

MARK AZLIN
Owner, The Bourbon Mall
Bourbon, MS

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Location: Mark's office, The Bourbon Mall
Date: June 29, 2005
Length: 19 minutes, 53 seconds
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Project: MS Delta Hot Tamale Trail

NOTE: While the interview was conducted in Mark's office, the music playing out in the main dining rooms can be heard in the background.

[Begin Mark Azlin.mp3]

0:00:02.1

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Wednesday, June twenty-ninth, 2005 and I'm at the Bourbon Mall with owner, Mark Azlin. Would you mind, Mark, saying your name and also your birth date for the record, if you don't mind?

0:00:16.2

Mark Azlin: Okay; my name is Mark Azlin, A-z-l-i-n. And my birth date is December fifteenth [nineteen] seventy-one.

0:00:22.7

AE: All right--the same year--I was born that year.

0:00:23.8

MA: Oh, really? Okay.

0:00:25.2

AE: Yeah. So you can tell me a little bit about the history of the Bourbon Mall?

0:00:31.9

MA: Well it was originally an old store built in the late 1920s and--and it was operated as an old store all the way up to the 1990s, and it was closed down. And a gentleman opened it back up and was using it as--as a store and also selling lunches when I bought the place in [nineteen] ninety-eight. I bought it with the plans of turning it into a restaurant.

0:00:54.2

AE: Now when you say store, do you mean like commissary or general store or--?

0:00:57.8

MA: Just--just like a general store for the area.

0:00:59.3

AE: And what was the name of the store?

0:01:00.9

MA: It was the Bourbon Mall when I bought it.

0:01:02.6

AE: Oh, okay. Okay.

0:01:03.0

MA: Uh-hmm. I just kind of kept the same name.

0:01:05.1

AE: And so are we technically in Tribbett [Mississippi], but close to Bourbon or--?

0:01:09.0

MA: No, we're in the town of Bourbon. Actually, one time there was a post office in the town. This is Bourbon, Mississippi. We're on the map. It's not--it's just a little dot but we're--we're on the map.

0:01:17.6

AE: And so do you have any idea why it's called the Bourbon Mall?

0:01:22.9

MA: Well it--yeah, because it's--it's kind of a joke in a way, but it's just a little small general store that served the--the community, everybody around and so it--it was a mall to the area.

[Laughs] It's kind of--the Bourbon Mall, so I don't know. It just--it got the name and just kind of stuck with it because it's just an old store that--that served everybody in this area.

0:01:43.4

AE: Are you from this area?

0:01:45.4

MA: I'm from Leland--seven, eight miles away.

0:01:48.6

AE: Okay, so you grew up in the Delta. Did you grow up eating hot tamales?

0:01:51.3

MA: Yes, uh-huh.

0:01:53.3

AE: Where did you used to eat hot tamales growing up?

0:01:55.3

MA: My dad used to buy them from a little black lady there in town and--and bring them home on the weekends sometimes--Etta's Hot Tamales. Etta is not around anymore; she was in Leland.

0:02:07.8

AE: Uh-hmm. What was it about tamales--if you could talk about your memories of eating them as a kid, what was it about them that you remember? Was there kind of a mystique to them or was it an every day kind of--?

0:02:18.9

MA: Well, no. No, I can--it's kind of funny that you say this and all but--but the old wives tale--and this is what I remember about eating tamales as a kid. I'm being honest here. You asked and I'm answering honestly. **[Laughs]** My dad used to bring them in from this little black lady who

had a house there in Leland and--and he used to laugh every time he brought them and said we're going to eat some more of the neighborhood cats tonight. And it's kind of a little folktale--is--is tamales are made out of your local cats. And--but that--believe it or not, that's what I remember as a kid.

0:02:48.9

AE: You're the third person today who has shared that same Delta myth.

0:02:51.1

MA: Really? [*Laughs*] Yeah, but I mean, that's what I remember as a kid. But my tamales are all beef, no cats. [*Laughs*]

0:02:57.7

AE: [*Laughs*] Well how is it that you got (a) interested in the restaurant business and (b) serving hot tamales?

