 12, 15. It may be all family. It may be no family. It may be business partners, and if it's a business meeting then a couple of us will go to another table and let the guy do his business. Or if you come here on a weekend, you may run into friends and a table of four will turn into a table of eight. So that's—but that's the Cajun people.

00:36:54

SR: Well can you describe for the record, since there's not a visual on—on being recorded, what the atmosphere is like in here—what it looks like?

00:37:05

DP: Well we've got a lot of Jazz and Zydeco pictures. There's—there's stuffed fish and ducks on the wall. There's—all the food is served on basically paper plates, huh?

00:37:18

SL: No, you went to—after the hurricane it was all paper, and now we've gone back to—to a heavy-duty plastic plate that's washable and reusable. Every table has got a complete set of condiments on it. I mean it's—and the bar is available.

00:37:31

DP: Yeah, vinyl tablecloths and tile floors—I mean something that's easy to clean because when Cajuns eat crawfish and boiled crabs, boiled crawfish, there's going to end up on the floor.

[Laughs] It's going to end up on the floor.

00:37:44

SL: When you're cracking crabs or something it could hit the guy next door.

00:37:45

DP: You know, easy to clean up and stuff, so it's—it's kind of a laid back atmosphere, and everybody comes, and you can't get too loud. If you're here on Friday night eating boiled crawfish and drinking beer, that's—you won't bother the next table no matter how loud you get, you know.

00:37:59

SL: And that's kind of the reason people come, because it--everybody is friends with everybody, and if you squirt crab juice on the guy next to you he's like, *Whoa*. And then it might be, *Well, maybe we should have gotten the crabs instead of the shrimp*, or you know it's like, *Well okay. Come—come on up here and eat.* [**Laughs**] So, and you have a 30 or 40-minute, hour wait on Fridays. Well while they're doing that, there may be a guy eating crab right there, and—and there's a little hawking going on, and he goes, *Oh, how about a pincher?* You know, and—or he can't eat the whole—the whole dozen. He says, *Well look, you know, Here's a crab. Y'all take this one and so nothing goes to waste.*

00:38:34

SR: You know, you said that you get—have gotten criticized for not being technical and stuff, but I wonder if that's sort of missing the point of the spirit of the food of this region—not that it doesn't take skill, but—

00:38:48

SL: You know the criticism of the technicality of it, that—I find that's the one or two that really want to take notes and write it all down. And—and you're trying to say, *Look, there's not going*

*to be a test later. And if you want to talk to me, here's my phone number. Call me, you know. 1-800-297-6670 is my—my number. It rings right on my hip. Call me; we'll discuss recipes 'til we're blue in the face. Or if you've got one of my cookbooks and you're—you're having trouble with the recipe, call me. I'll walk you through it. But during a 30-minute show it's kind of tough to tell someone everything they need to know about their—and I always close with, *If you didn't get enough technical information on it, come see me after the show and I'll go through it with you.* And that's why we also schedule our--our shows two hours apart, so that not—not necessarily so the crowd can change, 'cause the crowd would change the very next—the next hour—but it helps us clean up and also visit with all the guests that come up and say, *Hey, we didn't quite get this, or you know, You're giving away this chocolate yummy and we got some of it, but what is it? How is it—?* And then we can say, *Come to the next show. I need the people in the seats.* Or, *This is how we make it,* or you know whatever—just kind of pick at 'em.*

00:40:04

SR: Chocolate yummy—can you say what that is?

00:40:07

SL: That's a butter pecan cookie with a cream cheese, powdered sugar, whipped cream layer with two different puddings, with more whipped cream, pecans, and chocolate on it. Lots—

00:40:17

DP: And no calories. [*Laughs*]

00:40:19

SL: Yeah, yeah. I don't charge extra for the calories. You can leave those on the plate. It's like I said earlier, you know we don't cook heart-healthy in the South. Our friends are doctors, lawyers, undertakers, and grave diggers, and they got to make a living and we help them where we can.

00:40:34

SR: And you make that because, is that a regional dish?

00:40:37

SL: That's—that's a pretty much Southern dish. Well I say it's Southern; I was making it in Canada, and the guy said, *We make that; we call it something else*. I was like, *Okay, okay*—But we make it mainly because I want kids involved in cooking, and it's a dish that's fairly easy to make, and you can make it fairly quickly and kids won't lose interest in it. And you know, if kids and men had another hand they'd choke to death when they ate it, because we eat it so fast and so much of it. So we make that dish to get kids interested in cooking.

00:41:07

SR: And you mentioned that you have children.

