

Charles Joseph “CJ” Gerdes
Casamento’s Restaurant – New Orleans, LA

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Date: May 11, 2015

Location: Casamento’s Restaurant – New Orleans, LA

Interviewer: Sara Roahen

Audio Engineer: Thomas Walsh

Transcription: Deborah Mitchum

Length: Two hours, ten minutes

Project: The Lives and Loaves of New Orleans

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Tuesday, May 11, 2015. We are in New Orleans, Louisiana, at Casamento's Restaurant. I'm also here with audio engineer Thomas Walsh, and with Casamento's proprietor. Could I ask you, please, to tell us your full name and, in your words, what you do for a living?

[00:01:06]

Charles Joseph Gerdes: My name is Charles Joseph Gerdes, people call me CJ, and I am the owner of Casamento's Restaurant.

[00:01:12]

SR: Could you share your birth date with us?

[00:01:15]

CJG: 5-22-57.

[00:01:18]

SR: Thanks, CJ. Let's start with: I'd love to know where you were born and raised.

[00:01:25]

CJG: I was born right here in New Orleans, raised up about seven blocks from here, on Constantinople Street.

[00:01:32]

SR: Oh, okay, Constantinople. And what was the cross street?

[00:01:35]

CJG: Chestnut.

[00:01:37]

SR: Okay. So you've been in this neighborhood kind of all your life, huh?

[00:01:41]

CJG: Oh, yeah. I've been here all my life.

[00:01:43]

SR: Tell me how long you've been at this restaurant. Has this restaurant been part of your life forever?

[00:01:53]

CJG: Yeah. Well, the restaurant's been here since 1919. I have been here since—.

[*Laughs*] Basically, I have pictures of me when I was five years old with an apron on, up in the front, you know, playing like I was taking orders and stuff. But consistently I've been here since I was fourteen.

[00:02:12]

SR: How are you—? Your last name isn't Casamento. How are you—?

[00:02:18]

CJG: That's my mother.

[00:02:19]

SR: —related to this restaurant?

[00:02:19]

CJG: My mother was a Casamento, my grandfather's daughter.

[00:02:23]

SR: Okay. Maybe we can back way up and talk about how this restaurant started and who started it. Would that have been your mother's father?

[00:02:31]

CJG: Yeah, my grandfather started it. He came over from Ustica, Italy in the early 1900s, and he was working at different restaurants and all that, and he decided he'd like to start his own restaurant. So this was it.

[00:02:45]

SR: And his name was?

[00:02:47]

CJG: Joseph Casamento.

[00:02:48]

SR: Okay. Do you have any idea how old he was when he came from Italy?

[00:02:52]

CJG: He was seventeen.

[00:02:55]

SR: Okay. And did he come with a wife or did he meet someone here?

[00:03:00]

CJG: No, he met somebody here.

[00:03:01]

SR: Was she also Italian?

[00:03:04]

CJG: Yes, she was Italian. Her last name was Dilorenzo.

[00:03:07]

SR: Do you know her first name?

[00:03:09]

CJG: Eleanor.

[00:03:11]

SR: Eleanor. Okay. I feel like I remember that the founder of Charlie's Steakhouse, sort of up Napoleon [Avenue], was also from Ustica. Was there any relation, do you know?

[00:03:24]

CJG: I don't know, but there's a few people I've met over the years—somebody that I've played racquetball with forever whose grandfather came over with my grandfather, we found out, on the same ship.

[00:03:35]

SR: Oh, really?

[00:03:36]

CJG: Yeah, mm hmm.

[00:03:38]

SR: Wow. A lot of people came from Sicily, and also Italy—

[00:03:42]

CJG: Yes.

[00:03:42]

SR: —in that era.

[00:03:44]

CJG: Mm hmm.

[00:03:45]

SR: So, tell me what you know about why he opened this kind of a restaurant in this location.

[00:03:54]

CJG: Well, he worked at an oyster house and he saw things where he was working that he wanted to do different, like as far as the bread. When they would use French bread, he didn't like the way that they had to keep throwing the bread away because it kept getting old and stuff real fast, so he wanted to figure out a different way to not have all that waste. So he came up with the idea about serving the kind of bread that we serve, the Texas toast, and he was real particular about having things done a certain way and eliminating waste and all that. So that's how that came about.

[00:04:38]

SR: So do you think that—? I don't much about Ustica. Is that on the water at all?

[00:04:47]

CJG: It's a small island off the island of Sicily. It's about eighty-five percent a farming community. My sister went back there years ago, and she said it's a nice place to visit but she wouldn't want to live there. I mean, there's no air conditioning, there's no—. I mean, it's real basic living, you know. So, yeah, that's it. It's mostly farming.

[00:05:09]

SR: But he maybe was familiar with seafood before he even came over here, if it was an island, huh?

[00:05:14]

CJG: I don't know, but he never, ever mentioned that. I don't think he—. From what my uncle told me, his son, he never had any inclination on what he was going to do when he got here until he started working in a restaurant. That's when he fell in love with the restaurant idea.

[00:05:35]

SR: Did he live in this part of the city? Is that why he opened it here, in this location?

[00:05:42]

CJG: You know, I never—. I don't know where he lived. I have no idea where he lived. Nobody's ever talked about where he lived before here, you know. Just when he finally built this place in 1919, him and my grandmother lived upstairs, and my uncle and my mother lived upstairs too. All four of them lived upstairs until my mother got married. My uncle lived upstairs until he died, the night of Katrina, and—. Yeah, that's where they lived. They all lived upstairs. It's like a big apartment upstairs.

[00:06:18]

SR: You said that he was really particular. What else can you tell me? Well, I don't know—. How old were you when he passed away? I mean, did you know him for a long time, your grandfather?

[00:06:30]

CJG: Yeah. I was twenty-one. I had just gotten married. He died about six months after I got married.

[00:06:36]

SR: Okay, so you knew him pretty well.

[00:06:37]

CJG: Yeah.

[00:06:38]

SR: What was he like?

[00:06:40]

CJG: He was stubborn, [*Laughs*] hotheaded, you know. He was just real business. Everything was business. He didn't have much of a fun side to him. He was real particular on

what he wanted and how he wanted things done. It's funny, when he would talk he would speak English—it would be like a little broken English and stuff—but when he would get mad it would be half English, half Italian coming out of his mouth and you didn't know what the heck he was saying. It was funny. But, like I said, he was just real particular about everything he did, real strict. The employees hated him because he was so strict. That's just the way he was.

[00:07:23]

SR: Did your grandmother work in the restaurant too?

[00:07:26]

CJG: Oh, yeah. She helped him out the whole time, up until she got older. She helped out in the kitchen. She would make the coffee and things like that beforehand. But she didn't have too much to do with the restaurant later in life while we were open. My grandfather was shucking oysters up front with me and my uncle up until he was late eighties.

[00:07:50]

SR: Wow.

[00:07:51]

CJG: Oh, yeah.

[00:07:53]

SR: So that would have been like in the '70s?

[00:07:57]

CJG: Yeah. He died in 1979.

[00:08:00]

SR: Okay. Did he and your grandmother speak Italian to each other?

[00:08:05]

CJG: A little bit. Not much, not much. They had gotten into, you know, the habit of speaking English. My grandmother spoke great English; just when she would get upset she would call everybody by their wrong names, you know. It's just the way she was. But no, they would basically speak English to each other. Just when they got aggravated that Italian would come out, you know.

[00:08:30]

SR: So when your mom and your uncle were growing up here, what school did they go to? Did they go to school in this—?

[00:08:35]

CJG: They went to St. Stephen's, right across the street.

[00:08:36]

SR: Oh, yeah.

[00:08:37]

CJG: Mm hmm.

[00:08:38]

SR: Okay. And then your mom didn't move far away when she got married. Did she work here when you were growing up?

[00:08:44]

CJG: Oh, yeah. My mother worked here ever since she was a teenager. She was the head waitress in here. She worked every day. Back before Katrina we were open double shifts Tuesday through Sunday, and they worked every shift. They worked every shift and, you know, like now, they lived for the summer. Because in 1949 is when we started taking the summers off, and that's when my grandfather decided to tile this place, and that's how taking the summers off

became—. You see, he figured he would do it in the summer because the oysters at that time were bad, business was slow; so we decided to take a few months off, and he got all these tiles imported from Italy, and by the time they did it all it took almost three months to do. So, he enjoyed having the time off, and we kept it going, you know, because we're here sixty-five hours a week so we need some down time.

[00:09:43]

SR: Ah, there are a lot of questions that just came out of that. I want to ask you first: what is—? Is your mom still alive?

[00:09:48]

CJG: No. She died about twenty-six years ago.

[00:09:53]

SR: Okay. What was her name?

[00:09:55]

CJG: MaryAnn.

[00:09:56]

SR: That's so interesting to me—first of all, that this restaurant wasn't always tiled, but I guess it always was in your lifetime.

[00:10:07]

CJG: Yeah, since 1949.

[00:10:10]

SR: Okay. Have you seen pictures of it before the tiles?

[00:10:13]

CJG: I got a couple of pictures in the front up there, one from the year they opened, 1919, and the other one from about five, six years after that. This is the original floor tile, and the original hot water heater in there, and the original icebox in there from 1919.

[00:10:31]

SR: It still works well, the icebox?

[00:10:34]

CJG: Well, the hot water heater don't work as well, but you can't find parts for it anymore. It works when it wants to. That's why we had to have another one installed as a backup. But, yeah, the icebox—you know, they used to just put big blocks of ice in it, before refrigeration came, and then after refrigeration came in—. But yeah, it's still in there. It still works great.

[00:10:55]

SR: The look of this restaurant is so unique and beautiful, I think. Why did your grandfather decide to tile it? We have some employees coming in now, but that's okay. This is the sounds of a restaurant. It's fine. We're in here before lunchtime, so people will be setting up for lunch.

[00:11:21]

CJG: Yeah. Okay.

[00:11:23]

SR: Do you know why your grandfather decided to—? I mean, it's really almost floor to ceiling tiles, all the way around.

[00:11:30]

CJG: He wanted it easy to clean, so you figure—. You know, back years ago in the summertime, my uncle would take all the furniture out and bring a hose in here and hose everything down. That's how they used to clean it.

[00:11:48]

SR: Do you do that now?

[00:11:51]

CJG: No. [*Laughs*] No, no. We just—twice a year, we'll just get the ladders and everything and scrub the tiles down.

[00:12:00]

SR: Is it easier to clean?

[00:12:03]

CJG: Oh, yeah, definitely. Like I said, you just—. You mop the floor and you scrub the walls, wipe the walls down, and it's done.

[00:12:10]

SR: Are the walls the original tile that he put up? Yeah.

[00:12:17]

CJG: Yeah, 1949, yeah. The only thing from 1919 is the floor tile.

[00:12:23]

SR: I see, right. Okay, but the walls are from 1949.

[00:12:27]

CJG: Yeah. Everybody wants to know how these tiles on the floor held up so long, and we had a couple extra ones and one of them now is in an Italian-American museum downtown. We have a spot in there with some different things. They're three quarters of an inch thick.

[00:12:42]

SR: Really?

[00:12:43]

CJG: Yeah. They don't make tiles like that anymore. That's how, you know.

[00:12:46]

SR: I was kind of wondering. I was assuming that all these tiles are really old. What would you do if you had to replace one?

[00:12:52]

CJG: I have some replacements. Like I said, now I only have one floor replacement. Thank God we haven't had to replace that. But as far as wall tiles in here and the kitchen and everything, I have boxes of them.

[00:13:04]

SR: Because he had extra and you kept them?

[00:13:06]

CJG: Yeah. He had lots of extra ones, yeah. We found them all up in the attic.

[00:13:10]

SR: Do you live upstairs?

[00:13:15]

CJG: No.

[00:13:15]

SR: Does anyone live upstairs now?

[00:13:17]

CJG: No. We just use it as storage. Like I said, the last person that lived up there was my uncle, and that was until Katrina. Then when my wife and I took it over fully, we just use it as, like, if we want to go rest up there in between shifts or something. But we mainly use it as storage.

[00:13:34]

SR: Okay. Now, about the summertime, since you brought it up: so, he closed to put the tiles up. Have you ever thought of not closing in the summer?

[00:13:49]

CJG: When I was younger I always said, yeah. I said, "You know what—?" When I was in my twenties and thirties I said—you know, back then we weren't as financially stable as we are now, so my wife and I, we had just had two daughters and stuff like that, and I said—. Matter of fact, we wanted to buy the place next door to expand, and my uncle never wanted to do it. He was up in age and stuff and he didn't want to be bothered with it and all that. So my wife and I kept saying, "Man, we'd love to keep this place open all the time." And as I got older—and now I'm in my late fifties—I can't wait to close this place. There's no way I would do it now, but yeah, at one time I did want to.

[00:14:37]

SR: But the only thing that held you back was your uncle?

[00:14:40]

CJG: Yeah.

[00:14:41]

SR: So, you know, he keeps coming up. His name was Joseph, too, is that correct?

[00:14:46]

CJG: Yeah, well my grandfather was Joe; he was Joseph.

[00:14:51]

SR: Okay. And he worked here his whole life as well?

