



**Spencer McMillin**  
**Former Chef at Caritas Village**  
**Memphis, Tennessee**

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Annemarie Anderson: Okay. Today is July 15th, 2021. This is Annemarie Anderson recording live from Oxford, Mississippi, and I'm with Spencer McMillin and he is in Beaufort, South Carolina. Mr. McMillin, would you go ahead and introduce yourself for the recorder, tell us your name, and tell us what you do again.

Spencer McMillin: My name is Spencer McMillin. I'm a chef, currently unemployed by choice. I've been a chef for thirty-eight years. And right now I would consider myself I guess a gastro traveler. I'm just traveling on my stomach with my wife, who's actually employed. She's got a position at Cúrate in Asheville, North Carolina.

Annemarie Anderson: Cool. That's awesome!

Spencer McMillin: Yeah. She's working in the pastry department.

Annemarie Anderson: That's awesome. Well, maybe we can go back. So our last interview was exactly 365 days before this on July 15th of last year.

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And maybe you could go back to that moment-- maybe not that moment specifically but that time-- and kind of give us a summary of what you've been up to since then.

Spencer McMillin: Sure. Yeah, absolutely. When we spoke last, I was in Charleston doing the same thing I'm doing now, traveling on my stomach on vacation with my wife. When we first spoke, we were kind of in the beginning of our trip, our first two, three weeks. We took five weeks off, so we were week two. From Charleston we went to Savannah, stayed there three or

four days, and then we went to New Orleans. New Orleans was a shocker. Middle of the pandemic, we decided to descend upon New Orleans and see if our favorite restaurants were doing okay. And New Orleans, God bless that town, it looked post Katrina.

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There was nobody on the streets. There was homeless gathered under bridges in big shanty towns. We drove through the Quarter second day in and about nine o'clock at night there was no lights on. It was absolutely a ghost town. It was just a shock. So there was a lot of shock after I talked to you. From New Orleans we met my-- I don't know if you remember but I was talking about last time I wrote a cookbook called *The Caritas Cookbook, a Year in the Life with Recipes*. We met our friends-- who also did the photography and the layout design-- we met them in New Orleans and finished most of the cookbook there, so that was fun.

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From New Orleans we went back to Memphis and finished the cookbook. So that was one thing we did. We got everything together, found a publisher. But the most important thing we did when we got back to Memphis was start another project. When we talked last, I think we talked about Feeding the Front Lines, Memphis where we fed the hospital workers with donations. We also did the Restaurant Workers Unity Project. When we were at Caritas, we turned it into a relief mission for restaurant workers and it turned out to be for everybody. When we got back to Memphis we created The Restaurant Phoenix Project, a title that my wife came up with, and basically at that point and still restaurants are struggling. It's a little bit of a different struggle right now. The struggle right now is finding employees. Everybody is so understaffed. But back then it was revenue.

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So what my wife and I decided to do with our friend Bobby Maupin was create another nonprofit that did benefit dinners at struggling restaurants. We got all the product donated and the profits from those restaurants, all the proceeds went straight to the restaurant. So maybe a symbolic gesture but these restaurants were getting two-, three-thousand, four-thousand dollars of clean money, no expenses attached to it. So we did-- let's see. I've got it right here. We did four restaurants. We did a farm. Johnny Kirk who's down there right outside of Oxford, he's got Third Plate Pastures. He's a hog farmer and close friend of mine. He was struggling. He didn't know if he could keep the farm going, so we did a benefit for him on our farm and raised him three- or four-thousand dollars and he was able to keep going.

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So he's still there today, amazingly. From there we decided to-- the unemployment insurance was running out. We were doing stuff for everybody else, and we realized, oh, we need some income coming in, too. So nobody in Memphis was hiring. It was still kind of a schizophrenic situation. So we decided to look elsewhere. And Kristin suggested that, "Why don't we go where you're from?" I'm a Yankee originally. I was in the South for thirty-one years before that. But we went up to New Hampshire, got on Indeed.com, looked for jobs up there, and found a little Italian restaurant that was struggling. It had opened in the pandemic.

