

Bruce Ucan
The Mayan Café—Louisville, KY

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Interviewer: Gustavo Arellano

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[00:00:00]

Gustavo Arellano: My name is Gustavo Arellano and I'm doing this oral history of Mexican restaurants for the Southern Foodways alliance. We're in Louisville, Kentucky today at Mayan Cafe and the date is Monday, February 9, 2015.

Can you say your name and occupation?

[00:00:17]

Bruce Ucan: Sure my name is ah Herberto H-E-R-B-E-R-T-O Ucan U-C-A-N. I'm chef/co-owner of the Mayan Cafe.

[00:00:26]

GA: And what's your birth date?

[00:00:29]

BU: March 1, '68.

[00:00:32]

GA: (*Laughs*) March 1, '68. Can you tell us a little bit about where you were born especially for those people who don't know the Yucatan, especially how it's different to the rest of Mexico?

[00:00:44]

BU: It's, uh, well, I live in the central part of the peninsula of the Yucatan, which is called Kantunil. Um, it's between Chichen Itza and Merida. If any tourist go—been there, they are familiar with the you know, map and stuff. But the—very small town. You know

[00:01:06]

GA: What was the name of the village where you where from?

[00:01:09]

BU: Oh, Sorry it's called Kantunil. It's K-A-N-T-U-N-I-L, Yucatan which is close to you know

Quintana Roo (*laughing*) everybody flies to the tourism industry.

[00:01:22]

GA: Describe your childhood in Yucatan I've read in interviews that you especially credit the cooking of your mom's and or your *tías* [aunts]. Can you describe those first memories you have of food in your household?

[00:01:36]

BU: Sure. You know, it's interesting. Sometimes I think about how everything started. I think everything, I think, started with memories, or memories hit my head and like I start thinking like “I remember this before.” And you know it goes to my childhood like when I was a kid. I remember my mom, I guess memories of them getting up so early in the morning, you know, you can hear the chickens and the roosters in the morning. My mom woke up in the morning, and for some reason my dad, I guess he woke up early on the weekends, which I don't know why, I guess. He was never um, uh a farmer. He did some of the farming but I think he was more like a city worker, you know? He went once a week to the next big city or to the coast like Cozumel or Cancun.

Anyways my memories of food, it starts like very early age of smells of chilies, you know, smells of tomatoes, watermelon, you know, just like and that starts like um— so, you know. I watched my parents—I mean not my parents, but my mom cook most of the meals. It was amazing; she was an amazing woman. I don't know, we were like 11 kids, actually, I mean twelve—ten survived, two of them passed away, unfortunately, when they were little. But, um, I remember my mom, my sisters cooking and, and, and all doing the stuff and doing the work daily. That's full time for them. And I remember myself playing around, but most of the time, you know, there was so much stuff going on in the village. And, of course, I was a kid playing around and, and other festivities during seasons—you know, like the January, there's all kinds of bullfights and Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe [Feast Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe], the Guadalupe festivities and other stuff. So, you know, I was, um, familiar

with a lot of the festivities and food was always, always was—it was part of the culture and tradition.

[00:03:39]

GA: Can you describe how Yucateco cuisine is different from the rest of Mexican cuisine? Because it's a very particular type of food that you can't find anywhere in Mexico, so can you describe like some of the special ingredients some of the *platillos tipicos* [traditional plates]?

[00:03:54]

BU: I think one of the things the difference between the North and the South, which is the Yucatán or one of the states, it's like the way we make our own spices. You know, we burn the chiles, you know; we burn to crisp when it becomes totally black. And they, they, they, they, they kind of like mix it with some kind of masa dough And they make it like a paste and as well as achiote, which is a seed of a tree and they do the same thing; they roast it and they grind it and they—it becomes a paste and all kinds of black and white peppers, same way—they grind it, and they make paste out of that. It becomes part of the spice we used traditionally. And marinating and roasting the whole pig on the ground and comparing on the south—the North, I mean. It's a little different; they use more like, um ,roots like maguey. Maguey, which is like, how do you call this, um. The cactus? Cactus family?

[00:05:04]

GA: It's the agave.

[00:05:06]

BU: The agave, I'm sorry. Totally different, but we live in a more, more tropical environment, and we use a lot of citrus, citric fruits—oranges, limes, coconuts. They use a lot of—they don't use a lot of coconuts to cook with, but they use a lot to, to drink with. But most of the other oranges, they use onions. And the interesting part of the Yucatán: if you water your plants and you water your— fruits, you can actually have fruits all year round, because it's all, it's hot always. I mean, even December, January it's about 67° [Celsius], so it's I think that's the difference in the way we use a lot of the spices and the—what we can get there all year round, I think that's got to do a lot with the difference between

the North and South.

[00:05:55]

GA: Can you describe the flavor of achiote?

[00:05:56]

BU: Annato is another name for achiote. It's— you know, annato doesn't have a whole lot of flavor. It's like comparing annato with, um, let's see with um—what can I say— another spice that doesn't have a flavor—white, like, um pepper, For example. If you mix something with the pepper, it becomes stronger. So kind of like that you know? Or what's it called, the other spice that's yellow—it's not—it's—

[00:06:28]

Anne Shadle, Ucan's business partner and Mayan Café general manager: (Off-mic) Turmeric.

[00:06:30]

BU: Turmeric! Turmeric's the same way. It doesn't have a spicy; it has a smell, but none of the flavor. But if you mix something with a lot of citric, a little herb, it become so intense. Achiote the same way. You know, it's kind of like kind of like—we use it— to color foods, you know, like chorizo, you know. When we ground chorizo, when we make soups we use achiote for color. Not necess—not a whole lot for flavor but— as I said before, if we use *naranja agria*—which is sour orange, which is hard to get here in the States—it becomes totally, totally different it becomes a different spice and flavor if you can get— and that's how the differences, you know. And—but achiote is used like extensive—like *extensively*—everywhere in the, the area. Yeah, with other stuff, you know, they use it for special occasions, too.

[00:07:23]

GA: What was your mom and your dad's name?

[00:07:26]

My mom—Manuela. Manuela de Jesus. And my dad Florencio Ucan.