00:41:10

SL: I have three girls. They—they range from 24 to 16. I think the only thing my wife and I ever agreed on when we were married is that we wouldn't have two in college at the same time, and so they're four years apart.

00:41:23

SR: And are they interested in foods?

00:41:27

SL: The youngest one is a Suzie Homemaker and really helps in the restaurant—well in the catering company and—and I had an on and off catering company, and she used to always say *Dad, you make the best steaks. We're going to open up a steak restaurant.* And I'd say, *Well when you're old enough to run the restaurant, okay, but until then I'm doing the shows and going to go travel. I'm not going to work 20 hours a day anymore.*

00:41:49

SR: What about you, David—do you have children?

00:41:49

DP: I've got two girls, 26 and 20, and they like to come here and eat but that's about all. They don't want to be a part of it. The restaurant business is a very hard business, very—lot of hours, a lot of—to do it right.

00:42:00

SL: Well they like to visit the register too.

00:42:03

DP: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

00:42:03

SL: I mean we were talking about that today at lunch, you know. It's like gimme, gimme, gimme, yeah.

00:42:09

DP: They definitely know how to do that.

00:42:11

SR: Well I—the restaurant business, and the food business in general, is—you put on a lot of miles. You—it's hard. What—can you tell me what you enjoy most, why you do this work?

00:42:23

DP: I love people and love being around people, like them to be happy. And if you—they come to eat, and you give them good service, good food, good atmosphere, and they leave happy, that makes you happy.

00:42:34

SL: That's—that's true, and when I grew up you know every Sunday was dinner at grandmother's, and—and between the cousins and the uncles and aunts it was always 50 or 60 people around the kitchen. Good times always revolved around a kitchen, and so that's—that's what I knew. That's—. I went to chef school through a corporation here in town, and they taught me how to cook, and then I opened my own place 'cause I wanted to open my own business, and the hours just go with it. And I don't know how other restaurants feel, but when I first started doing my shows on the road, if I couldn't cook periodically and have people around me I wasn't happy. The restaurant business—you go to a restaurant and they're swamped, well you bus tables for them or you—it gets in your blood, and no matter what you do, you kind of still vacillate back to a restaurant.

00:43:26

DP: And I came up when I was real young with a—my grandmother was in the bakery business, and she—and she used to wake us up at 4 o'clock in the morning. And you know you had to have everything cooked and that—for the bakery to start serving at 6 o'clock in the morning, 'cause the railroad people that were across the street—the railroad tracks—and they would stop the trains and come and buy donuts and cookies and cakes and pies for breakfast every morning. So we stayed up pretty late—pretty early getting to bed. And it's just like when Scott said when it gets in your blood, you just can't help it; you just got to be around it.

00:43:58

SL: Well and a lot of times your kids are like, *I don't want to go to the restaurant*, but they come to eat and they come to hang out and they come to say, *Daddy, gimme--gimme—gimme.*

And then—and part of that is, *Dad, I want to love you, but I don't want you to know I love you.*

[Laughs] You know or, *I brought my boyfriend in and you're going to feed us both because he doesn't have any money and we're going to the movies—you know, that sort of thing.*

00:44:17

SR: Well did you work in the bakery?

00:44:19

DP: Oh yes, uh-huh. Yeah, my grandmother had what we called—it was an Italian bakery, because we did a lot of Italian bread and cookies, donuts, cakes, everything. I mean she—they had it for like 50 years, you know, before she died. And then, but that was long hours, and I was taught you know, you don't count hours; you just do the work. I never—if I work 80 hours a week or 90 hours a week or 70 hours—you don't count hours.

00:44:44

SL: When I was in the cafeteria business, the week after Thanksgiving I figured the hours that I worked. I'm a manager with a college degree, and I was making way below minimum wage, and that was the last time I ever figured hours to paychecks. They just don't come out.

00:45:00

DP: Yeah, I was always raised, and both being Italian people where my family's—where my grandmother had the bakery, the house was connected to the bakery. And my other grandmother had a general merchandise store; the house was connected to the store, so when my grandfather

would want to eat lunch, my grandmother would go to lunch at 11:30 'cause she would run the front of the store—the register; fix food for him in the back. He'd sit down and eat, and then when he came to the front she would go to the back and eat, and they would take like two 30-minute lunches, and they'd start at 6:00 in the morning and end at 11 o'clock at night. You know they had the store. The same thing with my grandmother and the bakery: they'd go to bed at 10 o'clock at night and up at 4:00 in the morning, and you know they did that for another 50 years.