[00:14:55]

CJG: Oh, yeah. Yeah, he basically worked all the way up until probably his early seventies. He was without a doubt the fastest oyster shucker I've ever seen in my life. I mean we had this guy, Mike, up here who's won all these shucking contests in the Quarter—and as a matter of fact, when they did the [*Diners, Drive-ins, and Dives*] episode here he opened up a dozen oysters and Guy Fieri timed him, and he did it in like a minute and fifteen seconds, and everybody thought that was so great. Well, when my uncle—this was when I was in my late twenties, the employee I have now here, Robert, was in his thirties, and my uncle was in his fifties at the time. We all got behind the oyster bar and had a shucking contest between the three of us. Every one of us did it under a minute. I did it in fifty-five seconds, my oyster shucker, Robert, did it in fifty-two seconds, and my uncle did it in forty-five seconds. He was just incredible. I've never seen anybody even approach that in this city.

[00:16:06]

SR: I can't imagine. It takes me like five minutes to open one.

[00:16:09]

CJG: Oh, he was just so fast.

[00:16:11]

SR: So he grew up doing that. I think I read somewhere that your wife said that he wasn't just fast but he was really clean, because—

[00:16:22]

CJG: Very clean.

[00:16:23]

SR: —that's another—.

[00:16:23]

CJG: Yes.

[00:16:24]

SR: What did she mean by that? What does that mean, for the record?

[00:16:28]

CJG: What was that?

[00:16:29]

SR: Just for the record, what does it mean to be a clean oyster shucker?

[00:16:32]

CJG: Oh, okay. Well, back then—. See, oyster shuckers these days don't shuck like we used to back then. Back then, what we would do, we would shuck the oyster; after you shuck the oyster, you wipe the knife over it and clean it and you set the oyster down and you line them up on the counter—however many dozen you were going to have. It's like if you had three dozen, you would line thirty-six up. Then you would take your glove off, wash your hands, and then put the oysters on a plate. These days, these guys don't like doing that. What they do is they shuck the oyster. They got a glove. Now, see, we never wore gloves back then. My uncle would wear a thumb piece, a rubber thumb, and that was it. That's all anybody ever wore back then. So these days everybody has gloves, and the gloves get sopping wet and they get dirty from the oysters and they don't want to take the time to take the glove off and stuff. So what they do is they take the oyster, pick up each—. They don't even put them down. They just shuck the oyster, they take

the oyster and they put it on a plate, with their glove, so then they got to go back and try and clean all the oysters, and a lot of times they don't do it and we have to get on them about it. They just do things a completely different way, you know. They open oysters from the knot in the back now. We never did that; we opened it from the top, you know. It's just a different way that they do things these days, and they all do it.

[00:17:52]

SR: So you mean—. The knot in the back: do you mean like the hinge?

[00:17:57]

CJG: Yeah.

[00:17:58]

SR: Oh. I thought that's how you're supposed to do it. How would you do it earlier?

[00:18:01]

CJG: Well, we—. See, you got the hinge and then you got the top. The top is thin, but experienced oyster openers know exactly where to put the knife. A lot of them don't like doing that because it's easy to slip and cut yourself. Now, I've only cut myself once in my life. My uncle never cut himself. The other problem is, when you open them from the back, from the knot, you have to pry, and they break knife blades like crazy. I still have a knife I've been using for thirty years and the blade is still on there. I've never, ever broke the blade.

[00:18:40]

SR: Wow. I'd love to see that knife when we're done. [*Laughs*]

[00:18:45]

CJG: Okay. Matter of fact, I've got two of them. I've got my uncle's and I've got my own.

[00:18:48]

SR: Really?

[00:18:48]

CJG: Mm hmm.

[00:18:49]

SR: Okay, and so, this is a little off track, but why did that change? Why did oyster shucking change, do you think?

[00:19:00]

CJG: I don't know. You know, it was hard for me to even see that it changed because we've had the same oyster shuckers for so long and they did it that way. Then all of a sudden when Katrina came and I had to get new shuckers and stuff like that, they all come with this new way of doing things and they're busting blades and all this. I'm like, "Y'all going to have to start bringing your own knives here," you know. We were going through knives like crazy. It's just like, "Why are y'all opening them like this now?" It's just a whole different way, and every oyster shucker we get in here is doing it the same exact way.

[00:19:36]

SR: What about Robert? Does he do it the old way?

[00:19:39]

CJG: Well, he used to, but he—. Robert had an accident back before Katrina and he hurt his head and he was in the hospital for a long time, and ever since then he just hasn't been the same. And all of a sudden, I guess working with the other guys, he started doing like them, so he does it like them now. Sometimes he'll do it the right way, when he remembers, and sometimes he goes back to the way they do it.

[00:20:05]

SR: You know, I opened some oysters recently and it was really hard even doing it at the hinge. So I guess it's probably, in a way, if you're not really experienced, it's easier to do it at the hinge.

[00:20:17]

CJG: No, matter of fact, when Bradley Cooper filmed his movie in here he played an oyster shucker and I had to show him how to shuck oysters, and I showed him the right way, he caught it within about twenty minutes. By the seventh or eighth oyster he was doing great. He was doing great. I mean he wasn't fast, but he was doing good. He was doing great.

[00:20:37]

SR: Tell me what the name of that movie was, so people will know.

[00:20:40]

CJG: Well they haven't—. The name that they were going with was called *Adam Jones*. Now, they supposedly maybe have changed it or not. He plays an oyster shucker who shucks his millionth oyster, and then when he does he struts out of here and doesn't tell anybody, just throws his stuff down and walks out. He plays a down-and-out restaurant owner. He wanted to clean himself up and everything and he goes to Europe and starts his own restaurant and comes back here and becomes very successful. But yeah, that was a—. He was a great guy. Like I said, he caught on fast, faster than I ever thought he was going to catch on.

[00:21:20]

SR: Hmm. So it is possible.

[00:21:22]

CJG: Oh, yeah.

[00:21:23]

SR: It is possible to learn that.

[00:21:23]

CJG: Oh, yeah.

[00:21:24]

SR: You know one of my questions was going to be whether you ever shuck oysters, because I always see you in the kitchen. I don't think I've ever seen you behind the bar. Does that happen these days?

[00:21:33]

CJG: Oh, yeah. I still—like if one of them are sick or anything. Well, I'll give you an example. A few years back I had a problem with one of my oyster shuckers. I told him we were going to open up New Year's Eve, because LSU was playing here and we had so many people here. I said, "We're going to up open up New Year's Eve," you know, and it was a Sunday [when we're usually closed], and he flat out said he wasn't going to work. So I said, "Okay, you're history." And I'm thinking to myself, "This is Sugar Bowl week, and I just got rid of my oyster shucker and now I'm left with no oyster shucker." So what I did was I came in each morning. I get here at 6:00, so at 9:00—we open up at 11:00; from 9:00 to 11:00 I shucked oysters and made like thirty dozen oysters on plates and put them in the cooler in the back. And I did it in between shifts, too, and I did that for two months until we found another oyster shucker. I was pretty tired. My hands were pretty raw and everything from doing it that much. But, yeah, I still get back in—you know, keep in practice. I still do it.

[00:22:41]

SR: Do the shuckers ever get like carpal tunnel or—?

[00:22:45]

CJG: Oh, they're always coming back here with hand cramps and everything else, and blisters and stuff like that, yeah.

[00:22:50]

SR: Yeah. Do you like shucking oysters?

[00:22:54]

CJG: Yeah. I enjoy it. I enjoy it because, you know, it's something I grew up doing. My grandfather started me when I was fourteen, oyster shucking. I started working here full-time when I was fourteen. I was going to high school in the day and then I would come here and bus for my mother at night and shuck oysters. Then when I graduated high school I came in and I was the oyster shucker for the kitchen, and I shucked oysters and then I would bus for my mother all through high school. But when I was twenty-one I started cooking. My father got me back here to start cooking. So I would shuck oysters in the morning and cook for lunch and then cook some for dinner.

[00:23:33]

SR: Your father worked here too?

[00:23:36]

CJG: Yes, he worked here too. He was the cook, the cook and the manager.

[00:23:39]

SR: Oh, okay. Were you required to work here, starting at fourteen, or did you want to?

[00:23:43]

CJG: No, I was required, yeah. My parents and I butted heads the whole time because I wanted to go to high school football games and stuff like that, and it was fighting tooth and nail

to get to take off. It was rough, and I always resented my sister because of it. I had a sister five years younger than me, and they never made her do anything. She never had anything to do with this place, and I was the one who had to do it all. You know, the male of the Italian family. That's the way it goes. But I always resented my sister because she never had to work in here. She got to everything and I got to do nothing, and it was just—. But, you know, it worked out in the end, so.

[00:24:25]

SR: Did you get paid?

[00:24:26]

CJG: Oh, yeah. It's funny: I had a problem with my grandfather—well, with my father first. When I was a senior in high school they started this work program where you would go to high school half a day and then you would work and get credit for it the second half, so I would come work here. After the first two weeks I noticed I didn't get no pay, and I'm thinking, "Okay, what's going on?" So I asked my grandfather, I said, "How come I'm not getting paid?" He says, "Well, isn't this supposed to be for school?" I said, "No. I'm working half the day and I get credit for it, but I could have been doing something else. I'd rather stay in school if I'm going to work and not get paid." So, yeah, we had a little problem there, but he ended up paying me anyway. That's my grandfather: he was going to take care of me anyway. He laughed about it after that.

[00:25:24]

SR: *[Laughs]* At what point did you know that you would make this your living? Did you always know that, or was there a time when you thought—

[00:25:34]

CJG: Nah, I–

[00:25:34]

SR: —you wouldn't?

[00:25:35]

CJG: —knew it. Actually, when I was twenty-one, right before I got married, I actually took a break from here and went to work at Lykes Brothers Steamship Company for about nine months, and my grandfather got sick and he says, "I want you to come back over here and I want you to start cooking." I said, "Okay." And I said, "But I'm pretty well set here." He says, "Just come on over here," and he started paying me twice what I was making over there. So he made me come over here, so that was it. I was here ever since, ever since.

[00:26:11]

SR: What did you do at the steamship company?

[00:26:14]

CJG: I was in billing. Taking care of billing off of ships and stuff like that.

[00:26:21]

SR: Okay. At some point I'm going to get to the oyster loaf, but since we're talking about your family, I would like to stick here for a minute and talk about your uncle specifically, Joseph. So, when I first started coming here he was still working here. He was very much a presence. Can you tell us what he was like?

[00:26:44]

CJG: He was not a people person, I'll tell you that. You'd rarely ever see him smile. He liked making the money in the restaurant, but he didn't like the hassles with it. My wife and I would joke, you know, he just wanted people to come in and just throw him the money and then

leave. He didn't like the interactions of the restaurant and stuff. He would come down, he would eat—. In his older years he would come down, he would eat dinner, he would go back upstairs. Then he would come down in-between shifts, he would do some things, he would do the register and stuff like that at night and stuff, but he didn't really work in the restaurant anymore. He used to shuck oysters and he used to wash the glasses up there, and what he did was he took care of the incidentals around the restaurant, anything went wrong. He was gifted like crazy: anything electrical, anything that had to be repaired in here, he did. He did all the books and all that, and my wife said, after he died and we took over the place, she said, "You just don't realize how much Joseph did around here until he wasn't around here anymore." We had it easy: we come here, we work, we go home. Don't have to worry about nothing until you come back to work. But now she handles all the bookwork too. She waitresses here and she handles all the bookwork, and I see her going crazy with a lot of it, with all the stuff you got to do, and it shows you how much he really did around here. We took care of the business side of it, and he took care of everything else.

[00:28:21]

SR: So you became partners at a certain point, I guess.

[00:28:24]

CJG: After my mother died I owned one quarter of the restaurant, and then my father died three years after my mother. It was a bad three or four years there, because in here we had my two aunts that worked here, my grandmother, my uncle, my mother, and my father. And within that three- or four-year period, my two aunts, my grandmother, my father, and my mother all died and left me and my uncle and my wife basically. And that was a really rough three years, four years to get through.

[00:29:05]

SR: Yeah. So that was in the '70s.

[00:29:11]

CJG: That was in the '80s.

[00:29:15]

SR: Oh, the '80s.

[00:29:16]

CJG: Yeah.

[00:29:16]

SR: Okay. It was your grandfather who died in the '70s.

[00:29:18]

CJG: Yeah.

[00:29:19]

SR: So when you say you had your aunts here, who were they? Was one of them married to Joseph, or was it your—?

[00:29:28]

CJG: No, Joseph stayed a bachelor all his life. He didn't want nothing to do—. [*Laughs*] There was nothing wrong with him; he just—. He always thought that the only reason he was—. He didn't like dirtiness. He was real clean; he didn't like anybody—. It's hard to say. He wasn't like a hermit, but he was like—. He just didn't want to be bothered, and he thought if any woman wanted him it was going to be for his money and stuff like that. Plus the fact that he lived here and all that. So he didn't bother with anything. But, no, my aunts were my grandmother's two sisters.

[00:30:06]

SR: Oh, okay. What were their names?

[00:30:08]

CJG: Mary and Rosalee. They were Dilorenzos, and they lived two blocks from here, so they would come help out.

[00:30:17]

SR: Yeah, that must have been a rough few years.

[00:30:20]

CJG: It was. I was very, very close with my mother. We worked here, you know, all our lives together until she died when I was thirty years old. And yeah, that was a rough period there.