[00:07:33]

GA: What was some of the favorite dishes that your mom would make or your *tías* [aunts]. Like, name a couple of them.

[00:07:39]

BU: I think one of the traditional dishes that they make is cochinita pibil, which is oven-roasted pork, which is (*laughing*), you know it's— they like to do it, but I think they— it's a lot of work, and I think that's one of the favorites for everybody, you know. So they do roasting deer meat when it's available. You know, obviously, they're not there anymore, you know; they're all gone (*laughing*). But we also do— my mom likes to make tamales a lot with banana leaves; that's one of the things she likes to do. Also, she likes to do—what else does she like to do? Yeah, I think that's the favorite That she does. My dad loves to eat it, of course. The same thing. (*laughs*)

[00:08:24]

GA: When you were in Mexico did you ever have any aspirations of being a cook or a chef when you were a *chico* [kid]?

[00:08:30]

BU: Never. *Never*. I, I never thought I would have in my, my whole life I never thought about it. I got images of big cities—being in, living in places—but as far as food goes, no. You know, I work through the Quintana Roo area, Mayan Riviera, along the coast for many years. You know different countries are different you know? You do you do what whatever people have to do to make a living and that's mostly—I don't think people really think about—as workers as we are, you know. Most of the Mayans they, they're not well-educated, you know. Unfortunately that's the way it is, you know. I'm sure it's got to be a reason why—money, other stuff. And they just work, so I think it just becomes part of the life. I don't think—I don't think honestly any of them think about, “Oh, I'm going to be a doctor, I'm going to be somebody.” I don't think they do that. It is becomes one of those—I don't know if it's lucky, or you

know just that's how it is, you know.

[00:09:31]

GA: You said you worked in Quintana Roo, and then along some of the resort areas. What were you do— where were some of your first jobs when you left your village?

[00:09:40]

BU: My first job, actually believe it or not, was on the coast of Playa de Carmen. My dad took me, then when I was twelve years old. And I (*coughs*) Sorry. And I was just going to help him out to work on the— open the open the new roads on jungle areas, you know, to connect to other cities or villages. But very short time. My first job working by myself not being with my dad or watching me was in Akumal. A-K-U-M-L. Which is along the coast of the Mayan Riviera. We just started sweeping the beaches with, you know, *sargasso* they call it like, uh just like a—what's it called that comes from the ocean? Seaweed. Yeah, seaweed. And then became, like a dishwasher—that was interesting. Worked for some French guys along the coast. Actually, I learned a lot from the French people. I worked for them for two years. And then I worked for another Mayan chef—you know, on and on with different chefs came along from Europe and learned some stuff there. So it became interesting—I liked the fusion of mixing things. I thought that was extraordinary, like, “Wow, how can you do that?”

But my first experience like –I can tell that was funny. One of those things like, um, somebody asked me right before I started cooking. “Can you make a club sandwich?” And I said, “What is that?” “Well you actually take this ham and bacon and tomato and lettuce and, you know, you just put it together, and you know, whatever—put turkey in it, maybe sometimes.” And so I said, “Okay.” So my confusion was which was one first—does the tomato go, does the ham go on top of the cheese, or vice versa? I was so traumatized by that, you know (*laughs*).

But and then, I look back like, “Wow, this is interesting,” how ignorant I was, but you know it's just

part of the learning process, you know. But that was my first jobs, you know, and it was interesting for me, yeah? And then after that, I just kept learning other things—fusion. I learned to do pasta from scratch. I thought that was the best thing I've ever seen—doing different sauces, and you can mix that. But you know what's interesting? I never thought about applying that to—telling my mom, “Hey mom, why don't you do that? You know, I just never thought about it you know, ever.

[00:11:54]

GA: What interested you about the kitchen? You're working as a dishwasher you're working in these resorts, so at what point did you think, “Hmm, that's something I want to learn, that's something I want to play with.” You mentioned French chefs—like what was it about them that gave you that inspiration?

[00:12:08]

BU: I think being in charge of watching, of overseeing like a kitchen, you know? I thought, “How do those guys go to sleep every day and not worry about this responsibility?” You know, like it was a lot of pressure and I thought it was impossible; I would never be able to that because how they know—they feel so secure about telling people, “You do this, do that” and things are done, you know. It kind of just struck me like, “Wow, this is really cool,” you know? Maybe one day, I can do that, but I thought that was *way* along the line, you know. But I was stuck with that in my—that kind of stuck in my mind.

[00:12:39]

GA: What was—did you have, did you run your own restaurant at any point when you were in Yucatán?

[00:12:44]

BU: Never. Never. I wish I could (*laughs*).

[00:12:47]

GA: What was the, you would say, the highest position in the food world that you achieved in the

Yucatán?

[00:12:54]

BU: I think it was the—it's called First Class cook. It's like the—apparently there's a—I never knew after years, I find out that there is like ABC. You know, like different kinds of levels of cooks. You know, so C was the okay, B, and A was the number-one, like “Wow!” and that—I guess next thing would be like sous chef, or chef de cuisine, and then chef. Yeah, I think that's highest level, but I was pretty good—honestly I was I—was very—I don't know— how can I say— interesting to learn and I learned fast and I was accurate that things are good and people liked it, you know. I worked very hard (*laughs*).

[00:13:37]

GA: When you were working at these resorts, did you ever cook Yucateco-style food? Or was it mostly European and American style food for the tourists?

[00:13:45]

The fusion of that. I think they did both. They did mostly—Mexican and they did their fusion of Mayan with European artists because most of the people that came, they came here. They were from the US or Europe, you know, so they wanted something different, you know, that they got. That's what I thought, too. But honestly, now that I see things, now I see that maybe they wish they'd probably eaten more traditional foods than what they got.

[00:14:14]

GA: Do you—you know historically in Mexico, indigenous cuisine is always looked down upon. You know, “The *indios* [Indians]”, like, ashamed. Do you think those resorts had the same perspective on Yucateco food or, on Mayan food?