00:45:40

SL: And you know, you mentioned about dad ate first and then mom ate—that's a Cajun tradition too, because when you would go to grandmother's house to eat, what would happen is all the women would feed the kids first; then the men would sit down and they would be served; and then when everybody had eaten, then the women would sit down and eat.

00:45:59

SR: You've seen that happen?

00:46:00

SL: Regularly. And it wasn't a chauvinistic thing; it just—that's how it worked.

00:46:04

DP: That's how it was, yeah.

00:46:05

SL: They cooked, and they felt like they didn't want to be bopping up during their meal to make sure everybody had everything, so when everybody was served and then the women sat down and ate.

00:46:15

DP: And—and most of them, like I said, were family-owned businesses like my grandmother staying in the general merchandise business. She stayed up front and ran the register, and my grandpa went in the back and ate, and then when—like I said, he—that way nobody—they always had somebody—nobody else could run the register but the family. There was no—back then no stealing going on; no this, no that. It was all—.

00:46:35

SL: Well back then there wasn't a lot of stealing going on period in Lake Charles. I mean 'cause you took a beatin' from the neighbor.

00:46:38

DP: She didn't have to worry about an employee; they were always there. That's how they lived their lives. Their business was their life.

00:46:46

SR: Are there—I know there's a big Italian population in Louisiana in general, but is—are there many Italians in this area?

00:46:53

DP: Yeah, fairly big, yeah. There's quite a few Italians here in Lake Charles, and all of them are in business, and all of them pretty much have been pretty successful.

00:47:00

SR: Do you ever serve spaghetti?

00:47:04

DP: No, not here. *[Laughs]* At home, but I leave that to my mama. *[Laughs]*

00:47:10

SR: What about—I mean both of you—and what you're doing, you're devoting your lives. I mean you're businessmen, but also a byproduct of what you do is cultural preservation in a big way. Does—do you think about that?

00:47:23

DP: Oh yeah, all the time, and I try to pass it to the kids. But this younger generation coming up doesn't understand that. They—they can say, *Daddy, how do you work 80 hours a week or 90 hours, because—?*

00:47:34

SL: But why?

00:47:34

DP: Why, you know? I said, *Because it keeps things going smoothly.*

00:47:36

SL: *Because I have you and I've got to pay.*

00:47:40

DP: But, and it keeps things going smoothly, and I like being around here. I like—I don't—it's almost like I get up in the morning, like I don't have a job, 'cause this is just what I like doing. I like coming down here. I like meeting people, seeing people, making sure everything is done right, and that's just me.

00:47:54

SL: Well that's like my saying at the fair, you know. You'll be there, like the Wisconsin State Fair where—where you're from is an 11-day fair; well, I work all 11-days. And I come in one day and I say, *Guess what we get to do today? We get to play at the fair.* And—and we don't—I don't have a real job; I don't even think I have a job. I mean I travel the country. People treat me like I'm special. I cook for them and—and it's funny. You know, we may work all day at the fair, and a sponsor may say something and I say, *Well why don't I go to your house and cook?* And he'll invite 10 or 20 of his friends, and we'll cook, and that's how all that happens. And—and the better you know people, you know, people do business with people.

00:48:36

SR: And do you—do you feel a responsibility to where you're from when you're out there on the road?

00:48:42

SL: I really do, and we laugh about it all the time. The Tourist Bureau ought to pay me to be on the road because I promote Louisiana. I promote Lake Charles. I'm the number one seller of the Pirate's Pantry Cookbook, which is our Junior League cookbook. I sell more cookbooks when I'm on the road than any other person or—or group, simply because of what I do on the road. So I promote my hometown, and like when we had the hurricane and the Red Cross people sent people in from all over the country—now when I travel I see those people on the road and they open their homes to me and they—they want to cook for me and they—. I mean they love Louisiana because of what we did here in Louisiana, and some of the people hear some of the negatives from New Orleans, but I'll tell you: Lake Charles—everybody during the hurricane when they came home got together and worked together, and our City is 98-percent up and running, where New Orleans is still waiting for someone to do it for them. And I mean the day after the hurricane, there—there was no power for 13 days in the city, and a lot of people like me that fed the hurricane victims—and David got here because he couldn't leave because of the restaurant, until it was too late—they all—. But what you did was you would open one freezer at a time, and then everybody in the neighborhood would come and eat at your house. It would be shrimp and there'd be roast and there'd be venison and there'd be steaks and—'cause once the freezer was open you had to eat it. And—and you kept the freezer closed because it stayed frozen longer. And so everybody just sat down and ate, and they used their generators to play the radio; they used their generators to listen to the news to see how bad we really were, and we didn't

think it was that bad. I mean it—it was hot and it was sweaty, and you know we took baths in the swimming pool, but other than that it wasn't too bad though.