[00:30:31]

SR: And then Joseph—you know, you mentioned that he died the night of Katrina, and I remember that. It was a heartbreak. Can you tell us about that? [Interviewer's note: Hurricane Katrina was August 29, 2005.]

[00:30:41]

CJG: Everybody—. Well, you know, it was toward the end of the summer, and my wife and I had a vacation planned to Vegas—we go to Vegas every summer—and we were going to leave the day before Katrina. We had it planned three months ahead of time. We kept an eye on Katrina, and when we saw how close it was coming and how fast it was coming and how bad it was going to be, I upped the flight one day. You know, paid a little extra, upped the flight one day, and we left early. Matter of fact, we were the last flight they let out of here, before the wind started getting too bad. My [daughters had] just started college in Baton Rouge but [they and] the rest of the family had gone to Houston. My uncle and a good friend of his went to Vicksburg,

Mississippi. That's where they went, and the night of the storm, before it got too bad, my uncle had called me in Vegas and we were talking, and I could hear the panic in his voice because at that time it was a category five and it looked like it was going to hit us head on and everything was going to be destroyed in New Orleans and all this. And this place was ninety years old at the time, and he didn't think this place was going to stand up, and his whole life was here: he lived upstairs, everything he owned was upstairs. And he had health problems. He'd had a bout with lung cancer, and he had some heart problems, so I told him, I said, "Joseph, you got to calm down. The place will be okay." I get a call about nine hours later that night from my sister saying they found my uncle dead in the hotel room, and he had died of a heart attack. He must have got himself in such a frenzy, you know, and that's what happened.

[00:32:40]

SR: I'd read somewhere that he hadn't really left New Orleans, or really this block, in a long time.

[00:32:50]

CJG: When we were younger he would go on trips with us to Gatlinburg, Tennessee. That's where my family would always go. Every summer we'd go to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, and that's the only vacation he ever took. He was in the military and all that—he was in World War II—so he traveled then and all that, but since then Gatlinburg is the only place. He would drive—. [*Laughs*] He had this old car, a '60-something Chevrolet, and it was like twenty years old and only had like four thousand miles on it. He would never go anywhere. So he would take it, only in the summer, to ride to Biloxi just to blow the engine out. You know, give it a good run and then ride back. And we went to Gatlinburg with each other a few times, maybe three or four times when I was real young, and that's the only places he's ever been.

[00:33:44]

SR: That was—. His was one of those Katrina deaths that doesn't even get counted.

[00:33:52]

CJG: Right, exactly.

[00:33:53]

SR: There were so many of those.

[00:33:54]

CJG: Yes.

[00:33:55]

SR: So then when you came back after Katrina, it was you and your wife. Her name's Linda, right?

[00:34:02]

CJG: Linda, mm hmm.

[00:34:03]

SR: It was starting over in a lot of different ways, I guess.

[00:34:08]

CJG: Yeah, it was rough. I'm surprised we got to open up as fast as we did. We opened up in November, and we were the only restaurant—. We were the only business around here that was open. We spent the whole time when we came back going back and forth to Baton Rouge. That's where the city government was set up, so we had to go back and forth, getting titles changed, getting names changed and everything, before we could do anything. Then I'm calling all my suppliers, trying to find out what's the status on oysters and everything else, and, matter

of fact, we ended up opening up the week when they started opening up the oyster beds, so it was perfect timing.

[00:34:55]

SR: Did you have a plan for if they hadn't opened the beds up? You were going to open anyway?

[00:35:00]

CJG: Yeah, we would have opened anyway. We were just going to sell the other seafood. Matter of fact, when we opened up the military was still across the street and they were still patrolling around the area and stuff. And we would feed some of the military across the street. You know, help them out and everything. But, no, we were just going to, you know—. I had monkeyed around with the idea of getting oysters from other places. Matter of fact, they sent me some oysters from Pensacola [Florida], and they were little bitty things, and they sent me some oysters from the West Coast, and they were like rubber and they didn't have no taste and they were expensive as hell. So I said, "Nah. I'm not using none of this stuff." So, the week before we opened up P&J Oysters, which is who I was using at that time, called up and said, "We're going to be opening up a couple days before you do." I said, "Well, that works out great." So I've never ever gone without oysters here, never. I've never run out of oysters.

[00:36:05]

SR: Wow. What do you mean when you say the military was across the street?

[00:36:10]

CJG: Right before the restaurant opened up, after Katrina, the month and a half after—.

[00:36:20]

[Interruption for sound issues; transcript suspended]

[00:39:19]

SR: Okay, let's pick up again. So you were talking about the military across the street.

[00:39:24]

CJG: Yeah.

[00:39:25]

SR: What did you mean by that, just for the record?

[00:39:28]

CJG: Yeah, like the National Guard and stuff who were there. You know, the following weeks after Katrina, they were here to prevent looting and stuff like that, and all the bad stuff that was going on, so they set up a station right across the street and that's where their base was. A couple of weeks after Katrina, my brother-in-law at that time was a policeman here, and he would get us through the lines to come up here to the restaurant to check the restaurant to see how it was, and it was weird. It was like rolling through an apocalypse that happened, you know. You'd see jeeps coming down the street, you'd see Humvees everywhere and the military across the street and you'd think there was a war going on. That's what they were doing: they were patrolling all the streets, making sure that [looting wasn't] going on and stuff like that.

[00:40:25]

SR: I was in this neighborhood too at that point, and I don't totally remember. Was the military set up like where the basketball court is?

[00:40:33]

CJG: Yeah.

[00:40:34]

SR: Okay. Did it ever cross your mind not to reopen?

[00:40:41]

CJG: No. No. [*Laughs*] Never. No, this was my baby. This was my time to—. There's so many different things I wanted to do with the restaurant different that I couldn't do when my uncle was around because he didn't like change, you know. But as you go on you have to change in some ways. We've added so many things to the menu. Basically I've added all these things to the menu over the last fifteen years, starting with the seafood gumbo, which now we've been having that over twenty years. Our menu used to be simple. We used to have like four or five entrees, we'd have two appetizers. I mean, it was a little simple menu. Every year I would add something else to where it's a pretty nice size menu right now.

[00:41:39]

SR: It's funny that you talk about change because this really feels like the kind of place that doesn't change.

[00:41:47]

CJG: Mm hmm.

[00:41:48]

SR: What else have you added? What else have you changed, I guess, either menu items or otherwise, besides adding the gumbo?

[00:41:57]

CJG: Well, the gumbo, the crab fingers, the calamari, the seafood platter, the chargrilled oysters, which has skyrocketed since we've done that three years ago. That's about it. I mean, we've added more beers and stuff like that. But as far as anything visual, visually-wise it's all the same. It's the same as it was. We've had to update some of the equipment. You know, ever since Katrina, almost every piece in here has been replaced. We had a stove that was fifty years old

when we replaced it, and we had to because you couldn't get parts for it anymore. The knobs were all off of it and I had pliers hooked to each of the things, turning the pliers, so I said, "I can't do this anymore." So, we had to get that stove about five years ago.

[00:42:53]

SR: So there was a lot of noise happening a few minutes ago and it was your oyster shucker—or one of your employees; I don't know if it's the oyster shucker.

[00:43:03]

CJG: Yeah, it was my two oyster shuckers.

[00:43:05]

SR: Filling what you call "the box."

[00:43:07]

CJG: The cooler, uh huh.

[00:43:09]

SR: What is that? Can you tell me what—?

[00:43:12]

CJG: It's an old-fashioned cooler. You dump the oysters in the top, and then you put the grates back on the top, and you got these two big pans on top of that that you fill with ice, and it keeps the box cool.

[00:43:24]

SR: Is it electric?

[00:43:26]

CJG: No. Nope, just like something you would see back in the '20s.

[00:43:30]

SR: You were saying while we were waiting for them to fill it up that that's only the second one this restaurant's ever had?

[00:43:38]

CJG: Yeah, that's only the second oyster box we've ever had.

[00:43:40]

SR: Is that a common way of keeping oysters? I mean, is it easy to find a box like that?

[00:43:46]

CJG: No. We had that one specially made.

[00:43:49]

SR: And you said that the original box was wooden.

[00:43:53]

CJG: Yeah, mm hmm.

[00:43:54]

SR: Why did you have to get rid of that one?

[00:43:56]

CJG: It was just splintering, finally, all over the place, you know. It was sixty years old, so it was—. Yeah. It was worn out.

[00:44:05]

SR: Why did you not update to something more modern, [*Laughs*] electric or—?

[00:44:13]

CJG: I don't know. My uncle, he talked to me, he says, "What are you thinking about putting there?" I said, "Well, it depends on if you want to go modern or if you want to stay in theme with the restaurant." He says, "Well, I like the way it was." So, we had somebody come

in. We knew somebody that did these kinds of things, and he built one for us. It took him about a month to do it, and he built it for us, and he said, "It's just like the wooden one you had except it's aluminum."

[00:44:45]

SR: What kind of person makes that?

[00:44:47]

CJG: Sheet metal. They make all kind of different things for restaurants and stuff like that. So he came in, he took the dimensions of the old one and all that, and built it off of that.

[00:45:03]

SR: Tell me about the cash registers.

[00:45:07]

CJG: Now the cash register we have here we bought in 1975. It's only the second cash register we've ever had. The first one was one of those ones you would see like in a 1910, 1920 grocery store that you actually had to push down, and it only went to \$4.99.

[00:45:25]

SR: *[Laughs]* I guess you had to upgrade. But I feel like when I first started coming here, I remember your uncle being at the cash register, and I remember that he wouldn't really like type anything in.

[00:45:40]

CJG: No.

[00:45:41]

SR: It wasn't that kind of cash register.

[00:45:42]

CJG: No, you just push the amounts on there and you press the button that says "open," and it opens. That's it. Simple.

[00:45:48]

SR: So that's the one you still have.

[00:45:50]

CJG: That's the one we still have.

[00:45:51]

SR: So does that mean the servers have to add everything up with a calculator?

[00:45:56]

CJG: Oh, yeah. They got the calculator right over there. That's where they add it up.

[00:45:59]

SR: And what about your credit card machine?

[00:46:01]

CJG: We don't have credit cards, [*Laughs*] and we never did take credit cards and never will take credit cards.

[00:46:06]

SR: [*Laughs*] That's not something you're going to change, huh?

[00:46:08]

CJG: No, no.

[00:46:11]

SR: What about—? Oaky, so technically I'm documenting sandwiches for this project, and I love your oyster loaf. And you mentioned that that was one thing that, when your grandfather opened, he did differently from other places—

[00:46:29]

CJG: Yeah.

[00:46:29]

SR: —in town. I'd like to talk more about that. I'm wondering: Have you kept it the same?

[00:46:33]

CJG: Yes.

[00:46:34]

SR: That's not one of the things that you changed.

[00:46:37]

CJG: No.

[00:46:38]

SR: So could you describe for me, your oyster loaf?

[00:46:41]

CJG: What it is, we get it from Bunny Bread. We're the only restaurant who gets it. What they do is they pull the whole loaves of bread off the conveyor belt before it gets sliced, and they deliver all the whole loaves here. And what I do is I cut the whole loaf in half, then turn that upside down and cut it in four, so it comes out to be eight thick pieces of bread. They're about eight to nine inches long, and when you make the sandwich it's about three inches high. And, you know, you toast it on an open fire, you butter up the bread. Some people dress it with lettuce, tomatoes, and mayo; some people don't—some of the old traditionalists just like the butter on the bread—and you load up all the oysters in between it. I like it a lot better than French bread, I'll tell you that, because sometimes when you go places and get French bread,

sometimes the bread's real hard and sometimes—. This bread comes out the same all the time, so it's nice and soft and goes well with it.

[00:47:43]

SR: When you were growing up, was it Bunny Bread? Has it always been—

[00:47:49]

CJG: No, it was—

[00:47:49]

SR: —that company?

[00:47:50]

CJG: —Sunbeam at the time.

[00:47:51]

SR: Okay. But they also probably had to get it specially unsliced.

[00:47:55]

CJG: Well, that's why I had to move from Sunbeam, because they kept forgetting to pull it off the thing and I had to keep going without bread. One time—you know, Jazz Fest is always a big time for us, and they didn't have my bread one Jazz Fest week, and a lot of my good customers that come from out of town and come to eat that bread were having a fit. So I said, "I can't do this no more." So I called Bunny and they've been—. They forget once in awhile, but now I know to order a lot ahead of time so I don't run into that.

[00:48:26]

SR: Do you have a special slicer or do you just eyeball that?

[00:48:29]

CJG: No, just like, if you ever see the *Diners and Drive-ins* tape, when Guy Fieri's in the kitchen with me, I got the electric carving knife, [*Laughs*] and that's how I cut it. I go through about two of them a year because they're not really made for all that kind of cutting. We'll go through about eighty whole loaves a week of that bread, so that's a lot of cutting. So, yeah, the knives give out quick.

[00:49:00]

SR: I never knew that that's how you did that.

[00:49:02]

CJG: Uh huh.

[00:49:03]

SR: I mean, there are companies that make Texas toast, right, but it's not the bread that you want? Or this is just how you've done it?

[00:49:10]

CJG: Nah, it's just—. I've seen them; they come in little squares and they don't come in the long pieces like we use for the loaves.

[00:49:18]

SR: I see.