[00:14:28]

BU: Totally no. I think they're dying to—I think, but back then, it's probably as today. I'm sure they're dying to eat more originality than traditional. They're more like the flavors. But I see it now. Also, I

don't think they would eat something like so traditional—they probably not like it. So that's one of the struggles—not struggles, the things we do at the restaurant, you know, trying to combine everything so traditional and put— make it in a way where people will kind of like, “Wow, this is really good,” so, you know?

[00:14:59]

GA: When—how old were you when you were moving up and down the Mayan Riviera?

[00:15:03]

BU: Fourteen through maybe eighteen, twenty, because, you know, I moved here—I was twenty years old when I moved to the States.

[00:15:15]

GA: What made you want to move to the United States?

[00:15:18]

BU: Interesting, interesting question (*laughs*). I never knew I wanted to come. I met somebody from Kentucky, believe it or not, Louisville, Kentucky. And, you know, an American woman and we got to know each other and one day, you know, natural things happen and [she] asked me, “Do you want to come to the U.S.?” and I was—“What is that?” I thought U.S. was in Mexico somewhere (*laughs*). And I said, “Why not?” I'm always wanting to try something different. I was the kid, I wanting to do something or go somewhere place. If I could go anywhere, I'd probably, but obviously, the ability and the resources, it was—it was impossible.

But sure I did. I took the chance. Sure, I told my mom I was going. She said, “No, don't go. You're not coming back.” I said, “Don't worry: I'll be back.” So I went, I came. And here I am: 28—28 years later, still in the U.S. Um, yeah, so that's how I came, I came to Kentucky (*laughs*).

[00:16:12]

GA: How did you meet this woman?

[00:16:15]

BU: She was an artist. I guess she graduated from the University of Louisville in art, art, and art and Spanish degree. I guess she was touring, and she liked the country. A lot of the—back then, in the seventies, they went and they fell in love with the culture and being an artist, and I don't know what else, maybe. And they, they just loved it and they stayed there. You know, and they just lived it and learned the language that we speak, which is Spanish. And, um, just met her there, and you know, the history.

[00:16:49]

GA: So what year did you come to Kentucky?

[00:16:51]

BU: 1987. March of 1987. Actually, March 7 to be exact. After my birthday.

[00:16:59]

GA: Had you ever heard of Kentucky before?

[00:17:02]

BU: She told me a few things about, uh, what Kentucky was. The Kentucky Derby, of course. Kentucky Fried Chicken, all the stuff—kind of like the names you know people talk about but, uh, that's all I know. And horses. You know, but I never, never kind of had an idea—you know, the climate, when it snows. You know, you can't eat the ice, you know—it snows (*laughs*)—especially when it's yellow. (*laughs*)

[00:17:33]

GA: When, um, when you came here, what was going to be your job, or what was your first job here in Louisville?

[00:17:39]

BU: When I came here, I did not know—I did not want to work, honestly. I wanted to just take a little bit of break and—I wish immigration would've not give my, my, my work permit, you know. I was

hoping to not work a few months. But I had to, you know. I had a visa. It's called a marriage visa, or a fiancée visa at the time. Which I had to get married in three months. So we did, we get married and, it's, you know, we living together, so we got married and I start working in construction. And—never liked construction, ever. Never liked it. I hated—I don't know, it's just boring to me. It's not challenging, and it's slow-paced. You know, and I applied in some other restaurants, like Captain's Quarters, which is another—which is another in Louisville by the river, and I'm sure you probably one you're familiar wit. But—and then worked at the Hyatt—Hyatt Regency. I worked at Master—Masterson's Restaurant. Um—what else? Some other places around here in—but anyways, my first job was Captain's Quarters, I'm sorry. And I was applying, they called me right away—eh, like the next day. And say, “Hey, do you speak Spanish”—ah, English? I said, “I can read a little.” So I remember the—I went over there for my first interview, and they say, “Can you read this?” “Yeah, sure.” And they throw me in, on, right on the line and say, “Do your thing.”

And like, wow this is cr—and, this is 19—March, uh, end of fall of '87, you know, right after I get there, I got there. No, no, it's actually, it was April, May somewhere. And my goodness: I got my, my butt, uh, kicked because it was a different, different world. I mean, it was actually different. Much different from Mexico. I come here and all this stuff happening here at the same time. But it was—I liked it. I liked it a lot. And so ever since, I started cooking and I realized that I think I had a chance to do something else, you know, like maybe, but people also respect chefs in the States, you know. Mexico, it's a little different, you know. There's no, uh, proud of being a chef there, I think.

[00:19:41]

GA: When you came to Louisville, were there lot of Mexicans here at the time?

[00:19:45]

BU: Not at all. I mean, I remember I, uh, walking down the street and I saw somebody and I run and say, “Where you from?” And they tell me, “I'm from, uh, L.A. Or Mexico or Latino. You know, I don't

know, South America. And I would love to talk to them. (*mimicking gibberish*). We would talk a lot, and uh, you know, but yeah, in 1987 through nineties, no—no Latinos at all. I think they were probably in—LA, LA maybe, where they can get—easy, because we are in the central of the U.S. Pretty much, and, yeah, it was too far for the Latinos to get here, probably. And no jobs—I don't know. I don't know. It's interesting.

[00:20:24]

GA: What do you remember about Mexican restaurants when you first came to Kentucky?

[00:20:28]

BU: —I couldn't—you know, I never remember seeing a Mexican restaurant like a taquería. I remember seeing, uh, a chain. I think Tumbleweed was one of the Mexican restaurants I remember, and Chichi's—they were here. They were like the main, main Mexican restaurants in Louisville or, I don't know, the Kentucky area. Uh, but yeah, there was a difference. I was shocked when I went in the first time and ate their food. Wow, this is different—tastes good, though. (*laughs*). But it was different. Lots of cheese, which I've never seen so much cheese in my life when I came (*laughs*). But it was good—yeah.

[00:21:09]

GA: At what point—you're working at all these restaurants, on the line, doing different things. At what point do you think to yourself, “I want to open my own restaurant”?