00:50:30

DP: It was bad though. It looked like a war zone had hit here. I had never seen anything like it in my life, and I hope to never see it again.

00:50:35

SL: Well just leaving the house and going two blocks took two and a half hours the first day because you couldn't go anywhere because—oh 100-year-old trees fell. Every telephone pole in the city was gone. It was so funny: I took a group down to Cameron, which is our southern-most—that was hit the hardest—and the guy goes, *Well it doesn't look like it was hit too bad here. I mean we've been going for 50 miles and there's not a telephone pole that's broken.* Well no, because we replaced 100 miles of telephone poles—you know that sort of thing. If you didn't see it, the pictures—if you saw pictures, that's just a miniscule of what it was like. I mean the—the 12-story bank building didn't have a—

00:51:17

DP: But what it did do—the city of Lake Charles did do a good job of just getting back together.

00:51:25

SL: Yeah, we all came together. Like I was on the road—I was on the road during one of them [hurricanes], and I called home and the guy said, *We've been by your house and we boarded*

your windows. We've—we cleaned out the driveway so you can get in there, and we emptied out your freezer and cleaned it.

00:51:41

DP: I was one of the first restaurants back open, and it was funny 'cause I had just Stella, one of my cooks—actually, two of my cooks, and maybe two waitresses and me. Everybody else had scattered and left town, and we—all we started back, our menu was gumbo. And we served 650 gumbos the first day we opened the doors, on a Friday morning, and—and that's all we had. I mean it's all the product I could get, and then slowly like—. I did that for a few days, and then the following week I got a shipment of fish and shrimp in, and I started serving the fish and the shrimp dinner, and then a gumbo. But I started my menu back off at scratch: at a gumbo, one item, and then two items, and then three items—

00:52:20

SL: Used to have to drive 100 miles to get gas.

00:52:22

DP: Yeah, and I'm just saying, and it took—and it took up until—it took me about six months to get my menu back to where it is today.

00:52:29

SR: How many days after the hurricane was that Friday when you reopened?

00:52:32

DP: Probably, let's see. 14, 15—as soon as the electricity came back on.

00:52:38

SR: And what kind of gumbo did you make?

00:52:41

DP: Chicken and sausage.

00:52:41

SL: Yeah, it's all we had.

00:52:42

DP: It's all we had at first [*Laughs*], and then shrimp and crab.

00:52:44

SL: And I'll tell you how bad it was. I was—I was on the road calling home every day, saying you know, *I've got four more days of shows*. And as a matter of fact, from that experience my contracts now say if a hurricane hits my hometown—within 150 miles or 200 miles of my hometown—my—the contract is null and void and I'm coming home, because I'm under contract with the Red Cross to feed the shelters. I'm under contract with the Entergy people to feed all the electrical workers that come in on any disaster. So it's now written into my contract that if a disaster hits my hometown, no matter what's going on, I come home. Because when I

got home I fed 160,000 people in 45 days, maybe from the—November 18th to January 23rd, I think it was, I fed 160,000 people. And then I went to New Orleans and fed 30,000 people in five days.

00:53:40

SR: Well what do you mean you fed them? What—what kind of food did you use, and where did you do that?

00:53:44

SL: The food was trucked in from different parts—either Houston or some of the stores that had started getting back open, but I fed them full meals. I served jambalaya, spaghetti, braised beef tips, lasagna, chicken tetrazzini, crawfish étouffée—whatever it was we served a full meal with two vegetables and a dessert. And the Red Cross gave those away and—.

00:54:13

SR: And so you were working for—I mean you were working with the Red Cross?

00:54:16

SL: I was working with the Red Cross, yeah. And—and they would—they would drive—. I had a commercial kitchen attached to my house that was basically just a fun-for-all kitchen, but I had it certified through the Health Department, and as a matter of fact I made the—the Fox News for New Year's Eve. I served the 13,000,000th meal of that hurricane—of the two hurricanes actually. And the Red Cross only—in a whole hurricane season—used to only serve 9,000,000

meals. We served 13,000,000 just for these two storms. And actually it was closer to 14,000,000 by the time it was all said and done.

00:54:54

DP: But if you could get your restaurant open, we did tons—all the business we could handle. I mean it was—it was crazy ‘cause there was very few people open. The only person open when I opened up was Domino’s Pizza.