[00:49:19]

CJG: Yeah, the Texas toast that I've seen in restaurants actually look like sliced bread but bigger, you know, and ours doesn't look like that.

[00:49:28]

SR: Yeah, you're right. You know, people in New Orleans are really particular about their po-boy bread and their French bread. I like po-boys *and* I like your oyster loaves. It's a different thing.

[00:49:47]

CJG: Right.

[00:49:47]

SR: Like, the oyster loaf is what I come to Casamento's for. Do you get people who get upset that you don't have traditional New Orleans French bread?

[00:49:56]

CJG: Yeah, some of them, people who don't know the restaurant and come in here. Like, they'll call me on the phone and say, "Do you have po-boys?" and I say, "Well, yeah, it's a po-boy, but it's not with French bread; it's with Texas toast kind of bread." But some people just come in off the street and they—. And I have pictures of it on the menu, so they can see what it is, but yet they'll order the oyster loaf and it'll come to them and they'll say, "Well, this ain't French bread." And I'll say, "Well, the picture's right there for you." But, yeah. I mean, but once they start eating it they love it, you know. But when I go out to a restaurant, like when I go to Arnaud's or something, I go get a roast beef po-boy, it's on French bread, you know. It's nice and soggy and all that, and that's the way I like it, and I'll eat it like that. But seafood I like on that bread right there.

[00:50:45]

SR: When I eat a po-boy somewhere else I, without question, get lettuce, tomato, mayo. If I come here and get an oyster loaf, I don't want any of that. I just want the butter, and I put

some hot sauce on my oysters. Do your servers ask—? I don't even know: Do your servers ask people if they want it dressed like a regular po-boy?

[00:51:10]

CJG: Yeah. A lot of the regulars, they know right off. They don't even ask them; they know what they want, and stuff like that. It's a lot of the older generation, the people that have been coming here for twenty, thirty years, they [just want] butter on the bread. Just butter on the bread, and they may add some ketchup to it or something like that. The younger generation, I'd say about seventy-five percent of them, get it dressed: lettuce, tomatoes, mayo, hot sauce. They'll put everything on it. It's funny: my uncle used to get mad when people would get a loaf dressed. He'd say, "That's not how it's supposed to be made. You're not supposed to get it dressed. It takes away from the taste of the oysters," and everything, you know. I said, "Well, you can't—." Just like we used to not serve spaghetti on Friday because my uncle was a Catholic, and especially during Lent we wouldn't have spaghetti on Friday, and if somebody would want to order spaghetti—. When we started serving it again on Friday, he was having a fit. He said, "You ain't supposed to eat spaghetti on Friday. You ain't supposed to eat meat on Friday in Lent," and all that stuff. He would have a fit. So, yeah, people are set in their ways.

[00:52:26]

SR: What about you? How do you eat your oyster loaf?

[00:52:29]

CJG: What I'll do is I'll eat it with just the butter on it, or I'll put some cocktail sauce on it: ketchup and a little hot sauce and horseradish.

[00:52:45]

SR: Can you tell us how you fry your oysters, because they have a very particular taste as well.

[00:52:55]

CJG: Yeah. Well, we don't deep fry. We don't have any deep fryers. It's cooked all in cast-iron pots on the top of the stove. We don't use any kind of peanut oil or coconut oil or stuff like that. When you go to other restaurants [and you see] oysters that come out [and] they're dark or they're heavy, it's because of the kind of oil they use. Peanut oil, it soaks in the batter—. With peanut oil or coconut oil and stuff like that, it just soaks up too much of the grease and it don't come out light and crispy and everything. If you notice, ours come out all light brown, crispy, not much batter on it at all. What we do is we fry in pure lard, and we also use corn flour, so we're gluten-free. Up until about ten years ago I never knew how many people had gluten problems in my life. I've never known this many people. Now they've put us on a national gluten-free registry, and we're on different things, and people come from all over because they've never had fried seafood in fifteen, twenty years. It's funny how a lot of people will come in here, they know we're gluten-free, and will order chicken tenders rather than seafood because they haven't had fried chicken in years, so they'll order chicken tenders. It's unreal. So, yeah, it's a big difference. People are just so excited to be able to eat seafood that have celiac problems and stuff like that. So yeah, we get a lot of business from that.

[00:54:38]

SR: Do you use straight corn flour because it's gluten-free or because that's what your family always did?

[00:54:45]

CJG: That's what we always did. It was an accident that we found out that we were gluten-free. Years ago you really didn't hear nothing too much about gluten-free and celiac and all that stuff, and I don't even remember how we came about finding out. I don't know if somebody came in and had it and said, "What do you fry in?" And we said, "Corn flour." And they said, "Well, that's gluten-free." However it was it started, we started advertising that we were gluten-free and it just took off.

[00:55:17]

SR: What about the lard? Has your family always fried in lard?

[00:55:21]

CJG: We've always used lard. That's the only thing we've ever used. People come here and say, "You can get a heart attack from all that lard," and everything. Well, you know, my grandfather always said, people always complain about butter and everybody wants to use margarine. People complain about lard, as far as the health facts, and he said—and he said it for years—it's just the opposite. Now they've found out that margarine was so bad for you because of all the saturated fat and all that stuff. The lard has not trans fat in it and everything like this, so it turned out to be that what he was saying was true.

[00:56:00]

SR: You have some longevity in your family too. [*Laughs*]

[00:56:03]

CJG: Oh, yeah. Most of them lived into their nineties. Back then you didn't have to worry about what you ate, and you didn't have all this stuff in the foods that you have today and everything: all the chemicals and everything. Back then you just ate what you wanted; you didn't have to worry about cholesterol and all this stuff.

[00:56:26]

SR: What about the availability and price of lard? I mean, that's not something that very many restaurants use in huge quantities anymore. Has it changed over time?

[00:56:36]

CJG: The price has gone up a little bit each time, but—. [*Pauses; laughs*] Matter of fact, I'm not going to name the supplier, but a couple of weeks ago my supplier didn't have my lard. They just didn't get it into the plant, to the warehouse, and he tells me, he says, "We were supposed to get it. I don't know where it's at." I said, "Well, it's Jazz Fest week. What the heck?" So I told my wife, I said, "Who sells lard?" and she says, "Well, I'm going to go over to the Restaurant Depot and I'll see what happens." So, before that, my supplier calls me, my rep calls me, and he says, "I'm going to go pick you up some lard. I'm going to Restaurant Depot and I'm going to pick you up some lard." I said, "Okay, they have the same kind of lard?" He said, "Well, it's a different brand." I said, "Well, bring it to me, bring me a couple cases, and let me try it. I got to make sure that it tastes the same and everything tastes the same." So he brings these four big squares of lard and I use one of them. And I'm looking at it and tasting it and everything, and everything tastes fine. It all tastes the same. So I asked him, I said, "How much do I owe you?" So he tells me how much I owe him, and I'm going, "Oh, okay." So I go look at the bill from the last one that he gave me and I'm looking at the bill and I say, "Wait a minute." So what we did is we took two of the empty cans from the lard that he brings and I chopped up that big block and I filled up two of the cans, and the two cans was still less than the one can that he sold me, so he kind of like shot himself in the foot by doing that.

[00:58:26]

SR: Because it was so much cheaper.

[00:58:28]

CJG: Yeah. I'll be hauling to Restaurant Depot. [*Laughs*]

[00:58:30]

SR: [*Laughs*] So the lard comes in a can, like a Crisco can or something—like that shape?

[00:58:36]

CJG: Yeah, it comes in a big twenty-five-pound can.

[00:58:40]

SR: Oh, okay. I love the look of your kitchen. I mean, it does not look like a commercial kitchen except for maybe your stove.

[00:58:49]

CJG: Yeah, people come through the kitchen and the customers say—you know, we have a line through the door and we're putting out food like crazy—"This is the kitchen? This looks like the kitchen at my house. How do y'all put out so much food in this little bitty kitchen?"

[00:59:02]

SR: Yeah. It's the size, and it's also—. I mean, it looks like my grandma's kitchen.

[00:59:05]

CJG: Yeah, exactly.

[00:59:06]

SR: It's so old-fashioned-looking—

[00:59:10]

CJG: Yes, it is.

[00:59:11]

SR: —and the pots that you use for the frying are all blackened.

[00:59:15]

CJG: Oh, yeah.

[00:59:16]

SR: When was the last time you had to buy one of those? Do you have to replace them ever?

[00:59:21]

CJG: Yeah, we had to replace a few of them. Just over time they start developing pit holes in the bottom, just from overuse, from using them so much. Yeah, I think the oldest one I got on the stove now is probably about twenty-five years old.

[00:59:38]

SR: Very well-seasoned.

[00:59:41]

CJG: Yeah. I scrape them down at the end of each week. While they're hot you take a knife and it just cuts right through the stuff, you know, and just scrape it off.

[00:59:49]

SR: Do you have to use a thermometer to keep track of your oil temperature?

[00:59:55]

CJG: No. I know what the temperature is. I could put oysters in the—. I know exactly how hot the grease is when I put the oysters in there. I could go do something in another part of the restaurant and know when to come back and it'll be just perfect.

[01:00:10]

SR: Do you adjust the flame during service or do you pretty much keep it—?

[01:00:15]

CJG: No, it's always high, always high.

[01:00:17]

SR: Really?

[01:00:18]

CJG: Mm hmm.

[01:00:19]

SR: Well how hot do you get lard to fry an oyster?

[01:00:21]

CJG: On there it gets to about 425 [degrees].

[01:00:25]

SR: Okay. That's pretty high.

[01:00:27]

CJG: Yeah.

[01:00:28]

SR: Now, tell me about the oysters that you use for fried oysters. Do they come from the shucking station? I mean, are they shucked here?

[01:00:40]

CJG: Yeah, that's what they do. They come early in the morning and shuck the oysters for the kitchen and the chargrill.

[01:00:44]

SR: And how do they determine—? How do you determine which oysters get fried? Are they a different size or different quality from the ones that get served raw?

[01:00:51]

CJG: Well, most of the time we like to keep the medium-size oysters for the raw oysters, for the counter—you know, for people to eat at the tables. The bigger oysters we'll use for frying, the smaller oysters we'll use for oyster stew—and also medium-size oysters; the big oysters, for the chargrill. But sometimes they come in sacks and you don't have a choice. You know, you just got to do what you got to do. Just like right after the oil spill, that was probably the closest time I ever came to running out of oysters. We came within, I'd say, maybe three dozen of running out for the first time ever, but thankfully we were able to go over to Texas and get some. Texas oysters are a lot bigger, but they were fine; they tasted fine and everything. But, like I said, sometimes you don't have that luxury of going through a sack and picking the different sizes. They all come one size and there's nothing you can do. You got to deal with it.

[01:01:57]

SR: Well, let's talk about the oil spill a little bit. That was almost exactly five years [ago], correct?

[01:02:04]

CJG: Mm hmm.

[01:02:06]

SR: There was an oil spill in the Gulf, and a lot of people still don't serve oysters—not because of quality, but because price went up; availability went down. How did you deal with that, and how did you keep getting them?

[01:02:22]

CJG: Well, we started getting them out of Texas.

[01:02:26]

SR: For how long?

[01:02:28]

CJG: A few months. We even tried to get some—. Some of them came from Alabama, which they started a little small, and then when you get toward Pensacola and stuff they were really small and I didn't want to even deal with them. So we were basically getting about ninety percent of them out of Texas.

[01:02:46]

SR: Like Galveston?

[01:02:49]

CJG: Yeah, around there, and, like I said, they were bigger oysters. But you got to do what you got to do, and the taste was still good. Thankfully they started opening one bed here, one bed there, and I was able to start supplementing the Louisiana oysters with the Texas oysters, so it basically came back. But, yeah, a lot of people were leery about eating oysters, but a lot of people said if Casamento's is serving the oysters they got to be all right. I mean, one time years ago we had this red tide, bacteria that came into the Gulf, and a couple people got sick in here. This was years ago. People want to say—you know, like some of the other restaurants— Oh, man, they serve bad oysters." Well, people got to realize: you don't know you have those oysters until somebody eats one. I mean, the supplier didn't know. When they bring them to us, we don't know, until somebody gets sick and then they go test the waters. That's when you know something's wrong. You don't know until somebody gets sick, but everybody wants to blame the

restaurants and all that and it's just not the case. It's not our fault. Once you find out, then you get rid of the oysters. But thank God that was the only time that's ever happened.

[01:04:18]

The thing after the oil spill is we had to keep waiting until they kept going out to test waters, test waters, test waters. And then when one area would be okay they would open it up, and then we would get oysters from there and people would come in and say, "Where you got them oysters from?" And we'd have the tickets to show them exactly which ones they opened up and [where they came from], and within about a year they came back.

[01:04:45]

SR: Are you particular in general about what beds your oysters come from?

[01:04:51]

CJG: I used to question a lot of times where they came from, but when I started using this new oyster dealer that I deal with, he's been pretty good about it. I just look at the tickets when they come in and I go look at the map over there and see where they came from, and if I haven't heard about any problems in those areas or anything, you know, it's pretty cool.

[01:05:17]

SR: But what about—? So there's a map hanging on the wall of the different oyster areas.

[01:05:21]

CJG: Yeah.

[01:05:22]

SR: Even if you're not—. Aside from concerns about health, can you tell the difference in taste in the oysters from different areas, and do you think about that or care about that?