[00:21:18]

BU: —I think it was in the early, like mid-nineties, when I realized, “Ah this is—I think that's when they, also here in the U.S., they started this, kind of like the new genera—I don't think new generation, the, uh— like the food industry took a different course, you know, like, uh, chefs were more respected here. They were more famous, they were more, like, creative. They were more, like, challenging. And I realized that. I was like, “You know what? I can make a living out of this and maybe do something and be some, somebody and be someone respected. And, and uh, but I did remember thinking that I was

wanting to have my, my, my restaurant. But I knew that I had to start somewhere, something small. So we start doing catering with my ex-wife, you know. She helped me to start the, the, uh company, small. But, uh, it took almost 10 years until we opened the first, first one.

[00:22:16]

GA: When you were doing catering, what were some of the foods that you were offering, and who were you catering for?

[00:22:23]

BU: I think the clientele was very limited here. Uh, uh, I feel like it was the right time to start it, or maybe not, but the people were starting to click, you know, around the central part of the U.S. Um, people that has traveled to, traveled all over the world, I think they understood my food but I wasn't exposed publicly to a lot, so it was very hard to get their, their attention, and, and, and do something. But most of the things that we cooked was kind of like—actually you ask me was like, some of the, some of the dish that we had to do was more like, uh, American, they call it—we call it like—trace of cheese. And, you know, people were kind of—I don't know if they were afraid. But some were not afraid. We, we used cochinita pibil, we need pollo asado, we need some beans, we need salbutes, these homemade tortillas. Um, so different kinds of—a little bit of a little, of whatever I was from, the Yucatán, you know. But, but they loved it. Once they ate it, they were like, “Wow!” It's just trying to get them to eat it—that was the challenge.

[00:23:23]

GA: Yeah, I think it was very brave of you to try to offer this cuisine that a lot of people in the United States were not familiar with. Why was it import—most of the restaurants that I've seen in Kentucky, they're very Americanized. Why was important for you to offer Yucateco food from there very beginning?

[00:23:42]

BU: I think the first time that I came—as I said before, and I went to Chichi's and Tumbleweed places,

I think I felt insulted a little bit because, I said, “This is not really Mexican food.” But my ex-wife, I remember, saying “This is how, this is how the country is, you know? It's about money, making money.” Industries and chains and this is what it is, you know? And, like, I was, “No, this is not right. I need to do something right.” So I was starting—my mind's thinking like, I wanted to express myself like, you know, I want to show you how to do it the right—what I thought it was the right thing, you know. Not cheeses; how you roast meats, how to do things. You know, you eat naturally. It's just too much extra things. And—I think that was my intentions at the beginning and the other thing when I came here. I think, trying to, um, be different than just other restaurants. And it's working so far. Yeah, totally.

[00:24:40]

GA: One of—you mentioned salbutes as being one of those first dishes that you offered. Can you describe what a salbute is?

[00:24:47]

BU: Salbute is a, it's a handmade—corn with a—tortilla made with masa dough from scratch. We basically, instead of making on, put it on a flattop grill to make tortillas, we flash-fry it on a pan. And they'll kind of puff up a little bit and you flip it both ways, and that's it—done. It's very soft, kind of like a pita, mini-pita bread. And then we stuff it with a—salbute means in Mayan, “salbut.” It means “stuffed tortilla.” And then we stuff it with a choice of—but you don't really stuff it, you put it on top, you know. And you kind of like press it down so it kinda looks like stuffed. Um, we, uh, traditionally we do it like cochinita pibil. Once again, we use all kinds of uh, seafood, wild game meats, sometimes: wild boar, deer meet, turkeys, whatever we can get—rabbits—back home. It's, you know, very—I don't know how to describe it. And it's very, very—street food. You know, very, very traditionally you just like, you don't use those in fancy restaurants, you know, so—

[00:25:59]

GA: Can you describe one of the first times at—maybe a catering experience where you had this

Yucateco cuisine and people didn't know what it was and you had, you had to convince them to eat it?

[00:26:10]

BU: —It's funny you say that. I remember working at—actually, I didn't tell you that I have a little truck before the—after the catering, I had a mini—they call it roach, “roach vans.” Which is like a food truck. And I was frying salbutes inside this truck and I was at the—actually, Derby Festival, one of the parades that they do for Derby festivities. And I was trying to make a dish and put it on the window of the truck. And I would tell people “Please come and try this.” But people were *afraid*, you know, like they don't know what it was. Different, like you know, “Wow, what is this?” you know. They're not *used* to that. And they said, “Why don't you put a lot of cheese on it? Why don't you do this?” And [I said] “No, this is how it is” you know. Just, we, you fry the tortilla, you stuff it with a—with meat, and you shave cabbage, and lots of lime, and hot sauce. And that was tough to convince them.

And some—I remember not doing *well* in the truck, you know. It was just—it was—nobody knew me, who I was, you know. It was a very, very tough time for me. You know. I went through a lot other places that tried to open, to try and um, people would not liked it. I went to—in Indiana, some village I went in Indiana, I went to one time on the weekends to try. People didn't like it—it was different. I *guess*, I just had to open the restaurant and then, right now, I don't have to convince them, they (laughs), you know they come. And they love it. I think it's one of the most popular dishes that we have at the restaurant.

[00:27:41]

GA: Yeah, I have to say it took a lot of bravery in the mid-nineties to be offering Yucateco cuisine in Kentucky and Indiana. And again: why did you stick with that when you could have easily gone, “Let's put cheese; let's put ground beef. Let's put even more cheese and sour cream.” Why did you stick with your food?

[00:28:02]

BU: I don't if that—it was stupidity or just me being *necio, terco*, stubborn—this is how it is. And that's it. I wouldn't have changed, you know. It's like when I opened the first time here in the—this area in '97 and, unfortunately I end up closing my first one, and it's a big location. It was so big, and we came back it was—I started here, at this location, 820—813 Market, and we went to 624, and then we came back again in this place. So— and I did not want to move in the East End, you know. People say, “You should in the East End! You should do big business in the East End.” But I really thought that this neighborhood, it's coming—it was coming along. I felt really—I feel really, you know, *grounded*, in this area. So we stay, even though the Westside Mission was across. And—one of those things for me. When I do—sometimes, I make—the right decisions, and sometimes I don't. And I'm not perfect. But so far, it's working.

[00:28:58]

GA: Can you describe this neighborhood? You know, when you first moved in, did you have these types of more, you know, cooler businesses than you did back then? 'Cause from what little I know of Louisville, I guess this area has seen a reformation in the past couple of years.