00:55:02

SL: And no staff.

00:55:03

DP: And working outside.

00:55:05

SL: And no staff.

00:55:06

DP: So we had to keep it pretty simple ‘cause of the staff, you know, like you said. And slowly I got one or two people of my help to come back one week, and then we—like I said we’d keep adding help, and as we added help we’d add things to the menu, and finally got it back open.

00:55:20

SR: People were probably so grateful.

00:55:19

DP: Oh they were. It was—

00:55:22

SL: Oh this area was phenomenal. I mean they—they loved everything. Everything was great. You could say, *Well that's not my best effort*, and they'd go [*Gestures*], *It's wonderful. Thank you very much.*

00:55:30

DP: No complaints. They were just—

00:55:32

SL: No complaints.

00:55:32

DP: —they were happy to be able to walk in your restaurant and eat. They were happy—that happy. I mean 'cause they had no—most of them didn't have electricity at their houses by then. We got up on some of these restaurants; they got up on them kind of earlier, you know, in different areas, and people just—they slept in the dark. They got up in the morning, and if you were open for lunch they—they were glad to see you. Come sit in—

00:55:51

SL: Well I can remember the first meal I cooked for the Red Cross. I had a flashlight in my mouth and the doors open because it was so hot. I had no electricity. I was cooking with a flashlight in my mouth and string. I was by myself the first three days, and then I got—got a guy that came to work for me, and it was really funny because we were working unbelievable hours. And people were like, *You can't work that man that many hours*. I said, *The heck I can't. Is he complaining? No, okay, shut-up*, and that's how we did it.

00:56:22

DP: Yeah, after we closed we cooked gumbos. You know I was just serving gumbos and we'd run out of gumbo, we'd just have to sit here that night and keep closed and cook gumbo, or get here early, early in the morning and start cooking. And just kept it up like that—just—

00:56:34

SL: No dishwashers—dishwashers became cooks.

00:56:37

DP: Yeah, we just started using paper products—all paper products in the restaurant. We threw everything away and just had—

00:56:44

SR: It must have felt good to know you were so used—you were so valued, I mean. What you were doing was pretty critical.

00:56:51

SL: That was—that was a great feeling, and the fact that people—well when we did the 13,000,000th meal CNN and all those guys were here, and they—they said, *You will come down to Cameron and you will actually serve that meal.* Because normally I was cooking 1,500, 2,000 meals a day; I didn't leave my kitchen other than to go to the grocery store or to grab a couple hours sleep. And they said, *You will come serve this.* And the little old lady said, *Oh you're the man that's cooking? Thank you, thank you—and, Was it good? Oh it was fabulous,* and so—.

00:57:22

DP: I got very fortunate. My main distributor was in Harahan, which is right outside of New Orleans, a company called Conco, and they had a warehouse in Shreveport. And I was one of their better customers, so the—Harahan got destroyed, but Shreveport was fine, so they trucked in their goods from Shreveport, Louisiana, north of us.

00:57:39

SL: You'd make your—you'd make your orders earlier because they had to leave and come so much further.

00:57:43

DP: Right, and so I got very fortunate to get product. A lot of restaurants couldn't get product, and you had to be selective on what product you got you know. And if you came in and I was

out, people would say, *Okay, what's—what you got next?* You know they didn't—they didn't leave. **[Laughs]**

00:57:56

SL: That was funny 'cause they would come in and you'd go, *What is that?* And they'd go, *Well it's on your order guide.* And you'd go, *No, no, this is what I ordered.* And they'd go, *Oh well we don't know what that is.* And they'd grab it and they'd throw it to the back of the truck, and you would get what they got you. I remembered I had ordered 500 pounds of crawfish tail-meat because I was going to do crawfish étouffée that day and **[Laughs]** I got a pound. I had a pound—one pound of crawfish. And I was like, *What is this?* And the guy goes, *Well those warehouse workers...* And that's all that was said—*Those warehouse workers.*

00:58:31

DP: And you couldn't gripe or they wouldn't show up the next day.

00:58:34

SL: They wouldn't come at all. **[Laughs]**

00:58:34

DP: Yeah, right. **[Laughs]**

00:58:36

SL: So you changed the menu like three hours before it was supposed to be—

00:58:39

SR: What did you make then?

00:58:41

SL: Chicken [*Laughs*], 'cause by that time we had power and our coolers and freezers were up, and we would stock—I mean we'd stock a lot of chicken, a lot of sausage, a lot of—I mean I was buying corn and green beans, corn in the—by the pound. I was buying 200, 300-pounds of corn at a time, and 13 cases of green beans at a time, and I mean we—and it was all going—and we were having a delivery about every second day.