[01:05:39]

CJG: No, not really. I mean, you don't really notice anything in taste. The only time you notice things in taste with oysters, differences in taste with oysters, is during the seasons. Like now they're starting to get—. Well, not now. They're still good now, but as soon as June starts coming around—. See, the oyster season used to be, people wouldn't eat oysters in a month that didn't have an 'r' in it. Well, the season has changed. Now it goes from maybe early October through mid June. Mid June, July, and August they start getting fat and milky and they look like cottage cheese and everything. That's when you start noticing the difference in oysters.

[01:06:21]

Now, the best oysters are the oysters that come out in the wintertime, what they call "cock oysters." They're colored oysters and everything and they got the—. A lot of people from out of town think those are bad when they come out on the plate because they're blackish in color and stuff like that, and we got to explain to them: that's the best oyster you will ever eat. They're called "cock oysters"; that's the best oyster you will ever get anywhere. Some of them will go ahead and try it and eat them, but a lot of people, they'll say, "Man, that thing's black. I'm not eating that thing," and they won't eat it. You can't explain to them.

[01:06:53]

SR: What makes the color changes?

[01:06:56]

CJG: The water. The difference in the water.

[01:07:00]

SR: The temperature or the salinity?

[01:07:02]

CJG: All of it, all of it, yeah.

[01:07:05]

SR: And when you say that those are the best oysters you'll ever eat, what about them tastes good?

[01:07:09]

CJG: The meat is perfect. It's not fat, it's not skinny; the meat is perfect. It has a sweeter taste to it. I eat raw oysters occasionally; that's the only time I will really eat them. I'm not a big raw oyster eater, but I like small oysters, and I like when they come out like that, you know. I'll sit there and get a whole glass full of them and just eat them. So, yeah, I like them when they come like that.

[01:07:40]

SR: It's funny that you say that you're not a big raw oyster eater. I mean, that's what this place is about. [*Laughs*]

[01:07:45]

CJG: I know, I know. I mean, like I said, I eat them at certain times, you know.

[01:07:51]

SR: So, can you, for the record, tell us a little bit about the oyster seasons and what's happening with them in the summer when they're all milky like that?

[01:08:01]

CJG: The heat. The heat has a lot to do with it. The heating of the water, the salinity, and all that. They get this cottage cheese kind of texture to it, and it's just like, I don't like them.

[*Laughs*] Even fried—if they're too big and milky, when you cut them you will see the cottage cheese effect on the inside, and I don't like that at all. A lot of customers won't eat big fried

oysters that look like that. It's got a different taste to them and stuff like that, [so I'm] glad to be closed during that whole time because I don't like serving them.

[01:08:38]

SR: You said that the seasons have changed. What's that about?

[01:08:43]

CJG: Just the weather patterns that have changed over the years. It used to be the months with 'r' in it but now, like I said—like P&J's told me years ago—the season's changed now. At this time, maybe fifteen, twenty years ago, you would start seeing those fat, milky oysters. They're still great. They're still grayish in color, got that nice thickness to them and all that. The season's just changed. It goes all the way through maybe mid-October, early October, when you start re-getting the good ones again.

[01:09:25]

SR: Have you considered changing what your closing months are?

[01:09:29]

CJG: Yeah, we were dabbling around with it. We were going to stay open through early June and then open back up in October, the first week of October, but we never did get around to doing it. *[Laughs]*

[01:09:41]

SR: You'd have to explain to your customers—

[01:09:43]

CJG: Exactly.

[01:09:43]

SR: —too, because I didn't know that the seasons had changed like that. So you don't eat oysters in the summer, I guess.

[01:09:53]

CJG: No, no.

[01:09:54]

SR: Who's your supplier now?

[01:09:57]

CJG: It's called Bez [Oysters &] Seafood. They're from Belle Chasse.

[01:10:01]

SR: Okay. And when the oysters come in, how can you tell where they're from? They're labeled in some way? Or how are they labeled?

[01:10:08]

CJG: Yeah, they have a tag on them that tells you the date and the area that it comes from.

[01:10:13]

SR: When you receive oysters, how do you test for quality? Do you test for quality when they're dropped off, or do you not, [and] you have to have a supplier that you really trust?

[01:10:25]

CJG: Well, when I first was dealing with the supplier, of course he wants to make a good impression on you, so he brings you all the best oysters you can get, all these select oysters and stuff. But over a time period, you know, every once in awhile I'll go through them and look at them. And most of the time as soon as they bring them they're throwing them up on the counter and they start shucking them so I can see right there what they're all about, and if I have a

problem with them—. Like sometimes, if he sends me oysters that have been sitting over by their place too long and they bring them to me, you can hear them. They're what you call "talking oysters." When you drop the sack, you can hear like a hollow sound from the oysters. That means that they're all dried up on the inside. But if you drop a sack and it's just, "Clunk!" that means they're all good. So as soon as you drop a sack and you hear all these, you know, like hollow sounds and all that, you start going through them and you start picking out the dry oysters. And then I'll call him and tell him and say, "Look, man, you got two or three dozen in each sack," so he'll whip right over and replace them.

[01:11:30]

SR: How often do you get oysters delivered?

[01:11:34]

CJG: Three or four times a week.

[01:11:37]

SR: Okay. So, like I said earlier, I've talked to some people in the restaurant business who really haven't served oysters much since the oil spill because of the price. Not because they can't pay it, but because they have a clientele that wouldn't respond well to increase in prices. Have you had to increase your prices—

[01:12:02]

CJG: Oh, yeah—

[01:12:02]

SR: —since the oil spill?

[01:12:03]

CJG: —since the oil spill, the oysters have almost doubled. The price of the oysters have almost doubled. I was buying sacks for about twenty-one, twenty-two dollars back before the oil spill; now they're up to forty.

[01:12:16]

SR: And you double your prices?

[01:12:20]

CJG: Just about. Well, not doubled them, but yeah, we've raised them significantly. Like the gallon oysters, they were like thirty-five, forty dollars at the time. Now they're sixty-five, seventy for a gallon of oysters. The thing is, and I talk about it with my suppliers all the time, once the supply and demand is there again the prices don't come down. They don't drop the prices. The price stays where it's at. Even though things are back to normal on their side, they won't drop the prices back down. They tell me, you know, the oyster fishermen, a lot of them got so much money from BP and everything that they don't bother going out. That's why I had trouble this past couple of years during real bad winters, like last year when we had a real bad winter. It was a struggle to get oysters. They didn't want to go out [because of the weather so] they didn't bother going out. I keep asking, "Why aren't these guys going out? Don't they have to make a living?" He said, "They got so much money from BP they ain't worrying about it." So, you know, that's why they'll never bring the prices back down.

[01:13:33]

SR: How does your clientele react to the increase in prices?

[01:13:38]

CJG: Well, a lot of them, they'll grumble about it a little bit, and then once we explain to them what's going on they totally understand it, you know. It don't stop any of them from getting them.

[01:13:52]

SR: *[Laughs]* New Orleanians want their oysters.

[01:13:55]

CJG: Yes, they do.

[01:13:56]

SR: At this point how much is a dozen on the half-shell?

[01:14:00]

CJG: Fifteen. It's like, when people come from the East Coast, from New York and everything, they think this is the biggest bargain in the world. They pay anywhere up to twenty-five dollars a dozen for oysters up there and the oysters look nowhere near like our oysters. They're little bitty and everything. I've seen pictures of them. They bring pictures of them and show them to you, you know. [It's just like, when they come down here,] it's ten, fifteen dollars less a dozen and they get nice plump oysters. They don't complain at all.

[01:14:30]

SR: Right. On an average week, an average busy week, how many sacks do you go through?

[01:14:37]

CJG: About a hundred to a hundred and twenty.

[01:14:40]

SR: And what does that translate to in pounds?

[01:14:43]

CJG: Oh, I'd say—. Let's see. I'd say a sack's about fifty pounds, so—.

[01:14:51]

SR: Wow.

[01:14:52]

CJG: Yeah.

[01:14:53]

SR: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

[01:14:54]

CJG: Yeah, so. [*Laughs*]

[01:14:55]

SR: What do you do with all your shells?

[01:14:57]

CJG: You know, this is something that really aggravates me a lot, especially since Katrina really. We have five ninety-gallon garbage bins outside that get picked up four times a week, and I'd say seventy percent of them is full of oyster shells. Now, all these oyster shells all these years could've been used to build up the reefs from all these restaurants. I mean, you got to realize, five bins of those four times a week—that's twenty bins of oyster shells that are just being thrown away with the garbage. The state last year implemented—. They were bringing out bins to people, to the oyster restaurants and all that, and they were collecting oyster shells. They were doing it for five or six restaurants. They started last summer. Well I told them, I said, "We're closed for the summer. In September I would like to get on this list." And they said, "All

right, call us back in September." I called them back for four straight months and they would not return my calls, would not return a call, so I don't know if they're still doing it or what.

[01:16:20]

I talked to Tommy Cvitanovich, who owns Drago's, and he says he has somebody that picks his shells up for him and brings them out. He says if I wanted to bring my oyster shells over to him he would gladly—but I don't have anybody that can do that. So he says the reason why this isn't going to work, he says there's only a million dollars put aside [by the state to do this], so he says that's probably why they didn't want to take anybody else on. He says it's going to go under within a year or two, and it's a shame. Like I said, all these shells that all these people have are just being thrown away. I had a guy who was picking up my shells years ago, but he's ailing now and he can't do it. He used to come here with a pickup truck and pick them up. He owns a farm down in Plaquemines, and he used to go throw them out and start building things, but he can't do it no more. So, yeah, if I had somebody that could come pick them up I'd gladly give them to them, I tell you.

[01:17:18]

SR: It does seem crazy that they're going to the dump.

[01:17:21]

CJG: Exactly. They're being thrown away when they could be put to good use.

[01:17:25]

SR: Yeah. You know, I have a lot more questions. You've already given me a lot of time. I really would like to ask a few things about your menu so I'm sure to get them in, and then a little bit more about your family. I really, really like your gumbo here, and I'd like to talk about

that. So that's interesting to me: that that's something that you added. That's a fairly recent menu item. Can you tell me a little bit about the process of making it and why I like it so much?

[01:18:02]

CJG: It was actually my mother-in-law's recipe. When we used to go over to her house to eat, a lot of times she would make it and I always liked it. I told my wife one year, I said, "You know what?" I said, "Why don't you ask her if we can put it on the menu?" She said, "Sure, go ahead. Put it on the menu." She showed me how to make it and all that. There's a couple of things she does that no one would believe that this is done with gumbo, and I'm not going to say, [*Laughs*] I can't say it, but it's a different base and it's a different way to make the roux. I'll just say that. It was something that was handed down from her mother that's done, and I've had people offer me money, you know, to give them the recipe and stuff like this.

[01:19:09]

Matter of fact, I had a guy, a friend of mine I used to bowl with, he opened up a hotel, a bed and breakfast, in Virginia. He wanted to know if I would consider shipping gumbo up there so he could use it there and I said, "Sure." I said, "Yeah, if you want it. If you want to buy it here and sell it there, I don't care." I never heard from him ever since. I don't know what happened to him, but he wanted to do it up there. I also used to send it to—. We go to Vegas every summer, and we knew the owner of the Barbary Coast Hotel, this guy, Kenny Epstein, and he had wanted to start selling it at one of his restaurants in Barbary Coast, but then he sold the place and all that and turned it into the [Cromwell]. So he's just got one hotel in old Vegas, and we don't really see him that much anymore.

[01:20:01]

But yeah, I've had people that wanted to take it out and do other things with it. Matter of fact, I had somebody in Branson, Missouri who wanted to start selling it, and he's supposed to contact me in the summer. He has a place in Branson, Missouri and wanted to start selling it, so I said, "Well, let me know." [*Laughs*]

[01:20:18]

SR: What would you do, ship it frozen?

[01:20:20]

CJG: Probably have to, yeah.

[01:20:23]

SR: Because you're not giving away the recipe.

[01:20:25]

CJG: No.

[01:20:25]

SR: [*Laughs*] Is your mother-in-law of Italian descent?

[01:20:31]

CJG: No. She's German.

[01:20:32]

SR: Okay, so that's not—. See, I had in my head that maybe it was sort of an Italian family-style gumbo, but it's not.

[01:20:39]

CJG: Nah, I mean I've done a few things to it, but about eighty percent of the recipe is hers. I've changed a couple of things on it, but most of it's hers.

[01:20:50]

SR: Can you tell me what's in it without divulging any secrets?

[01:20:54]

CJG: Yeah, okra, crabmeat—I mean crab claw meat—shrimp, and your basic seasonings like parsley flakes, onion, bell pepper, salt, pepper.

[01:21:08]

SR: And it's a roux base.

[01:21:11]

CJG: Yeah.

[01:21:12]

SR: Can you tell me if you use lard in the roux?

[01:21:15]

CJG: No.

[01:21:16]

SR: You can't tell me, or you don't?

[01:21:17]

CJG: No, we don't use lard. No. [*Laughs*]

[01:21:20]

SR: [*Laughs*] So it's roux-based seafood and okra gumbo.

[01:21:24]

CJG: Yes.

[01:21:25]

SR: No filé.

[01:21:26]

CJG: No.