[00:29:13]

BU: When we moved here in 1980—'97, sorry. 1997—there were very little, um, places to eat in East Market. I think back then it was more like—shelter house across the street. It was a little rundown neighborhood. There was—there were women's shelter, the family shelter, and the women's shelter. And all the houses that were in—there were, I don't know, I just felt—I felt really good here. I don't know why—I can't explain to you. But—kind of like the vibration of the neighborhood, it felt good. And honestly, when—I never thought for a minute like it was a mistake me opening here, you know. Even the first day, I remember a lady (*laughs*) a lady [with] a Mercedes Benz park in the front of the restaurant and calling from it—her car—asking if it was open. Also, if it was okay to walk to the restaurant. We say “Sure, we're open. No problem.” So ever we knew that, you know, that this is the right place. And over the years, this neighborhood has becoming so popular right now that it's really

difficult to go to get proper—uh, more business. Not more businesses, but um—place for rent. You know, and it's more restaurants now in this area. More trendy. Kind of like a trendy area now after two, after fifteen, sixteen years, maybe? Yeah. I mean, we came a long way being here—yeah.

[00:30:38]

GA: Why do you think your restaurant has had as much success? Because you yourself said in those first early years it was really difficult for you to get business with your Yucateco food. Where do you—where do you think was the turning point where you could say now, “Aha: I finally—*ya tengo éxito* [I'm finally popular]. I finally got it.”

[00:30:54]

BU: Mm-hmm. I mean, what year? I'm sorry; that's the question again?

[00:30:57]

GA: Like, yeah, around what time—how many years into your business or into you cooking your food did you finally feel comfortable and say, “Okay, I'm going to make it. Instead of me having to struggle and not, you know, realize when people are going to like my food, I finally made it”?

[00:31:11]

BU: Let me clarify something. I think I didn't say any of this. When we were *trying* to open the restaurant, before the restaurant, it was difficult. The day we opened the restaurant, the day we opened the first time, I don't know what happened—something clicked. It was instant success. I remember the door—we were ready to open that day, and I'm thinking, “I've got fifteen-hundred dollars in my bank account; even if we don't make it for a week, we are a business in a week or two.” But totally—I was—something happened, and people start coming—the first day, that weekend. We were *so* busy—I'm telling you, even today, we're so busy—that we closed after six months for vacation. Because we didn't know what happened to us. We—one day, we woke up, and we had so much business, we couldn't handle. So all my employees—they were tired, everybody. We closed and we went for a vacation for a month. I went home for a month. And then we came back—we're thinking—oh, people were saying,

telling me, “You were crazy to close for a, for a month. Nobody's gonna come back to your place.”

Guess what? We came back, we opened. *Again*, we, we were crucified. It was insane—we ran out of food almost every *day*. And then—so that's the reason why—what I saw. And also I wasn't—I didn't know anything about business. Like I said, if something hit us, we didn't know what to do. So we ended up moving to a bigger location, thinking, “Hey, you know, you should move. You're successful!”

But—not necessarily, you know? I'm getting wiser now, and decide that to think between lines—and realize how is the right decision and how we want to go with the vision of the restaurant. So, yeah today it's totally vision. But, yeah, we did, we did have a good experience opening. Once that happened, ever since. It was great, it was great.

[00:33:16]

GA: Describe your vision for Mayan Cafe. What are the principles you have? What do you want eaters to get from your food?

[00:33:25]

BU: I don't know if I was talking earlier about memories of food and how I remember smelling of chiles and the flavors that I could not get here. I think when I moved from here [the restaurant] the first time to 624 [Market] and then came back again to 207 on this location, I think there was something happened there. I don't know—like I said, you know, I think the more you do something, the more you run your business, you learn other things that you didn't—I didn't know. And you become like, what is the purpose of continuing doing this? It's about making money, it's about being famous, it's about doing what? And I remember these memories like, you know? I think the purpose of keep doing this is because people like the food. They enjoy the food. It's unique food. And also we need to translate it—like, it's going to be sustainable in the long run. And my partner—Anne Shadle, she's my sister-in-law, I'm married to her sister. And she's the one who—kind of, actually my wife suggesting, too—we kind of have meetings about the business, how the vision of the restaurant is going and stuff. I think

sustainability—that's the turning point of how to run a restaurant. And we start thinking about “Why don't we just”—because the memories that I have say—“Why don't we start buying stuff from the farmers?” It tastes better, it's better for the economy, it's better for everybody. Everybody is a win-win situation. 'Cause farmers get paid for them to, to, to, to get more vegetables to—for us. We get what we need. We enjoy what we do cooking and the, the food gets better because the flavor is unique, you know. You have so much fresh produce and cheese and all that stuff—meats, blah, blah, blah. And also the customer gets the best product ever.

So we start doing that in 2008, I think? And ever since, I think the vision—as we see, as we talk, as we speak right now—it's sustainability in every way possible, whether it's the food, whether it's the employees, it's the run the business and how the vision is going right now. You have to be sustainable, you know. Where I don't have to—like, for example, the employees not to overwork them. To be happy and enjoy what they do, you know. And I think, um, um—I think restaurant business, I think about making money. You're never going to make a lot of money *but*—you know, you know I guess I can say that, you know, you can do a decent living, you know? You know, and be happy with what we got.

[00:35:51]

GA: And sustainability is also something big in the Yucatan, in the Mayan culture, as well.

[00:35:57]

BU: I think with not knowing now before, I think, we were doing that anyway along the way. We just never, kind of, like, realized that—yes, definitely. Yeah, people—have *milpas* [corn field] They, they go up to—mostly for the Mayan Indians that live in the village like. They go to the *milpas*, they, they, they farm. They do their corn, they got pigs, they have cows they have this, that. So they—back then, when I grew up, I remember then trading, trading corn for other fruits or animals. Today is a little more—today's a little different, but it's not that much different. It's still do the same thing. They do *gremios* [mutual benefit association]—*gremios* is like, promise to the Virgen de Guadalupe, and they're

members to do the festivities and they still do, you know, the—you, you give me a—two pounds of chiles, and I give you two pounds of corn, and you give me two chickens and—that's how they trade things. Sometimes, money is not exchanged at all. Just stuff. So, and yeah. And they all grow—it's grown in the area. Yeah, so—

[00:36:57]

GA: And, and in your time in Louisville, obviously, the Mexican population has increased dramatically.