00:59:10

DP: You just had to keep a real streamlined menu so you'd know what product you had, 'cause it was kind of a crapshoot on what you got.

00:59:16

SL: Yeah, like with me they couldn't say—the Red Cross said, *You're contracted to feed 2,000 meals today*. They would call me the day before and say, *We need 2,000 meals tomorrow*, and I would feed them what I wanted. But I had a rotation, so they didn't eat the same thing every day. And that's how we worked that. Red beans and sausage was a big—big deal.

00:59:34

SR: Did you make gumbo ever, or was that out of the price point?

00:59:38

SL: No, the gumbo was definitely in the price point. We just couldn't serve it. When you send out 50 gallons of gumbo, it's everywhere. So we tried to serve stuff that could be eaten with a fork or could stretch and didn't have to go in a bowl that would slosh. 'Cause a lot of the people would meet the truck on the road and take 10 meals and go to their workers, because they were trying to rebuild their homes or rebuild the road or rebuild whatever.

01:00:09

DP: Cutting down trees—something. Doing something, you know.

01:00:14

SL: Yeah, you could work here all you wanted.

01:00:14

SR: What—I mean you said that you made gumbo because that's what you had, but I imagine you could have—there must be something about gumbo that's also what you—you knew the community wanted it. Maybe you could have made grilled cheese too.

01:00:33

DP: Yeah, no, we knew the community wanted it. And we had one or two cooks, so we picked the item we thought would be the best item—

01:00:38

SL: Go the farthest.

01:00:39

DP: —right, go the farthest.

01:00:41

SL: Easy to cook.

01:00:41

DP: And I had one or two waitresses, and that's an easy serve. You dish it up; you go serve—drop it at the table—and they could run, you know. We'd have this restaurant full of people. We seat about 180 people and maybe had two or three waitresses, so I mean it was just like you had chicken and sausage, and shrimp and crab gumbo. Good, they ran into the kitchen and got two bowls of gumbo, scooped up some rice, and then within a minute you had your food—two minutes.

01:01:02

SL: And a pitcher of tea on every table.

01:01:03

DP: Yeah, it's easy—it's easy to serve gumbo. You know what I'm trying to say. And once it's cooked there's no—you know, just dish it up. You don't have to wait to fry something or grill

something. So that was our main deal, was the help situation, and the ease of it, and people wanted it.

01:01:16

SR: It's kind of a comfort food.

01:01:18

DP: Exactly, exactly. Oh, they were so happy. They were tired of eating Domino's Pizza, and maybe one other thing that was—.

01:01:22

SL: MREs.

01:01:24

DP: Yeah, MREs. And—and you know when I came with the gumbo I was amazed. The first day, like I said, we sold 650 gumbos the first day.

01:01:31

SL: Yeah, because we had to get open. Our rents were still running and—and the labor was still running, and everything was still running.

01:01:39

DP: You know here, I probably keep \$25,000 worth of food on hand, and I got 15, 16 freezers. Well all of it ruined in the storm; I mean so we had to take all that out and throw it in the dumpsters, clean everything, get the Health—the Board of Health back in to re-inspect before—. But they were pretty quick about it, come in and re-inspect your restaurant, and then they'd say, *You can open*, you know. And then you had to order—start ordering all new food again, and starting from scratch. You started from scratch.

01:02:04

SL: Yeah, after the hurricane you had—you had to because they were scared of mold and they were scared of mud and they were scared of all the things that hurricanes bring, 'cause it—I mean how much water did you have in here ,Dave?

01:02:14

DP: This room here, the—the whole roof leaked, so we had two or three inches in here. The other part of the restaurant mainly was just like, all the windows were blown out and had to get the glass company out here to replace the glass, and you know leaks all over, and just you know some other stuff. I was pretty lucky. This is a pretty old building, and it's pretty well-built, but I shut this room off here that we're in presently and used—and used the last three rooms. Actually I used only the two—two of my dining rooms. And then we did a third and a fourth after I remodeled this one. So it just kind of—you started out, like I said, from scratch. It was almost like—like opening a new business again. It's really what it was.

01:02:48

SL: Well you did, 'cause the Health Department had to re-inspect you, and the—everything starting all over.

01:02:53

SR: It looks good in here. It's pretty shiny.

01:02:56

DP: Yeah, yeah.

01:02:57

SL: Well, hard work and two years.