[01:21:27]

SR: No oysters,—

[01:21:30]

CJG: No.

[01:21:31]

SR: —is that right? Okay. That's all the further I'm going to get, huh?

[01:21:35]

CJG: That's it. [*Laughs*]

[01:21:37]

SR: [*Laughs*] Stock?

[01:21:40]

CJG: Chicken stock.

[01:21:43]

SR: Ah.

[01:21:44]

CJG: Yeah.

[01:21:45]

SR: Okay. This really isn't a place for—. It's not a place for vegetarians, but also not for pescetarians.

[01:21:51]

CJG: No.

[01:21:52]

SR: [*Laughs*] Because the seafood's fried in lard, and there's chicken stock in the gumbo.

[01:21:56]

CJG: Yeah. People always come in and ask, they say—especially the gluten-free people—“What can we eat and what can't we eat?” I say, “You can eat everything but the spaghetti and the gumbo. That's the only two things you can't eat.”

[01:22:06]

SR: I also really like your oyster stew. It's so—. It seems so simple. Is it?

[01:22:14]

CJG: Yes.

[01:22:15]

SR: Can you describe that?

[01:22:16]

CJG: Yeah. Like a lot of old people say, simple's best sometimes, and it is. Matter of fact, Emeril Lagasse came in here and we did a thing for his program on the Food [Network], and he loves my oyster stew. He used to come in here all the time before he got real big and he used to get the oyster stew. What it is; it's just basically—. It's about a gallon of oysters; add some salt; then—. It's the gallon of oysters, the salt, onions, and fresh parsley. All the seasonings are ground up and thrown in with the oysters and all that, and the butter, about a pound and a half of butter, and it cooks down and all that, and then you add milk, and that's it.

[01:23:16]

SR: Whole milk.

[01:23:17]

CJG: Yes.

[01:23:18]

SR: That's exactly what it tastes like.

[01:23:21]

CJG: Yeah.

[01:23:22]

SR: It really is simple. Do you do that to-order, or do you make that at the beginning of the day?

[01:23:26]

CJG: I make a big vat of it. It'll last like—. Like I said, anything like that—like the gumbo, it just gets better as the days go on because everything—. But I usually got to make it every two days because it's gone.

[01:23:43]

SR: The oysters don't seem, like, shriveled or overcooked. I don't know how you accomplish that if you make it ahead of time. *[Laughs]*

[01:23:50]

CJG: No, they—. What you do—that's how you tell when it's time to put the milk in: when the oysters start curling in the ends. When the butter melts and it's curling on the ends, then you know to put the milk in.

[01:24:03]

SR: That's very old-school. Is that something that's been around?

[01:24:06]

CJG: Yeah.

[01:24:07]

SR: You know, one thing that I think is gone from the menu, if I'm remembering correctly, is you used to have spaghetti with daube.

[01:24:16]

CJG: Yeah. We never did bring the daube back. It was too hard to keep the meat. What you would have to do, because not a lot of people ordered it, so we had to keep freezing the meat, and then when you bring the meat back out it just was never the same. It was tough. So we just—. You know, when I was younger, that used to be my favorite thing to eat. Because I used to make the gravy, the spaghetti sauce, and then I would take the daube out and I would slice it, and it was so tender, so juicy. I would put that on a half a loaf with the butter and all that and mayo and it was just heaven. It was just heaven.

[01:25:02]

SR: For people who will be listening to this or reading this who don't know what daube is, can you explain what that is?

[01:25:12]

CJG: It's a big hunk of roast that just cooks down in the sauce while the sauce is cooking.

[01:25:19]

SR: In the tomato sauce.

[01:25:20]

CJG: Uh huh.

[01:25:21]

SR: And your family calls tomato sauce "tomato gravy?"

[01:25:24]

CJG: Yeah. They always called it "tomato gravy." People always question me now, and I say it's just a habit. I know it's a sauce, but they used to call it gravy: "Did you make the gravy?" And I said, "Yeah, I made the gravy."

[01:25:33]

SR: Do you make your gravy with roux?

[01:25:35]

CJG: No.

[01:25:36]

SR: Okay. And was that—? Yeah. I don't know any restaurants that still serve that. There were a few. Am I remembering correctly that you stopped serving that after Katrina? Or did you stop before then?

[01:25:51]

CJG: After Katrina.

[01:25:52]

SR: And that was probably something that just the older generation mostly ordered, huh?

[01:25:56]

CJG: Yeah.

[01:25:56]

SR: It's very old-school.

[01:25:56]

CJG: Exactly.

[01:25:57]

SR: Did you serve pasta with meatballs back then, or—

[01:26:02]

CJG: Yeah.

[01:26:02]

SR: —did that replace the daube?

[01:26:04]

CJG: No, we served it with meatballs.

[01:26:06]

SR: Do you still make daube at home?

[01:26:09]

CJG: Yeah, but not in the sauce. We just do roast. That's it.

[01:26:15]

SR: Okay. What about the—? You added the charbroiled—or chargrilled—oysters. Tell me about those.

[01:26:22]

CJG: Well, when the craze started going, I'd say about three years ago—we've been doing it about three years now—people kept calling me and saying, "You got chargrilled oysters?" and I got tired of saying, "No." So I went in the back and I looked around and I said, "I got to find a place to do this." I said, "There's no place in the kitchen to do it. We ain't got no room." I said, "I'm not doing it under the grill," and stuff like that. That's where we do the bread. I said, "I got to find someplace." So I went out in the back, and behind the bathrooms we used to have these racks, they used to keep the soft drinks there, and I said, "You know what? I'm going to take these soft drinks, I'm going to put them on the other side, and I'm going to build a cabinet

on this side and take down all that stuff over there." And we sheet-metaled the whole thing and put some exhaust fans up there.

[01:27:09]

What I did at first is I brought my grill from my house over here, and we were trying it, and I must have spent about two hours one morning just dabbling with different sauces and stuff like that and I finally came across a sauce I really liked. I went in the back and I did half a dozen oysters and I put the sauce on it and—see, a lot of restaurants that like—. Well, I'm not going to say no names, but a lot of restaurants we go to that have chargrilled oysters, I see the oysters come out, they're little bitty, and you see butter on them and some stuff on them, stuff like that. And I said, "I want mine to be different." I said, "You know, it's probably going to cost me a little more to do it, but I want them to be different. I want them to be"—you know.

[01:28:00]

So when I got this guy here that started doing them, I said, "This is how I want them," and he makes them perfect, just like I want them. It's butter, garlic, Lea & Perrin, a little bit of Chachere's seasoning, some lemon, parsley flakes. He cooks the oysters about halfway and puts the sauce on them and lets it cook, and then he'll put a little more sauce when they're almost ready to come off; then he cooks it with Parmesan cheese, and it looks like a hunk of pizza sitting there with all the cheese on it and everything, with the garlic and all that. It's just—. You know, like I said, when they come out, whether they're medium-size oysters or big oysters—I mean, if they're too small we'll add another one to it and all this stuff, but most of the time they're medium-to-big oysters. I'm not giving everybody the little bitty oysters. Most of the time when they come out, sometimes you don't even see the oyster. All you see is a coat of cheese on

there with the sauce bubbling on it and everything, and people love it like that. They just love it like that, so that's the way we do it.

[01:29:09]

SR: So, to give an image, they're cooked in the shell.

[01:29:13]

CJG: Yeah.

[01:29:14]

SR: And you just set that shell right on top of the grill.

[01:29:16]

CJG: On the grill, mm hmm.

[01:29:17]

SR: A gas grill?

[01:29:18]

CJG: Uh huh.

[01:29:19]

SR: Is he out there all service long? Do you sell enough of them? You say like one guy makes them.

[01:29:25]

CJG: As it started picking up, he's out there about seventy-five percent of the time, yeah. Especially on weekends.

[01:29:33]

SR: Is that something that you had growing up in New Orleans, or is that—?

[01:29:37]

CJG: No. Drago's started that. I don't know exactly when they started it, but it wasn't that long ago, you know.

[01:29:44]

SR: And that's Tommy Cvitanovich's—

[01:29:47]

CJG: Yes.

[01:29:48]

SR: —restaurant, who you mentioned earlier, huh?

[01:29:50]

CJG: Yeah. He's got to be pretty proud about that because almost every restaurant now is trying to serve them, you know. Different ways, people serve them. They sent me a book with restaurants in it. P&J did a book with all kind of restaurants in it, and a lot of them have versions of chargrilled oysters. A lot of them, they put the craziest things on these oysters, you know. Everybody's just taking it to the next step.

[01:30:16]

SR: It's interesting to me that you said that when you go out and eat chargrilled oysters—. You go out and eat oysters?

[01:30:21]

CJG: No, I don't eat oysters anywhere, anywhere, nowhere.

[01:30:25]

SR: [*Laughs*] Just for testing purposes sometimes, maybe.

[01:30:31]

CJG: Nah. Maybe a lot of people—a lot of times, when I go out with people, go grab something, they'll say, "This ain't nothing like Casamento's." And I say, "Well, what did you get them for then?" You know, I think we got the best fried oysters anywhere, and, just like I tell people, I wouldn't dare go eat—. If I got the best here, what am I going to go eat them somewhere else for, you know?

[01:30:52]

SR: Mm hmm. Is there anything like the chargrilled oysters that you've had that you'd like to do? That maybe you haven't done yet, or your clientele isn't ready?

[01:31:04]

CJG: I mean, there's different things always going through my mind. Stuff like—I had a vision of an appetizer: taking that bread that we use, cutting the ends off of it, and frying like shrimp, frying oysters, stuff like that, and lining them up in that, rolling them up, and toasting it under the fire like that and giving a dipping sauce with it. Just things like that. But we can barely keep up with what we're doing in there now. To add something else like that, that would take some time, is just crazy.

[01:31:47]

Now, there's something I'm surprised people haven't ordered. It's funny, they used to order this before I had chargrilled oysters. This was way before Katrina. I had a couple customers that would come in here and they would say, "Can you make oysters bordelaise for me?" I said, "What?" They said, "Yeah, you got the spaghetti, you got the oysters and everything. I know you got butter and stuff back there, and garlic and everything." I said, "Well, I guess." So at that time we weren't as busy as we are now, so I would get a little pan. You know, they'd give me the spaghetti and I'd make the sauce in it and all that stuff, and people

would eat that. And I'm thinking spaghetti with either the shrimp or the oysters and that chargrill sauce on it would be to die for. I made it for myself and I said, "Oh my God. If I keep eating this I'm going to blow up." So, you know, because now we put them on French fries. People get them on their French fries. And I'd say half the people now who order French fries get them with the chargrill sauce on it. People who get grilled shrimp want the chargrill sauce on it. They put it on everything now.

[01:32:59]

SR: I did not know you put that on your French fries.

[01:33:01]

CJG: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. See, what I do, I make it just like I make it for the back except I'll add the cheese into the sauce and stir it all up and everything, so the cheese and everything's in the sauce, and I just dribble it over the French fries and it's just—. Yeah. People love it. And, like I said, people get a cup on the side and dip their grilled shrimp in it and eat it and all kind of stuff.

[01:33:27]

SR: For the record, bordelaise—. So, spaghetti bordelaise is pretty particular to New Orleans, that preparation.

[01:33:35]

CJG: Yeah.

[01:33:36]

SR: And it is just like garlic and butter and maybe some other seasonings, similar to your—

[01:33:41]

CJG: Exactly, something—

[01:33:42]

SR: —chargrill sauce.

[01:33:43]

CJG: —like it, yeah. Something like it.

[01:33:45]

SR: I'm glad you brought up your French fries because those must be pretty time-consuming as well.

[01:33:51]

CJG: Yeah. Back before Katrina, we used to sit here and peel—they used to peel all the French fries. But then everybody started getting in this health thing to where they liked the skin on the fries, and I said, "Well, that makes it easier for us." So now we just slice them up every morning. We keep them in ice-cold water, and when I'm ready to use them you just throw them in, you know. They're homemade French fries.

[01:34:15]

SR: In the lard.

[01:34:16]

CJG: In the lard, yep.

[01:34:18]

SR: That's perfect. Can you tell me—so, you get here at 6:30 in the morning. Can you tell me what your day looks like? What do you do when you first get in? Because you get in a few hours before anyone else.

[01:34:31]

CJG: Oh, yeah. Like I said, I'm usually here about a quarter to 6:00. That's when I start making my gumbos and oyster stew. I make the iced tea; I do all my orders. You know, get all my deliveries in. What I usually do with the gumbo is I'll sauté everything one day, let it sit, and then make the gumbo the next day, and that's usually—. Every day I'm doing something with the gumbo. That's how fast that gumbo goes. Sometimes I end up having to do it double; it just depends on the weeks it is. But, yeah, it's just always something. I cut all the bread in the morning time. Like I said, I can do all my ordering and get all my deliveries in the morning.

[01:35:14]

SR: And then during service, I usually see you in the kitchen.

[01:35:20]

CJG: Yeah, I do all of the cooking in the kitchen. The only things I don't do: one of my girls does the grilled shrimp and the grilled chicken, and my other guy does the chargrilled oysters. Other than that I cook everything.

[01:35:32]

SR: How many of you are in that kitchen doing that dance?

[01:35:36]

CJG: Four during the week; five on the weekend.

[01:35:41]

SR: How big would you say that kitchen is?