[00:37:03]

BU: I'm sorry, decreased? Or increase?

[00:37:06]

GA: Increase, increase.

[00:38:08]

BU: I would say so—yeah, totally. Today, it's like—there's more restaurants around the neigh-the Louisville area, Jefferson County, you know. Even Kentucky—overall, I'm sure there are more restaurants than before. And they're still becoming—for some reason, they're becoming—Latino food is now becoming more popular than ever. I don't know why, but that's how it is going right now.

[00:37:32]

GA: Do you have any ideas or theories why Mexican—Latino food in general, but Mexican food in particular so popular now in the South?

[00:37:40]

BU: — I don't know. Maybe sometimes, or maybe—is it taco that tastes good? (*Laughs*). I don't know. I—it's a good question. I don't know if that's the spices or the flavors of the—that makes people excited about it, you know. I don't know, maybe they already experienced Asian food or they experienced—I remember in the early '80s, French food was very popular. I don't know, for some reason every decade, something changes. Now, it's Mexican. Maybe something else will be next. I don't know. It's going to

be interesting to see what's gonna happen. I know right now, farm-to-table kind of vision is the, like the, drive of a lot of chefs right now. And it's great. I think we should've done that in the first place, you know. Buy local, use local and other stuff.

[00:38:27]

GA: Describe some of your favorite dishes that you make here at Mayan Cafe.

[00:38:32]

BU: I—we. I don't have particularly one. I like to *create* dishes. I like to play with seafood, you know, and use other ingredients that are never—sometimes never used before, you know. Like, vegetables, you know. Like, um—yesterday, I went to a market and I saw breadfruit, you know. Breadfruit, it's pretty much like, uh, island—Caribbean food. And I had it before at other restaurants. And I like to play with that, you know. I like to play with different kinds of roots that I've never plated before, you know. It's interesting to me.

[00:39:09]

GA: So describe one of these creations. Like what, what do you plan to do with breadfruit?

[00:39:14]

BU: I don't know. I'm going to roast it, and then cut in pieces, and then deep-fry after. Or maybe, I'm going to boil it and pan-sear it with butter. Or I'm going to puree it, make a puree after that. I, you know there's so many things—until I find out the consistency that I like. I realized if I like something, people will like it. If I have doubts of something—oh, I can hear right away from my wife, just because she's the one who do taste—or my sister-in-law—taste stuff. And they kind of like—they judges and say, “Oh, this is not good” or “This is good.” And of course, I always want to give it a little twist with the Mexican or Latino-Mayan fusion. With the roasted chilies habaneros or a little achiote mixed together with oregano. Who knows, you know? But something will come up out of this—yeah.

[00:40:01]

GA: What are some of the most popular dishes that you make. In other words, the ones that the

customers seem to buy most of.

[00:40:07]

BU: Pork and rabbit. Lima beans. These lima beans—that I can't explain to you. They love it. They go nuts about those things. They're a simple dish. Hopefully, I—unfortunately, I can't get them fresh, you know. But frozen vegetables, some of them are really good, some are not. But seems to me that, um, lima beans becoming very consistent. Of course, there's all kind of grades of lima beans. You know, there's A—like, uh, number one, number two, number three. I think number three, they're kind of like more, more tender lima beans. They are kinda like medium and old lima beans. But the ones we use is grade A, which is very, very tender. And I'm particular about looking for those. If some vendor don't have it, I go to the next one. Seems to me like my business—the way we purchase things, it's based on who has the best lima beans, and I go for them. And, my goodness! We use probably—we use five cases a week—I would say, like, how many cases a week we use? Twenty, it's twenty-two, 100? Like maybe 400 pounds to 500 pounds a week—I mean a month, sorry. A month. I mean, just like that. For sure, a hundred a week, so times four, so.

[00:41:21]

GA: What do you call the lima bean dish and describe the process in making them, especially the Mayan twist that you give to it.

[00:41:29]

The original one back home is made with *white* beans which I think, if I'm not mistaken, it's—which is funny that you ask because—it's Great Northern beans?

[00:41:40]

Anne Shadle: (*Off-mic*) Fava beans?

[00:41:41]

BU: It's fava beans, or Great Northern beans. I'm not—because it's a long time since I remember them. But they—they pick it, they dry it and they cook it and halfway and then they drain it. And then they

put it in a flat surface, which will be like a drum—a drum cut out of the *tambor* drum. And they season it and they put it right on top of the wood and let her hot, and that's when they throw the white beans and they throw the *pepita molida*, which is pumpkin seed and then mix it really good. *Cebollina*, which is green—it's not, it's green onions or chives. And they toss it together, and the smell—the roasting, the burning—it's amazing.

So the way we do it here, we kinda like the same twist. We, we throw the green lima beans on the—it's called Fordhook lima beans. It's the larger ones. Not the, not the gigantic one—the green ones, it's Fordhook. It's like the medium sizes. We throw it on the flattop, we roast them, and then we transfer it to a hot burning skillet like with sesame oil, olive oil, and salad oil. And we roast them really good and we throw them with some pumpkins—dried pumpkin seeds, and green onions, parsley and lime. And it's—its interesting flavor. I'm not very—you know, I'm not fond of lima beans, but people here *love* the lima beans. If we don't have it, they go crazy. I swear, if—if one day I take it off the menu, the people they probably—this is the end of what we did—the end of the Mayan Cafe (laughs).

[00:43:18]

GA: What about rabbit? How do you prepare the rabbit here?

[00:43:22]

BU: The rabbit? We—rabbit. Um, I'm sorry, I forget to tell you. It's called lima beans tok-sel—that how they—it's just. Tok-sel means “roasted lima beans.” That's what it means in Mayan words, sorry.