0:03:04.6

MA: Well the restaurant business is something I've always wanted to do and--and I try to keep as many of the Southern local foods that--that--that are known in the South. Fried green

tomatoes--you know, you go to a lot of restaurants, but they look at you and think you're crazy if you ordered fried green tomatoes, but--fried pickles is another one--something different. Well in the South, if it's fried it's better, you know that. And so that's why we--we fry the tamale. And far as I know, we are the first ones to ever fry a hot tamale and sell it, you know, as far as--I've had several that copy me, but I don't think any--I don't know of anybody that's still doing it. And so we are the--the home of the fried hot tamale.

0:03:48.1

AE: Was it something that just happened on a whim in the kitchen one day? You just thought you'd try it?

0:03:52.4

MA: Yeah, actually it did. One of my cooks was in the--my brother-in-law came in one day and he mentioned something, "I wonder what one of those things would taste like fried." And one of my cooks said, "We'll find out." And he fried it, and the guy loved it, and he kept coming back every week and tell him to fry him some more--fry him some more. He would tell his friends about them, and he kept telling his friends about them. And then I got to the point where people would come in all the time asking for them. And I said, "We'll go--we'll go ahead and put them on the menu."

[A man walks in Mark's office, bringing him a steak.]

0:04:21.5

AE: I don't want to keep you from eating your supper.

0:04:26.5

MA: No, no, don't worry about it.

[Mark sends the man away, and says he'll get it later]

0:04:29.7

AE: So you wanted to open a restaurant, and you wanted to have Southern items on the menu and things that, I guess, you grew up with and remember. When you knew you wanted to serve hot tamales, is it a recipe that you developed on your own or you got from somewhere, or how did that work?

0:04:46.9

MA: Actually, I experimented--I talked to several people that didn't mind sharing a few things with me, and I started the process there. And then I've got a several Mexican people that work for me and--and they've added a twist to it. They showed me how they make them; it's completely different but I--I've kind of--I'm using some of their spices and some of their things

to where I--I think I've got it perfected, but you can always change it. You know, [in] cooking you're always changing. I mean--I mean I like to change it; I don't like the same thing over and over. But I feel like I got a pretty good product, anyway.

0:05:23.9

AE: Can you speak a little bit to how your Latino employees have--how--how what they make as a hot tamale is different from what is in the Delta?

0:05:33.2

MA: Well in Mexico they have these--these peppers they use that are--that--that's a little different than what your--your local people are going to make of them. They have that--they have their own seasonings that they use in Mexico that--you can buy them now in grocery stores. You have sections in grocery stores now that you go in and get a lot of these seasonings that you normally wouldn't find. And--and just--they have their--I don't want to go into too much detail, but they have a way of doing things, and also they--everything is hand-done in Mexico. They--they like to--everything is just hand-done, and they're quick, efficient, and--and roll them out.

0:06:15.7

AE: Do you have an idea if their tamales they make at home are pork tamales, because generally they--?

0:06:22.4

MA: Well they do make a pork tamale, but I--I don't make a pork tamale. I've tried theirs; they made them for me in the kitchen and--but I just--it's just not something that--people here are just used to beef tamales and I just--I just don't think that they would go over with--with my clientele just 'cause it's--everybody used to eating--you know, I like trying something different, and I have tried it but I just--it's so completely different, I just--I don't know.

0:06:48.8

AE: What do you--what do your employees think about the tamales you serve here, especially the fried ones?

0:06:54.8

MA: They like them, but I think--when we cook--when you cook something so much all the time you get tired of eating it and--and personally I--I'll eat some every now and then. I--I--but it's rarely--rare. But it's the same with the steaks. I--I used to eat steaks all the time, but now when I cook on the grill all night long, I--I'm ready to eat something different. [*Laughs*]

0:07:16.8

AE: Yeah.

0:07:17.2

MA: That's just part of cooking, I guess.

0:07:18.9

AE: Do y'all have here an extruder or a machine that you use, I guess, for the tamales?

0:07:24.8

MA: We have a little--let's see it's not a machine; it's a little press that the—oh, God.

0:07:32.9

AE: The Tamale King [brand of extruder]?

0:07:34.2

MA: It's not—yeah. It's the not the Tamale King. It's not that one, but we have a little press that we use.

0:07:39.9

AE: Okay. And do you make them every day or is there a schedule that you keep?

0:07:42.0

MA: No, yeah, we--we--I like to make them the beginning of--of each week and I'll take them, and I'll freeze them. And as I need them, I'll take them out and cook them. And that's one key to the fried hot tamales I'll tell you, is to keep the tamale from--from breaking apart, you've got to cook the tamale from a frozen state. [*Laughs*]

0:08:01.6

AE: Gotcha.