[01:35:44]

CJG: About twice the size of a jail cell. *[Laughs]* That's about it.

[01:35:52]

SR: *[Laughs]* I would say that seems pretty accurate.

[01:35:56]

CJG: That's about how big it is too.

[01:35:59]

SR: Have you ever considered moving the restaurant somewhere so that people didn't have to walk through your kitchen constantly?

[01:36:06]

CJG: Yeah. A lot of people will say, "I can't believe we got to go through the kitchen to get to the bathroom." I tell them, I say, "Well, you look around this place. Where else could we put [the bathrooms]?" There is no place to put them. This is only a shotgun place, and a lot of people love it. They love going through the kitchen, they love seeing what's going on in the kitchen, you know.

[01:36:26]

SR: I love it, but I always feel really badly because there isn't much space for you to move around to begin with.

[01:36:34]

CJG: Well, that's what people say: "I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry!" I say, "Don't be sorry. You got to go, you got to go, and this is the only way to go," so. [*Laughs*]

[01:36:40]

SR: When you say this is a shotgun place, can you describe what that is, for people who might now know?

[01:36:44]

CJG: Yeah, it's just a straight—every room is behind one another, just straight, you know, just like a rectangle.

[01:36:51]

SR: You walk in, you see the oyster bar, there's a second dining room, there's a kitchen, and then the restrooms are actually sort of outside.

[01:37:00]

CJG: Outside under the patio, yeah. And then there's a storage shed in the back.

[01:37:05]

SR: And that's where the grill is, back there, too.

[01:37:06]

CJG: Yeah.

[01:37:07]

SR: So you get through lunch service—you're not open between lunch and dinner.

[01:37:12]

CJG: No.

[01:37:13]

SR: What do you do after lunch service?

[01:37:16]

CJG: On Tuesday and Wednesday we don't open up for dinner, so I get the heck out of here and go home. But Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, when we open back up for dinner, I'm either doing stuff in the kitchen or restocking the drinks in the front. Just things like that. Then hopefully get about an hour of downtime, you know, just to relax, play on the computer, do whatever—watch TV.

[01:37:43]

SR: You cook the dinner shift too, huh?

[01:37:44]

CJG: Yeah. We used to have a second cook before Katrina, and she got displaced after Katrina, and we never saw her for a while. Sometimes people would come in and they would say they could tell the difference between my cooking and her cooking, and they wouldn't elaborate, and I couldn't tell if that was good or bad or what, but I didn't like that idea of hearing that. So I said, "Well, you know what? I'm going to do all the cooking myself. That way everything will come out like I want it to, and it's going to be a lot more work but, whatever." And I just kept it up ever since. Matter of fact, she came back about two years ago and she wanted to start working again, and I had her back there and I was watching her do a few things by the stove and I'm like, "No. This ain't going to work." I said I'd let her wash dishes and stuff like that, and then she left anyway. So, I said, "No, I'm just going to keep doing it myself until I can't do it no more."

[01:38:52]

SR: That's impressive. [*Laughs*] That's quite a work ethic. Do you think that it's in your blood?

[01:39:02]

CJG: Oh, yeah.

[01:39:03]

SR: [*Laughs*]

[01:39:04]

CJG: I've worked through—like this year. I mean, I'm usually pretty healthy; this year was a different story. In September when we opened up I had hand surgery on my left hand, so I had to cook for two weeks with one arm and I had to dump all my pots with my right arm and stuff like that. After that, in October, I get shingles and it was inside shingles. I thought I was

having a kidney stone attack, because I've had kidney stones before. I didn't know what was going on. I thought somebody had beat me in the side with a tire iron. I went to the emergency room and they can't find anything wrong with me, they do blood tests, they do all this stuff. Then the guy notices just a small little patch, right on my side. He says, "You know what? You got shingles." I said, "What?" And he says, "You got shingles. That's why you're getting all this pain and everything." I don't know if—. Anybody who has had shingles, they know the pain I'm talking about, and I cooked all through it. I didn't take one day off. I think, since Katrina, I've missed one half-day of cooking, and that's because I had a kidney stone that day. But other than that, yeah, I worked about a month with the shingles. Then I had another problem. My doctor told me I had to lose some weight, so I lost thirty pounds. Now I got a tear in my shoulder, and I got to have that taken care of in June, so it's just like, what is this? You know, it's like, please don't let the future years be like this, because I'm going to be in trouble.

[01:40:46]

SR: What do you like most about this work?

[01:40:50]

CJG: The customers. I like seeing the looks on the customers' faces. Especially first-timers, you know, when they get chargrilled or when they get the gumbo or when they see the oyster loaf and everything. If I'm not going crazy in the kitchen I'll take the time to look, because a lot of times when you're in the kitchen you can hear the customers talking and you can see—when they're studying the menu real good, you know it's the first time they've been here and stuff like that. So when the food comes out I'll stand there and look and watch the expression on their face, especially when they see the big soft-shell crabs come out and stuff like that. And when I watch them put the chargrill in their mouth for the first time and they're like

shaking their head, you know, and going like this. That's what I love the most about it: seeing the reactions of the customers.

[01:41:36]

SR: You said that your grandfather had you come back to the restaurant to cook when he was sick—or to learn to cook. Did you want to cook? Like, did you grow up cooking or wanting to cook, or is this something that just sort of grew on you?

[01:41:50]

CJG: It grew on me. I, you know, a lot of times wanted to kill my old man. Because he was the one who was showing me how to cook, and he had me standing there by the stove the whole time, and what I was, was really his gofer at the time. He was showing me what to do, but I know he was really using me too, because I'm running here, getting corn flour, getting this, getting that, making things easier for him. He was showing me what to do, but the thing is he had me doing this for like two months and I'm like, "I'm ready to start cooking," you know? So he said, "Okay," so he let me do it one night, and I was doing fine. Matter of fact, the next night was a Friday night and I added an extra pot on the stove and he says, "Are you ready to do that?" I said, "I think so."

[01:42:31]

So, yeah, it just caught on right there. People come through the kitchen now—and a lot of times on the weekends I'll have every burner going. Now I use six pots: two for French fries, four for everything else. And the people will see all six pots going at once with different foods all in each pot and they'll say, "How can you judge the time of this with this and this?" And if you ever look at me back there, I'm going crazy. I mean, I know how long it takes the shrimp, and the shrimp comes out the quickest. If the grease is hot, fifteen seconds for shrimp, you know.

Oysters take maybe a couple of minutes; soft shells, a little bit longer; trout's not that long; catfish not that long. It's different times for different things, but I've been doing it for thirty-five years so it's second nature now. I've actually tried over the years to show somebody how to do it, and they like throw their hands up and say, "There ain't no way." So I just said, "Eh, I'm just going to do this myself." What the heck?

[01:43:32]

SR: So does the seafood share pots—

[01:43:37]

CJG: Yeah.

[01:43:38]

SR: —or do you have different pots for different seafood?

[01:43:39]

CJG: The celiac people will come ask me, they say, "[Do you have] cross-contamination? Do you fry this with this?" and I say, "Everything I fry is gluten-free. All the fried seafood is gluten-free." And I got to keep saying that to them. They say, "Even the French fries?" The French fries are gluten-free. They got their own pot, though, but the French fries are gluten-free. Everything is gluten-free, even the fried chicken. I can throw the chicken in the pot right after I do oysters and it's gluten-free, you know?

[01:44:06]

SR: What about your daughters? You mentioned your daughters. You have two daughters, right?

[01:44:11]

CJG: Yes.

[01:44:12]

SR: And they work here, or they've worked here over the years?

[01:44:15]

CJG: They waitress on weekends. They pick up some extra—. One's an RN at East Jeff[erson Hospital], and the other one's a fitness instructor at East Jeff[erson] Wellness Center. But they work here on weekends to pick up some extra money. They do pretty good.

[01:44:30]

SR: But they're not waiting in line to take over the restaurant.

[01:44:34]

CJG: Well, they weren't at first, but as they see us getting a little older, they've—. If anybody does it, it'll be my daughter, Nicole, because she's starting to question a lot of things around here and all that, about doing things and stuff. Who knows? If they get married before we retire or whatever, maybe their husbands will want to get into it or whatever. But I think she will, if anybody. I think she will.

[01:44:59]

SR: When you say that she questions things, you mean she sees things she'd like to change, or she's just curious about how things work?

[01:45:05]

CJG: Oh, just curious. Curiosity about different things.

[01:45:08]

SR: So it's Nicole, and what's your other daughter's name?

[01:45:11]

CJG: Natalie.

[01:45:12]

SR: It's interesting that they both went into the health field.

[01:45:15]

CJG: Yeah. But they're complete opposites. One's a sports freak, like me, and the other one's a little shopper like the mom. You know, just complete opposites.

[01:45:26]

SR: What about your wife, Linda? Did she realize what she was signing up for when y'all got married?

[01:45:32]

CJG: Well, before we got married—. We started dating when I was eighteen and she was sixteen, and she used to go—. Matter of fact, when she started going to UNO—she went to UNO for a little while—she started doing the counter. I was cooking, she was doing the counter.

[01:45:48]

SR: The counter in the front.

[01:45:52]

CJG: No, making the sandwiches and stuff.

[01:45:54]

SR: I see.

[01:45:54]

CJG: Before she started waitressing. So she was in this business when she was eighteen. So that's why when my uncle died, when we went to the—. I have a sister that I had to buy out because she wants nothing to do with the restaurant, so when we went to the lawyers and I had to buy her out the lawyer says, "All right, so this is going to be in your name?" I said, "No, put half

in my wife's name. We're going to split it half and half." He looks at me and says, "You sure?" I said, "Yeah—," And Linda's just looking at me. [*Laughs*] I said, "Yes. Put it in both our names." He says, "All right. It's your funeral." [*Laughs*] And I said, "Okay, go ahead." So we both own half of it.

[01:46:41]

SR: Well, she's here all the time too.

[01:46:44]

CJG: Yeah. She's the night person, I'm the day person. She'll stay after we finish at night and make sure the help gets out of here. And she does the register and all that. And I'm here in the morning, you know.

[01:46:58]

SR: Do y'all have a retirement plan, or is it just: we're going to keep doing this until we can't—?

[01:47:03]

CJG: Keep doing it until we can't. I figure I'm going to try and do it for another—. Let's see. I'm going to be fifty-eight next month, so hopefully until I'm seventy, and after that I might—. [*Sound effect*] We're coming up on a hundredth anniversary not long from now. You know, this is ninety-six years here, so I want to at least get through that, hopefully healthy enough to get through that. But, yeah. I plan on going on. I don't think she's going to last that long, because I mean she does all the waitressing in here and it's starting to catch up with her, so I think she's going to start slacking back within the next year or two. Like just doing weekends or something and getting somebody else to do it. But we want to keep it as long as we can.

[01:47:45]

I told her, I said, even if nobody wanted to take it over—. She said, "Would you ever sell it?" I thought about it and I said—. I mean, somebody's already offered me a million and a half for it, and I said that don't even come close to what I would—. You know, for me to retire and everything, somebody'd have to offer me five million bucks. Because after you finish paying off the capital gain and all that stuff, you know, it takes most of it away. So I can never see—. As much as sometimes—as frustrated as I get and I want to sell it, I can't see doing it because I can't see not walking in this place. Not after it's been fifty-eight years of my life here. I told her, I said, "You know what? Even if nobody wanted to take it over if we retired, I would keep it for—." I said, "When we retire we're going to be set anyway. We ain't going to need that much money to finish off our life and stuff." Maybe keep it for private parties, movie shoots—people love this place for movie shoots—and just different things like that. You know, catering things. It just won't be day-to-day operations, like it is now, but I can't see not being in here. [*Laughs*] I can't see it.

[01:49:02]

SR: Or giving someone else the name.

[01:49:05]

CJG: Right, exactly.

[01:49:07]

SR: What would you say is the most challenging part of your life? I was going to call it "your job," but it's not really just your job; it's your whole life.

[01:49:18]

CJG: A lot of times you're dealing with the day-to-day restaurant stuff: dealing with employees, dealing with suppliers. And the other side of it: dealing with not much time to do

anything for eight and a half months out the year. Four years ago we just finally started taking a vacation, closing down for a couple of days, in the winter. I've never been anywhere in my life in the wintertime because we've always been here. My honeymoon was the only time I've ever been anywhere in the wintertime, and my parents gave me a lot of hassle about that because we got married on December 30, which was Sugar Bowl week. So, yeah, they didn't appreciate having to close for that. But I told Linda, I said, "You know, we're getting older." I said, "We've never been anywhere in the wintertime." I said, "I'd love to see Disney at Christmas, stuff like that." I said, "We're closed Sunday and Monday; we can just take a Tuesday and a Wednesday off. It's only two lunch periods, six hours. It ain't that big of a deal." We look at whatever the slowest week was around that time and we just do it, and we've been doing it for the last four years. We went to Disney and we went to—. We went to Disney twice; we went to Universal Studios twice; went to Vegas once. So it's been five years. My daughter said, "Why don't you ever go someplace where it's snowing?" I said, "Well, the problem is, if you can't get back then we got a problem." That would be a big problem, so we kind of stay to the southern parts. But it's a nice little break, too. It gives them a break, gives everybody time to regroup and refresh, so it works out well.

[01:51:06]

SR: Have you seen snow?