Rabbit. We get it from the local farmers, and we like, I don't know, 25, 30 rabbits at a time. And then—in most restaurants, I don't know if you're familiar with a lot of the restaurants that serves rabbit or any restaurant that you've ever been, they—it's traditionally serve it with the bones. You know, like half of the rabbit, you know? But we don't do that here. I realized that we try to do it like that, but people are not interested in—eat the bones, or try to get the meat. When I'm cooking and baking and serving—oh,

not baking, but roasting—I always think about the easy way to eat something, you know. Whether it's julienned with chopped. And I realized that rabbit—we need to debone it, take the meat out, and actually sauté a small portion and mix it with the *pipián rojo*, which is how serve it.

And people love it. People don't want to deal with bones—they want meat, and that's how they enjoy themselves. And that become very popular. And that's probably, my guess, that's the next white meat that people kind of like interested in to eat. We eat—I mean, we sell like around (thinking) a hundred rabbits every two weeks to three weeks? At least—yeah, I don't know. So that's a lot of rabbits, you know.

[00:44:59]

GA: Can you also describe the papadzules?

[00:45:01]

BU: Papadzules means—the food of the gods in Mayan. And its—we traditionally made tortillas in a pumpkin seed puree. Very, kind of like a sauce. So, basically we dip the tortilla inside the pumpkin [sauce] and then put it on the table and put a hard-boiled egg and roll it or—people put meat in it or whatever—but traditionally with egg inside and roll it as a taco and put more sauce on top, more of the pumpkin sauce on top, and a chunky tomato, uh, sauce on. And that's it. It's a really, really unique flavor. But here at the Mayan Cafe, we do it a little different way. We kind of like—put cochinita pibil inside and we roll it and we—we just cover it with pumpkin seed sauce and a fried egg with the yolk very, very tender—when you cut it, it just runs all over. So it's like a different experience. So this is the kind of the things we do—I take the, I take the Mayan tradition and I twist a little twist. It works; people love it. And it—and it looks presentable, of course.

[00:46:16]

GA: Do you still find it hard to get those authentic ingredients from the Yucatan to make your food? And if you can't get those ingredients, how do you manage to replicate those flavors?

[00:46:28]

BU: I mean, for the most part we can get some of the stuff like chilies and pumpkin seeds and the other—some of the things we can't get. For example, relleno negro, which is a black paste, chile paste, which is totally like from the Yucatan. It comes, period, from there. And, I go once, once, a year, or twice a year and bring—I don't know—20, 20 kilos, 25 kilos, you know. And sometimes immigration will say “What is that for?” (*laughs*) “Well, it's for cooking for our family.” And we use it, too, for our family to cook. And that's how I bring it so we use it here. Yeah. But it's—just a few things. I think with the market now, the free market from Mexico and the U.S., I think we can—are able to get a lot of the spices now. I mean, there's so many, so many—I remember when I open the restaurant here in the early, early—like in the '90s, there was no, no produce, you know? So I went to Chicago to get chayote, jícama, malanga, cactus—or, nopales—to pick up. But now, we—it's becoming easier here in the U.S. I think we should be able to—and also, with the Internet, we can get anything. I mean, amazing.

[00:47:49]

GA: Do you see other Mexican restaurants in Kentucky trying to become more authentic, or do you still think most of them try to sell an Americanized Mexican food? And why?

[00:48:00]

BU: I think they're trying to do more original. They're trying to get their own selves, to be giving a little twist and becoming as much as traditional as they can as, as they, as their experience, you know has driven them to do. Whatever they—if they went to Mexico before they opened their restaurants, or wherever they part of the area they're from, I think they're becoming more, like, traditional than just American. I think—the only place that I noticed that open American food—mostly the people, the chains, restaurants. But they—local chefs that trying to open the restaurants like me, I think they becoming more unique and their own twists in to do as much traditional and as much delicious as they can—yes.

[00:48:45]

GA: Why do you think that?

[00:48:47]

BU: I think they realizing that why not? Why not do what we should've done it in the first place? Do it the right way, instead of putting a lot of cheese. You don't see a lot of restaurants that, that—other chefs that, you know, they coming with the new ideas using a lot of cheese. They use—they might use cheese, but they use cheese in—the *good* cheese, from the farmers, you know. Like creamy cheese, queso fresco that's made here. Chorizo that is made here. I mean, just, yeah, it's amazing. Yeah, I mean, that's why. I think they're trying to make a name for themselves, too, which—I get it. I get it.

[00:49:21]

GA: In your time in Kentucky, how have you seen attitudes by native Kentuckians toward Mexicans change? Do you think—like, when you first came, did you ever experience much racism as a Mexican?

[00:49:39]

BU: —Maybe I was so dumb to notice (*laughs*). No, not really. I just didn't care about that, you know. I'm sure there was probably, but—there wasn't bothering me a lot for, for that. Yeah. I think also—when it comes to about food—I think—I'm sorry, what was the question again about food?

[00:49:59]

GA: Oh, no. I just said, like, do you think that—

[00:50:04]

BU: Oh, yeah, I think that the Latino food is like—I think it's interesting to—it's trendy right now. Put it that way, is. I think right now it's the time. Like I said before, I think is trendy is—that the new thing right now, you know? People are willing to try any kind of food, you know? Even—what's it called—dried—creatures, what's it called? Not creatures (*laughs*). *Chapulines* [grasshoppers] you know? Becoming very trendy! Seriously? Years ago, nobody would've thought about eating *chapulines*, you know? Crickets? (*laughs*)

[00:50:42]

GA: As, you know—you're a father of—how many children?

[00:50:45]

BU: We were twelve originally, but two died. Ten are alive. So it's, uh, four girls—no, I'm sorry. Eight girls, and I—I'm so sorry. Four girls, four boys. Yeah, and like I said earlier, a few of them died at an early age but, you know, they were—that's life.

[00:51:08]

GA: Have your siblings also come up to the United States?

[00:52:10]

BU: My brother works for me. He's been here for a few year—uh, several years with me. My other brothers, they're still working in the restaurant—in the Riviera Maya. And some work in the Yucatan Peninsula in other areas. So, you know, but I got see them when I can.

[00:51:26]

GA: How do you try to teach Mexican culture to your—to your children?