01:03:00

SR: I'm curious how you got hooked up with the Red Cross. Had you done that before?

01:03:03

SL: I—I do a lot of disaster feeding, and it's my claim to fame back in the day of catering with a lot food served hot and fresh and on time. And I had done a lot with the—with Desert Storm, the first war, when it came around. I think I fed close to 200,000 military guys. 'Cause as they would transition for their desert training at Fort Hood, they would come through Lake Charles and they'd bivouac here, and the National Guard and I had a contract together. So I would feed all them. And then we had an ice storm several years back and the Electric Company hired me, and I was feeding 1,500 people a day breakfast and lunch, so they knew I could do it. And a friend of a

friend said, *Hey, would you do this for us? And are you capable?* And I said sure—took over a contract and ran with it.

01:03:52

DP: And Lake Charles is a pretty small place, and Scott has a good reputation for what he does. And you know, once around here you get a good reputation, you—people stand—.

01:04:00

SL: It's hard to get a good reputation and real easy to lose it. [*Laughs*]

01:04:02

DP: Yeah, but once you have one, people stick by you pretty good.

01:04:07

SR: Well I just have a couple more questions. I know you've got to get to dinner service soon probably—but back to the gumbo briefly [*Laughs*]—.

01:04:16

DP: Yeah, we haven't got to the gumbo. [*Laughs*]

01:04:17

SR: Not but—I mean this has been a wonderful conversation and taken on a life of its own, but I just want to wrap up a few—few loose ends that I took some notes on during your presentation.

And one thing that I hadn't heard before, a technique that I'd like to know how to use, is how you know the temperature of the oil is correct for adding the flour, and why you have to—why you should add it when it's at that temperature?

01:04:45

SL: Well you want your oil hot so that the flour starts cooking immediately. You don't want it to soak up in there. So what I—I tell people is you want your oil to be at least 220 degrees, and the technique that I do is when you wash your hands and you rinse them—there's no soap on them but they're still wet; so just flick your hand in the cold oil, and then as you—as it comes up to heat, oil—water boils at 212. So, and water and oil don't mix, so a couple drops of water in your oil will start snap, crackling, and popping. But when it hits 212, it's really snap, crackling, and popping, so that when it reaches 220 all the water is popped out or—or evaporated, so you can put your flour in.

01:05:27

SR: And why 220?

01:05:29

SL: That's what my grandmother did. **[Laughs]** It—it starts to cook. I mean roux takes a long time to cook, and if you start it with your oil cold, I mean even that much longer. And—and I don't know; that's how we were taught to make it, and that's sort of like your fried chicken—at 325, and you fry fish at 350. I don't know. That's the magical—.

01:05:50

SR: Okay, and what—I think today—I can't remember what kind of oil you used today.

Vegetable oil?

01:05:55

SL: Pure vegetable oil, uh-huh. And the questions during the demonstration was, *Why not peanut oil? Why not canola oil? Why not*—and all of those are good oils. **[Laughs]** Why do you use Wesson Oil? Because they pay me; no—**[Laughs]**. I mean I use a pure vegetable oil, and I use it because I don't want a food transfer. One of the guys said, *Why don't you use olive oil?* And I said, *Because olive oil has a taste, and once you cook with olive oil it imports that taste to whatever you put that roux in.* I don't want that taste.

01:06:25

DP: And peanut oil and stuff is a lot more expensive, and it goes back to the cost of the gumbo, you know. It's got the—

01:06:30

SL: And—and the thing—the reason most people use peanut oil is because it has such a high burn temperature, and it holds well on fried foods, and it—and with impurities. Your oil goes bad not because you've heated it up. It's because the impurities in that oil burn, so if you can keep your oil below its impurity level, then you're good. You say, well it was pure peanut oil. Well it was pure vegetable oil, but everything burns at a certain level, and whatever is in it is going to burn.

01:07:01

SR: Do you—or can you tell me what kind of oil you—y’all use for your roux here at the restaurant?

01:07:05

DP: We use vegetable oil, but we use peanut oil for all our frying though, ‘cause of the reason he just said. It’s a higher temperature. You know, it can stand a higher temperature.

01:07:16

SL: And the impurities. I mean it—it’s easier to filter.

01:07:18

SR: And your roux, when you were stirring it, you could have gone for an hour there. Did you have it on high heat?

01:07:24

SL: Yeah. We were using a table-top cooker, so that didn’t get really high heat, but we had it on high heat and we went with it. The secret with cooking a good roux is a thick pot. You don’t want a thin pot, because you can’t stir it fast enough to keep it from scorching. So it’s—the hotter the better.