0:08:02.3

MA: [*Laughs*] Batter at a frozen state and batter--and then--and then I will fry it, which I use a beer batter--it's a batter for the tamales--and flour and fry them. And the beer batter consists of eggs, beer, flour--simple.

0:08:20.5

AE: Okay. It's a pretty batter, too.

0:08:22.2

MA: It is--it is a pretty golden brown batter.

0:08:24.2

AE: Well let me ask you this, because today, like I said, I probably am going to regret it later, but I had both the fried tamales and the regular tamales here and there's a difference in size. Is that--do you make a special batch?

0:08:38.4

MA: No, they're all the same size. They're all the same size. It's just they--the cooking process, the flour and the--the--the fried tamale is going to look bigger but it's 'cause of the--the process. You're putting another extra layer of flour and batter on it.

0:08:54.4

AE: They look fatter and shorter, too, a little bit.

0:08:57.9

MA: Well I--I can see that because the other ones are rolled up in corn shucks that are going--

[Interruption] Yeah, I'll be right there--right there.

0:09:09.8

AE: I can pause if you need to speak.

0:09:11.2

MA: That's okay, that's okay.

0:09:14.3

AE: And so do you think--how many tamales, if I may ask, do you think you serve during the course of the week? Is that a big part of your business, or is it something that's just kind of on the side?

0:09:23.3

MA: Steaks are my big thing. Steak is my biggest thing. I sell--

0:09:27.0

AE: Do many--

0:09:28.0

MA: --more of that and beer than anything else.

0:09:30.5

AE: [*Laughs*] Do many regulars come in for the hot tamales, or is that something that more people hear about and come--?

0:09:39.0

MA: I have--I don't know--I don't know of anybody coming just for that. I mean, I think the steaks are my big thing.

0:09:47.6

AE: Well everybody has been--and I know right about now we're talking about your fried tamales, so there will be a lot of pilgrimages for your fried tamales.

0:09:56.4

MA: Really? Well, good.

0:09:56.5

AE: I was going to ask you--oh, I was going to definitely ask you, when you were--you know, you were talking about growing up in the Delta and having hot tamales and getting them from this--this black woman in town, do you have any idea or hypothesis about how the hot tamales came to the Delta?

0:10:08.5

MA: No idea--no idea, not a clue.

0:10:13.6

AE: Has anybody ever maybe given you an idea?

0:10:15.8

MA: Uh-uh.

0:10:17.4

AE: There's a lot of folks who talk about--that the migrant workers who came in--in the [nineteen] to pick cotton during the cotton boom, and the Mexican laborers came in and--and brought their tamale recipes with them. But then there's been such a metamorphosis with there being, you know, mostly beef tamales now in the Delta, and primarily the black community hanging onto the tradition of making them, and so it's just a really interesting history. I'm trying to get a--a finger on the pulse of the history of tamales in the Delta.

0:10:45.2

MA: I gotcha--I gotcha. I've got a gentleman I need to pay. Just give me one second; I'll be right back.

[Recording stops for about five minute, while Mark pays a gentleman]

0:10:58.5

[Recording resumes]

AE: Okay, well now we're back and--

0:11:02.2

MA: Well, you can remember what I said. *[There were some things that we're talked about before recording resumed]*

0:11:03.8

AE: Well can I ask you again for the record if they sold tamales here at this store before?

0:11:10.4

MA: To my knowledge a tamale was never sold at the Bourbon Mall. Now not saying it wasn't; to my knowledge, I never saw a tamale sold here.

0:11:20.2

AE: Okay, and so we were just--we left off talking about the limousine business [Mark has a limousine service incorporated into the Bourbon Mall business]. So would you mind just picking up there and talking about how that started?

0:11:29.7

MA: Well, okay. I bought a limousine. I had people comment, "Mark, we'd love to come out there but you so far out." And so I bought one to play with to see if it would help my business, and I had people that called from all over that wanted it for birthday parties or whatever. They'd get groups together and come out here, and I saw that it kind of sparked my business a little bit. And I had someone approach me that wanted to go in the limousine business and said, "Mark-- Mark, you want to go in with me? We'll do it right and buy some nice cars," and that's what

we've done. We started off with one; now we have eight limos and, as far as I know--I might be wrong on this, too, but I think we're--we might be the largest limousine company in the state of Mississippi. If not, we're right there close by with eight limos in our fleet.