[00:51:30]

BU: This is going to be a challenge. Very, very challenge. I—I have, I have, I've got two girls, Elena and Liliana. And my wife, Christina. I have—I see my kids very, like, um—you know people think or say to other kids that, “I want to give them the best because I never had anything.” I don't necessarily think that way. I think they need to earn it, you know, and not necessarily giving anything or giving everything. I think, sometimes by giving everything because I never had—instead to help them, you damage them, you know? I've seen it along, and having those—I'm forty-seven now, and I think having those kids late, um, late in my lifetime, I think I'm more wiser to talk about them, about those situations. So it's going to be interesting how I really believe that the different ways to raise those kids than before. I think it's not about giving everything; it's a balance about teaching what's important to, to use, and how see the future going, you know?

[00:52:38]

GA: Do you think—do they—do you try to speak Spanish to them so they learn it? What's their reaction?

[00:52:46]

BU: I don't (*laughs*)—I don't force them, but I talk in Spanish to my wife. And she believes, and I believe, that the more they hear Spanish in the house, the more they get used to that. And sometimes it works, you know. We talk to them, and sometimes they're talking to Spanish to them—each other, few words, but it's working. I think—sometimes, I need help with other people. Psychologists like to tell me, “Hey, you know you need to do that,” and I do it. I got—I have nothing to lose—just talk to them, you know.

[00:53:16]

GA: What are any future plans you have? You know, for Mayan Cafe or maybe other restaurants or other, uh, business ventures.

[00:53:24]

BU: At this point right now, with the kids, I'm going to wait a few years. I do want to do one more thing. I'm not sure—I'm dying to. I still think I've got, one more in my belly, I don't know what. This restaurant is very consuming because we have everything—we make everything so fresh. And I'm not—I'm not saying that I won't make anything from fresh—from scratch the next time. I want to make it much simple, more sustainable. And I think will be my—probably the—I don't know. My—I'm kind of interested in venture and test that I wanna—in my mind. And how can I do it better than—more sustainable way and less work. Obviously, everything is hard work, but—I don't know. I wanna make—be creative. I don't want to use the same thing. As the years go by, there's more creative chefs coming along. More taquerías opening. I want to do something different. I don't want to copy—I cannot copy other people It has to be something unique for me. I, I cannot do it. It's—I'm very stubborn. (*laughs*)

[00:54:26]

GA: Just a couple more questions, we'll end. When you—what are some of the Mexican restaurants that *you* like here in Louisville that's not your restaurants.

[00:54:37]

BU: Hmm—it has to be Mexican, or any, any restaurants?

[00:54:40]

GA: Let's do both. So what are some of your favorite restaurants in Louisville? Then what are some of the Mexican restaurants that you think are doing good, like doing good food in Louisville?

[00:54:49]

BU: Like honestly, the one that I fascinated by is much simple food, like tacos. I go to and—it's how they make their salsas, they're fresh. And also I like to eat Asian food. I'm very, very a fan of Asian food. And the reason why I'm like Asian food is 'cause sometimes, I want to—I wonder how it would've been if I would've cooked how they cooked—like, lots of broth and halfway-cooked vegetables and a twist of a *Mexican* way. That's what I'm interested to know—like, how do you make like a noodle soup with a green broccoli? What happens if I giving it a little twist and I make, uh, *arroz con pollo* and I give it a little twist with a kind of a—broccoli, cauliflower? That's the things that I think of sometimes—like, that would be something different, you know? Let me think about food different way, you know? Than just Mexican food—I go to, I try everything. I go one time, and try them. And sometimes, they really good; I go back. And sometimes, I don't. So, I mean, be honest. It's just, you know. Sometimes, we—I cook at home, better (*laughs*)

[00:55:55]

GA: What do you think is the future of Latinos in Kentucky?

[00:56:00]

BU: Interesting question—I think Latinos think about staying here for the, for the long run. Families, kids in the school. Just—Louisville is a good, good—Kentucky is a good to live. Louisville? Better. It's

affordable, it's safe. I think they're more concerned about safe and stability. I think that's where they look—Latinos are looking for that, right now. You know? Talk about everything else that's happening in Mexico—everywhere. So I think they're looking for safe and security for their kids for their future. I think that's what they're looking for.

[00:56:40]

GA: Final question: If a Latino who wasn't from the South came here to Louisville, what would be your advice for them?

[00:56:50]

BU: Like, from the north part of Mexico?

[00:56:52]

GA: Oh, not even from Mexico, but even someone like myself: from Southern California decides to come—you know—come live in Louisville. What would be some advice you'd give them.

[00:57:01]

BU: I guess it has to be for a lot—first of all, it has to be what they looking for. Because I know, I know a lot of Latinos, they—they want to do something challenging. They want to do stuff. But I think if they just be patient and look around, take to, to themselves, I think they can see something they like. Especially if they like to be living in big cities, you know. I'm not from a big city from any means; I grew up in a small village. But sometimes Latinos, they come from, from big cities—like Mexico City is a big city. Some other parts of Mexico, they're big cities. Or, I don't know, South America. Panama, or—I mean, they come here and they—you know, they used to those *big* cities. And, once again, I think it's got to do with what they're looking for and what they want to do. I think that's—everything is based on that. And then telling my opinion, or suggest something for them, you know, to do.

I mean, I have a friend that was Cuban. He came from Cuba from, through Miami, came to Louisville and he didn't like Louisville because it was cold. Went back to Miami. The next time, he knows he's

back again. And I said, “What’s—what happened?” “I hate Miami.” I say, “Why?” There’s too many *cubanos* there (laughs). Go figure, you know? You think—you know, you imagine that you want to be with your *paisanos* [countrymen]—you know, you know, help each other. But, I guess he wanted to be here, you know? He came back, and now he has a family, he got married, he has a kid, and he’s doing okay. And he loves Louisville—it’s like I say, it’s a safe place to live.

[00:58:33]

GA: Any final thoughts or comments?

[00:58:39]

BU: —I think I’m just keep doing what I’m right now. The best, the right way that I think it should be. To be responsible, the things I do in my life, and just be, be kind to people.

[00:58:51]

GA: Thank you so much for your time.

[00:58:53]

BU: Thank you.