[01:51:07]

CJG: Yeah. I saw it on my honeymoon because we went to the Poconos in Pennsylvania. The only other time I've seen snow was here, [*Laughs*] the few times it snowed here, which I don't call snow, but you know.

[01:51:21]

SR: There've been flakes.

[01:51:24]

CJG: Yeah, actually a few years ago. Actually, all the trees across the street were covered. First time I'd ever seen trees covered with snow, and it was cool. Now I wouldn't want to get caught in any—. You know, people say [I'm crazy.] I'd like to spend two days like in a luxury hotel where they get a blizzard, just to go out there and see what it's like. You know, just see what it's like. [They say], "You wouldn't want to be in that." I wouldn't want to *live* in that, but I wouldn't mind seeing it once, you know.

[01:51:52]

SR: Experiencing it.

[01:51:53]

CJG: Yeah.

[01:51:54]

SR: You mentioned before we started taping that you have some employees that have been here a long time.

[01:52:00]

CJG: Mm hmm.

[01:52:01]

SR: How many longtime employees do you have?

[01:52:03]

CJG: I have one oyster shucker, and he also works in the kitchen—he's been here thirty-five years. My counter girl's been here twenty-five years. The little guy who does the chargrill, he's been here about twenty years. And the other two have been here almost ten years.

[01:52:22]

SR: Wow. Do most of your employees take the summer off also?

[01:52:28]

CJG: Yeah, most of them, yeah. Just about all of them do.

[01:52:31]

SR: And you had a couple of older employees, like when I first started coming here, too, that must have been here a long time.

[01:52:37]

CJG: Oh, yeah, the ones who—. They've all died off now, but before Katrina I had this girl, Wilma, and this girl, Fredalina, who started working with me when I was fifteen, and they worked all the way until they had health problems. And I had a little bus girl—old bus girl—named Alma, and she worked until she was in her seventies. She had diabetes and stuff and she ended up dying too. We used to have so much fun back then. It was really—. Not that we don't now, but it was just—. It was really a pleasure to come to work all the time. I miss all of them.

[01:53:19]

SR: Yeah. You know, I would say that Casamento's is probably in—you know, if somebody's going to tick off the top five restaurant institutions of New Orleans, this is in that bracket. Do you think about that?

[01:53:37]

CJG: A list came out not long ago that we were the seventh-oldest restaurant in the city, which we're really sixth because Parkway Tavern closed up for seven years in-between, so that would put them behind us. So we're really the sixth-oldest restaurant in the city. I didn't realize that at the time. They got different publications that come out, just like one not long ago. Behind

the counter up in the front I have all these magazines since Katrina. It's about forty magazines behind the thing, and some of the magazines that we've been in that you would never guess. I did a photo and an interview shoot for *Playboy*. We got a big three-page thing in *Playboy*; we got a big interview thing for *Maxim*. You know, just these kinds of magazines that you would never think a restaurant would be in. And when I tell people we were in *Playboy*, they say, "Well, did you pose or something?" I said, "No, didn't nobody pose." I said, "It was an interview about oysters and stuff." I guess because of the connection with sex and oysters and all that stuff. So I mean, we got all kind of magazines back there. I guess one of the biggest ones was "The One Hundred Things You Have to Do Before You Die" by—is it Solve magazine? What's it called?

[01:55:06]

SR: *Saveur*?

[01:55:07]

CJG: *Saveur* magazine, which is a big, big magazine. We were twenty-third on the list. It says you have to eat the oyster loaf at Casamento's. So, different things like that just, you know, make you stand back and say, "Wow, a little family restaurant." And, like I said, the movie shoots that we've had. We've been on the Food [Network] three times, Cooking Channel once; we've been written up in papers as far as Switzerland and Italy and all. It's just been incredible. When you step back and think about it all, it's pretty overwhelming, you know, for such a small place.

[01:55:45]

SR: Do those things motivate you day-to-day, or is it just something that you reflect on when you can catch your breath?

[01:55:54]

CJG: Well, it—. Both. It's one of the reasons why I say, you know, I could never stop. Because I feel like I'd be letting a lot of people down, customers down, stuff like that. I realized that a lot more when everybody saw that donut sign out there for that movie shoot and everybody kept calling up saying, "Please tell me it ain't true." And I said, "No, it's a movie shoot."

[01:56:21]

SR: [*Laughs*] Yeah, we talked about that a little bit before we started taping. So, a few months ago there was a movie shoot, and they kept the general look of the exterior, but they put up a very convincing sign and made it a donut shop. And I walked by it early in the morning and saw it out of the corner of my eye and had like a five-second meltdown, panic meltdown,

[*Laughs*]—

[01:56:49]

CJG: [*Laughs*]

[01:56:49]

SR: —thinking that Casamento's had sold. And then I realized that it was a movie shoot. But people were calling you that day, huh?

[01:56:55]

CJG: Oh, they were—. While they were setting everything up for the actual filming and everything was set for the donut shop, they had a car come by, and I was standing outside, and I was behind something so the guy didn't see me. He's riding by in the car and he's looking out the window and he goes, "What the—?" And he goes, "You gotta be kidding me!" And he's riding down the street and everything and I'm just laughing. Two minutes later I get a phone call and it sounded like it was the same guy and he says, "What are y'all doing over there?" I said,

"They're shooting a movie here." He said, "Oh, my God! You had me in a panic when I just passed."

[01:57:32]

SR: *[Laughs]*

[01:57:32]

CJG: I said, "Don't worry." *[Laughs]*

[01:57:34]

SR: I think that there will be people who listen to this, or read this, who would like to know the movies that have been shot here.

[01:57:41]

CJG: *Mardi Gras: Spring Break* was the first movie. Then they shot a movie called *Fred & Elsa* with Shirley MacLaine. Then they shot *Killing Them Softly* with Ray Liotta. They shot *Adam Jones* with Bradley Cooper, that's coming out some time later this year. And they just finished filming *Elvis & Nixon* with Johnny Knoxville and Michael Shannon.

[01:58:17]

SR: You've gotten to meet a lot of the actors and stuff. You were telling me that you're here usually for the shoots.

[01:58:26]

CJG: Yeah, and that's another thing that is overwhelming. I have t-shirts that are signed behind the bar. I must have forty to forty-five t-shirts signed by movie stars when they come eat. I mean, people from Jimmy Carter to Nicole Kidman to Tommy Lee Jones. You know, musicians, golfers, like Tom Watson. It's incredible to see these people that find out about your place, this little place, you know. Like when Jimmy Carter came here, all the Secret Service

came in here and we thought it was some kind of a joke, and then they said Jimmy Carter was coming here and it was really wild. He sat down at this table right here, him and Rosalyn, and they ate calamari, they ate oysters. They ate all kind of stuff, and Jimmy signaled me to come out of the kitchen and I'm going, "Oh, God." So I go sit down with them and I was talking with them and I asked him, I said, "How did you find out about our place?" He said, "My daughter, Amy, [came here all the time when she was a student at Tulane.]" He said, "She came here all the time. She raved about the place." I said, "Okay," you know. I'd have never known who she was. I didn't even realize it.

[01:59:42]

So, yeah, that was pretty cool. Martha Stewart's been here. She was pretty cool. And a lot of people came in here that obviously didn't want to be recognized, and of course they're not getting by me. I usually see them, and I wait until they finish eating and ready to leave and then I go ask them, you know, "Could you please sign a shirt?" And most of them, like Grete Waitz, and James Spader, and all of them—they all came in with their caps pulled over, and they appreciated that I didn't make a big deal about them being here, and they were glad to sign a shirt before they left. Most people were pretty all right.

[02:00:22]

Susan Sarandon and Tim Robbins came in here right after they made *Shawshank Redemption* and they brought their kids in here, and they were little bitty at the time. We saw them come in, and she was in a foul mood. She was just yelling at the kids and everything and he was just like, uh. So, they were sitting over here, and he comes to the bathroom, and you got to go through the kitchen to go to the bathroom, and he comes back and he's just kind of like standing in the kitchen looking around. I'm looking at him and I'm saying, "I saw you in

Shawshank and *Bull Durham*. I loved that. That's one of my favorite movies." So we're talking about it and everything, and he keeps looking out here in the dining room, and she's just yapping at the kids, yelling at the kids and everything, and I said, "Well, if you gotta go in there." And he says, "No, I don't have to go anywhere." So he just stayed in the kitchen for about ten minutes just talking to us and then he says, "Well, I guess I'd better get out there. I'm getting the evil eye." So he goes out there.

[02:01:11]

But yeah, everybody's been cool. We did a private party for Tommy Lee Jones.

[02:01:15]

SR: Really?

[02:01:16]

CJG: Yeah, he's cool. A little eccentric on things, but he's a real nice guy. Yeah, we've had fun in here with some of the people.

[02:01:25]

SR: I'm impressed that you recognize everyone, even when they pull their caps down. How do you even get an eyeball around that curtain when you have all those pots going?

[Laughs]

[02:01:33]

CJG: I tend to look out here because, you know, we've had some stars come in here that nobody's noticed and I find out later that they've been in here, so I keep looking. Like, I walked right past Ashley Judd. Not Ashley. What's the one that's the movie star?

[02:01:58]

SR: Yeah, I think Ashley, right?

[02:01:59]

CJG: That's Ashley?

[02:02:00]

SR: Yeah.

[02:02:00]

CJG: Well, she was in here and she came to get some gumbo to-go, and that's when they were shooting—was it *Double Jeopardy?*—down here. When they were shooting that, or whatever, she was in. She walked right by me and I'm looking at her and I'm saying, "Nah." She had a baseball cap on and stuff, a Kentucky baseball cap. When she left I find out that it was her, and I said, "Nuh uh." Because she's beautiful, you know? Just like Nicole Kidman: she's beautiful. So now I start looking out there because I missed a few people.

[02:02:33]

Now, a couple of Jazz Fests ago, we were real busy and my niece was working in front, and I happened to walk up front to get a bottle of water, and I'm looking at this guy sitting at the last table. I'm looking at him and I just keep staring at him, and he just looks at me and he like nods at me, so I figure, well, he knows me from the restaurant. I'm looking at him and I'm saying, "God, this guy looks familiar," but something about his hair just didn't look right. [So I go] back in the kitchen, I'm thumbing through my phone, and I'm looking at pictures of who I thought this guy might be, and I see a picture of him with short hair and it's the same guy. I told my niece, I said, "Come here." I said, "That guy that was sitting up there, dressed all in black," I said. "Did he have a British accent?" She said, "Yeah." I said, "Well did he have blue eyes?" And she said, "Oh, he had dreamy blue eyes." I said, "You know who that was? Was this him?" She said, "That's who it was." It was David Coverdale, the lead singer for White Snake. I said, "I

can't believe it; one of my favorite groups." I said, "I can't believe." I said, "I should have went up to him and asked who he was. You know, 'Are you David Coverdale?'" Because I would have loved to get a shirt signed by him. Oh! You know, so you miss a bunch.

[02:03:42]

SR: Yeah. Wow, you're good at recognizing people, though.

[02:03:46]

CJG: Yeah. Now, I got mad at my wife during the summer because I told her I had to leave when Bradley Cooper and them was shooting here. I got a picture, you saw it on the website, but I told her, I said, "Make sure he signs a t-shirt." I said, "He said he would sign a t-shirt." She said, "All right." They forgot, so I ain't got no t-shirt signed by him. So, [*Laughs*] like I said, there's a bunch of them we didn't get.

[02:04:06]

SR: At least you got a photo.

[02:04:07]

CJG: Yeah, I got the photo. I—

[02:04:08]

SR: Maybe he'll be back.

[02:04:09]

CJG: —make sure I get a photo with people now.

[02:04:11]

SR: Yeah. That's impressive. Well, I'm feeling super conscious because you're obviously coming up on lunch—

[02:04:17]

CJG: Yeah, we're getting—

[02:04:17]

SR: —service right now. [*Laughs*]

[02:04:17]

CJG: —ready to open up.

[02:04:18]

SR: I'll just—. Well, first of all, thank you for giving us this time.

[02:04:23]

CJG: I enjoyed it.

[02:04:24]

SR: And maybe we can close with you telling us what you're going to do with your summer? You have like a week and a half left until you close.

[02:04:30]

CJG: Well, we're going on a cruise in June. We're leaving on a cruise for my in-laws' eightieth birthday. July, Vegas as usual. August, we don't know what we're doing yet. Other than that, taking care of a few problems. But just doing whatever I can't do during the year, you know: play a lot of golf, a lot of sports, and just have fun.

[02:04:58]

SR: Do you sleep in?

[02:05:00]

CJG: Yes, but not as late as you would think. Usually by 7:00, 7:30, 8:00, I'm up.

[02:05:08]

SR: Well, enjoy.

[02:05:10]

CJG: I will. [*Laughs*]

[02:05:12]

SR: And thank you so much. This was a real pleasure to—

[02:05:13]

CJG: Oh, it was fun.

[02:05:14]

SR: —sit down with you. I've been coming here for years and—

[02:05:16]

CJG: Good.

[02:05:17]

SR: —never got to spend this kind of time.

[02:05:18]

CJG: Good.

[02:05:18]

SR: Thank you.

[02:05:19]

CJG: You're welcome.

[*Transcript ends at 02:05:20*]

END OF INTERVIEW