0:12:21.1

AE: And you'll go--

0:12:21.3

MA: In the big town of Bourbon. [*Laughs*]

0:12:22.3

AE: [*Laughs*] You'll go pretty much anywhere?

0:12:23.5

MA: We'll go anywhere; it doesn't matter. I've carried people to Dallas, Texas. I've gone all over.

0:12:32.3

AE: Now when you carry somebody to or from Dallas is that--how does that work? Is there a roof over their head involved in any way, or is just full-time driving them to here to the Bourbon Mall--they have a party or what?

0:12:43.8

MA: Well, no, I didn't go to Dallas to bring somebody just to Bourbon Mall. I had someone call me out here and said, "Mark, I need to get to Dallas tonight. Can you take me? And I just took somebody out there. We--to cash flow these limousines, we're not just bringing people just here, even though I've got--tomorrow night I've got five limo runs tomorrow night, and four of them are coming to the Bourbon Mall. So it is a lot of our business, but it's not all of our business. If I got a car sitting still and somebody needs it for something, you know, come use it--to help pay for it. And it--it's really worked out good for me because I--I've been able to use it--something different that nobody else has offered in this area. It's something that's unique.

0:13:27.2

AE: Uh-hmm. Would you mind briefly just talking again about the price points of the wine [you stock] and how you wanted to offer a four hundred dollar bottle of wine [on the wine list]?

0:13:32.2

MA: Well I want people from all walks of life to come in here and enjoy the place, but I said it is nice to have something like that for people that--that--that want to spend the money that want the best. I want to be able to have it for them, you know. All the way down to somebody who wants a bottle of Yellow Tail [Australian wine].

0:13:47.6

AE: [*Laughs*] It takes all kinds.

0:13:50.6

MA: Yeah, exactly.

0:13:50.4

AE: Well growing up in Leland, did you grow up eating at Doe's [Eat Place in Greenville, Mississippi]?

0:13:54.2

MA: No, I didn't. Mainly because I had three brothers, and I don't know just--we were just a real conservative family. We just--parents never really went out much to eat. We cooked a lot--my mother cooked at home all the time.

0:14:10.0

AE: Uh-hmm. Did your mother ever make tamales by chance?

0:14:13.4

MA: No, she cooked a lot of foods, but she didn't make tamales.

0:14:16.4

AE: Yeah. Do you have an idea if your parents had tamales growing up or if they--if they remember eating them?

0:14:21.3

MA: Well I know my dad has eaten a bunch of Etta's hot tamales. That was kind of a tradition for years, just going there and getting them. Outside of that, I never really heard him talk about it.

0:14:32.1

AE: Can you describe what Etta's were like?

0:14:33.9

MA: They were good, but it's--it's--like I said, I was a little kid when I was eating them, but I just remember them being spicy. And I remember going to this old house, and she would slide open a window in the house and serve you out of a little window they'd cut in the wall. **[Laughs]** So it was kind of different. I can't knock her place; look--look at the Bourbon Mall, a tin building out in the middle of a cotton field.

0:15:00.9

AE: Were her tamales wrapped in shucks or parchment paper?

0:15:03.7

MA: They were--they were [in shucks].

0:15:05.2

AE: Is that something important to you to--when you had them here to keep making them in shucks and keep that kind of--?

0:15:11.8

MA: Yeah, I like it because it just--to me it just goes with the Delta. I don't know, just sitting out in the middle of a cornfield, you might as well have the corn shucks to wrap around your tamales.

0:15:20.9

AE: Would you mind saying where you get your corn shucks? Do you have a supplier?

0:15:26.3

MA: I'd like to pass on that question.

0:15:27.6

AE: Okay, not a problem.

0:15:27.1

MA: You can buy them in the grocery store; they have them at Kroger. I'll leave them at that.

[Laughs]

0:15:32.2

AE: Good enough. [*Laughs*]

0:15:33.3

MA: You can buy them in grocery stores.

0:15:35.3

AE: Good enough. Well are there other places in the Delta--in or around Leland or Greenville or Bourbon that sell tamales that you like to eat or sample?

0:15:44.6

MA: To be honest with you, I don't go out and buy tamales anymore. If I want some, I just get them from here and take them home and--and cook them. I--I can't remember, since I've had this place, going out to somewhere else and--and buying tamales. Other than I have tried out competitors' tamales when I've gone out to eat before, and--and I put ours up against everybody's.