01:07:42

DP: The old way was a little black iron skillet. I mean that was the old way a long time ago.

01:07:46

SL: Yeah. use the black iron pot and you'd stir it the same way.

01:07:48

SR: And do you always use a whisk?

01:07:51

SL: I always use a whisk on my roux, 'cause it—especially when you've got a lot of flour and oil that you're cooking together. Like I said, I usually use a five or ten-pound bag of [flour] and a gallon or two gallons of oil when I—when I make enough for a show, so it's—if you're using a spoon you're not blending it as well. And a wire whip is almost like a mixer, and you're—and you're blending it, and with the oil being hot—I guess I didn't think of this earlier, but the reason we get the oil hot is when we put our flour in, if it's cold it lumps. So by it being hot it starts cooking immediately, and as we wire whisk it, it blends with the oil. And the butter is different because you can—the butter rouxs that we were making earlier with the other pot, we make that because it—it cooks quicker. But here again, you get the oil melted—I mean the butter melted—before you put the flour in, because you want it to blend and be smooth. You don't want lumps in it, 'cause a lump isn't cooked in the center.

01:08:57

SR: When you said that Wesson pays you, do you mean you have sponsors when you go on the road?

01:09:03

SL: I have sponsors on the road and—and basically that's a joke. [*Laughs*]

01:09:07

SR: But that's what you're referring to?

01:09:09

SL: Yes, yes, sponsorships. We deal with Tyson Chicken. They're a great company to work for. Kraft, which is a great—you know there's also Con Agra; they've got 33 products that people—they're good sponsors. And we just, whoever sponsors us at whatever show, we dance with the woman that brought us. Because everyone—but traditionally corn oil, pure vegetable oil—it could be soybean, it could be peanut. We use canola oil—the Canadian faction that was here [at the cooking demonstration], they were—they were interested that I used canola oil because it has a high burn temperature like peanut oil, and it does no food transfer. And so we teach a style of cooking on the road that can be cooked anywhere. The misconception is that Cajun people eat seafood and that's all they eat. Well we're like everywhere else; seafood is expensive, and it's a delicacy unless we're fishing or hunting or—or getting our own; then it's different. But we eat a lot of chicken and a lot of sausage, so on the road I teach a style of cooking—not necessarily what I cook.

01:10:15

SR: Okay, well final question for each of you. How do you feel about the jarred roux that you can buy in the supermarket?

01:10:23

SL: I—it's a good product. And if you're making a gumbo for three or four people, don't make the roux. By that—the Savoie roux, which I use a great deal of it, the Richard's roux, which—now Savoie's and Richard's— Richard's is a little darker than Savoie's, so it's a taste. And Savoie makes three different grades. They make a light, a medium, and a dark, and so you can get whatever you want on there.

01:10:50

SR: You approve of it too, David?

01:10:51

DP: Oh yeah. If I was going to say, for somebody that's not experienced in cooking gumbo, definitely start with the jarred roux and experiment with making their own roux.

01:10:59

SL: Well you know when I first went on the road, I traveled with cases of roux, and because roux is an iffy thing, you know, and—and I can remember the first time I got somewhere and opened the case and there was nothing in there, and I was like, *Okay, we're going to make roux.* And I made this roux and—talking to news people and talking to media people. I got carried

away, and the next thing I knew I had burnt the roux, so I had to start all over and make another pot. And—and the moral of that story is you got to pay attention to what you're doing when you make a roux. You got to stir it constantly and pull it off at the right time. So that's why I recommend rookies use jarred roux.

01:11:37

DP: Yeah, it will make it a lot simpler for them, and a lot quicker.

01:11:40

SL: And you can put that on your shelf in your pantry and keep it forever.

01:11:44

SR: After it's opened?

01:11:44

SL: No, no, not after it's opened; you refrigerate it. But before it's opened. As roux cools a little bit of the oil comes to the top, so that's vacuum-packed, 'cause it's—it's canned basically or—yeah, canned. Or it's like a jam or a jelly. The—the jar seals it on there, so when you open it, it actually goes [*sound effect of jar opening*] so you know it's good inside. And then you pour the excess oil off, and then start with your roux.

01:12:10

SR: Okay, gentlemen, thank you so much for giving me your time. It was really great.

01:12:13

SL: Thanks for having us.

01:12:15

DP: All right, thank you. We enjoyed it.

01:12:17

SL: Thank you.

01:12:18

[End David Papania-Scott Landry Interview]