0:16:10.7

AE: How would you say yours differ from everybody else's?

0:16:14.4

MA: Well--how they're different? I don't try to be different; I just try to be consistent. I want to consistently cook them the same way where they taste the same every time. You go some places and they might not taste the same every time. So I try to strive at having a--a tamale consistently cooked the same way every time.

0:16:36.7

AE: And when people eat them, a lot of people eat them with crackers and hot sauce and all that. Have you seen anything unusual that people do with the hot tamales?

0:16:43.5

MA: I'll tell you what my wife likes to do.

0:16:44.5

AE: Okay.

0:16:45.6

MA: And I--and it is pretty good. She'll take the tamales out of the shucks, about a half a dozen tamales out of the shucks, put them on a plate, take some cheese, usually like a blend, like Monterey Jack and Cheddar blend, sprinkle cheese and puts it all over top of it, and she'll take-- she'll put it in the microwave and melt the cheese on it and all, and then she'll take sour cream and dump it on top of it and--and it is good. It's great.

0:17:14.5

AE: That's the first I've heard the sour cream addition. I like it.

0:17:15.7

MA: Yeah, the sour cream is good. The sour cream is good--it's good. It is--you try--ought to try it. It's good.

0:17:22.0

AE: All right. Well is there something that you want to leave with the people about the Mississippi Delta hot tamales, a tradition or what you're doing here or what you plan to leave as your mark?

0:17:33.5

MA: I just want to--you know, I'm happy to--to say that we're--as far as I know we're the home of the fried hot tamale and no one else--I mean it originated right here in Bourbon, Mississippi. I mean that's--I think that's my mark on the tamale world is that we're the home of the fried hot tamale. And that's--I mean, I'm just--I'm happy to say that we have accomplished that. **[Laughs]**

0:17:57.6

AE: Well that's a mark. Is that something you advertise at all or--?

0:18:00.6

MA: I have before, yeah. I have before. I have before, but like I said, it seems like the majority of people that come here aren't coming just 'cause of my tamales. I mean, I have people that say Mark, you know--I have people that come out here and drive out to get two dozen fried tamales to go. I just--I don't think that that's why everybody comes--just for the tamales.

0:18:23.0

AE: Do you have any big dreams of expanding and opening another location somewhere?

0:18:26.7

MA: I have other people that have approached me about opening something up like this in other places, and I would love to maybe franchise the place. But as far as me going somewhere else and trying to run this place and another place, no. Let them have the headaches and hassles of--of running another place, because it's--it's a full-time job. *[Laughs]*

0:18:46.1

AE: That's the truth.

0:18:47.7

MA: It never ends.

0:18:48.8

AE: And do you have kids, did you say earlier?

0:18:50.1

MA: I have three [kids] under two [years old].

0:18:52.6

AE: Oh, man.

0:18:53.2

MA: Oh, yes. [*Laughs*] I've got twins that are two and a little boy that's ten-months old.

0:18:59.4

AE: O, you're busy. Well I was going to ask if they like hot tamales, but I guess they're a little too young.

0:19:02.5

MA: Yeah, they're a little too young for that. They're a little too young for that.

0:19:04.9

AE: Would you hope that they would carry on your restaurant tradition here and the tamale making?

0:19:10.1

MA: Yeah, I definitely want--I'm going to bring them up working some in the--in the restaurant business because I believe that it's important to show your kids a work ethic. That's--we had--we had to work as kids, and I think it's important that they have to, so I'm looking forward to them being big enough to--to stuff that--that dishwasher. *[Laughs]*

0:19:29.5

AE: Yeah, yeah, three extra employees. *[Laughs]* [Mark shows me a picture of his twin daughters] Oh, they are precious.

0:19:33.9

MA: Little pumpkins.

0:19:35.8

AE: Oh, cute. Well all right--well Mark, I appreciate it.

0:19:41.0

MA: Yeah, thank you for your time.

0:19:41.4

AE: Thanks for sitting down with me.

0:19:42.9

MA: Hey no problem--no problem; I hope you come back to see us.

0:19:42.9

AE: And I enjoyed the tamales. I sure will.

0:19:45.3

MA: Come back and see us.

0:19:53.9

[End Mark Azlin.mp3]