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And we drove up there, checked it out, fell in love with the area, and decided to just move up there. We got an apartment in Newmarket, New Hampshire, and took over this Italian restaurant,

rebranded it. It was called Ciao Italia, and Mary Ann Esposito, who is a very famous-- if you've ever heard the name, she's got a cooking show called *Ciao Italia*-- she was kind of a consultant on that project. So I'm a consultant. I got up there, I saw what we needed to do, and we closed it down and rebranded it, reopened it as Ciao Trattoria and Wine Bar, and now they're doin' okay. We kind of turned the situation around. We were there seven months. And in those seven months we kind of realized that the South is where we wanna be.

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We love the South. We tried the North. Just didn't have the same soul. So I trained my replacement and Kristin contacted Cúrate in Asheville. Asheville is a place where we always wanted to go. And she struck up a relationship with them. We left on June 20th and went straight to Asheville. She got the job and now we're just traveling for five weeks and we're about to head back there, and I'm gonna find work there. So in a nutshell that's kind of what the last year has held for us. A lot of traveling, a lot of projects. We opened a restaurant, rebranded a restaurant, went to the North. That's it. Oh, and the cookbook was published, and I'm gonna send you a free copy of it so you can check it out.

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It's a great document of that one year at Caritas and how it kind of-- we went from a nonprofit kitchen that was feeding the homeless, buying from farms, and how COVID kind of put an end to that and how we turned it into a relief mission. So that whole story's in there too.

Annemarie Anderson: I like how you say it, "That's just what we've done in a year." [Laughter]

That's a lot!

Spencer McMillin: Yeah, quite a lot. But we like to stay busy. If we're bored, we're, like, okay, what can we do? And especially during the pandemic watching all our friends-- I had many conversations with friends 'cause I would go into these kitchens. These had been my friends for thirty years. And just seeing my friends cry and fall apart, you just have to do somethin'. And we had the ability to do it, so we did it.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. That's great.

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Well, I was actually going through the interview that we did last year, and it struck me-- it was funny-- not to ask this question then, but I'd like to talk about it now. And you spoke to it a little bit about going to New Orleans and seeing this place. But talk to me a little bit about traveling in the middle of the pandemic, maybe like both what you were thinking and feeling about these places. Tell us some of those places that you went, and I guess what the restaurant industry looked like in all of those places, if that makes sense.

Spencer McMillin: Yeah. Well, one thing about Kristin and I, we're pretty defiant. People were telling us, oh, you don't want to travel. Yeah, just stay home. Hunker down. Don't go anywhere. We were on a hundred-acre farm, my father-in-law's farm, living rent free. God bless him for letting us do that. We just kind of, let's go out there and see what's going on.

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Let's be very safe, let's wear our masks, let's social distance, but we're not gonna let this pandemic keep us at home. Which may be naïve, I don't know, but we just had to get out. So we saw restaurant business-- it was heartbreaking in a lot of places, it was beautiful in a lot of

places, and it was scary in a lot of places. We went to thirty, forty restaurants in a five-week period. We saw people defying the mask mandate, which angered us. We would walk into a restaurant, the first thing I would do is go kind of peer into the kitchen to see what was going on and depending on masks or not we would stay or go. I'm hesitant to bring up any restaurant names.

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Annemarie Anderson: That's okay.

Spencer McMillin: I don't want to do that to these restaurants. Everybody was just trying to figure it out. But there was no theme. It was just everybody trying to figure it out, scrambling, didn't have enough employees, didn't have enough customers. New Orleans in particular, like we talked about, was heartbreaking. We went to-- I'll name the restaurants here because they were all great examples- Donald Link's restaurants, Cochan, Cochan Butcher, Peche, La Boulangerie. These are all restaurants owned by Donald Link and they were all efficient, safe, still delicious, even with empty dining rooms. To get a reservation at Cochan, the fine dining concept, you had to get it a week out typically in non-pandemic times.

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But when we went down there last July we walked right in and there was maybe two tables in there. And there was cooks back there just kind of milling about, didn't have much to do, and they were just kind of screwing around. To see that . . .

My wife and I when we first started dating, we went to New Orleans and Cochan Butcher and Cochan is really where we kind of cemented our relationship. We just looked around and we're

chefs and this is the best food in New Orleans. And how amazing to be partaking of this! And we just fell in love right there. And to go back in during the pandemic and seeing that restaurant get emasculated, just empty, the cooks kinda screwing around, it was kinda heartbreaking. It was very heartbreaking. I did do a lot of cooking when we went to the Outer Banks.

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Amazing seafood in the Outer Banks. Amazing seafood in the Outer Banks, so I cooked it. But we did go to a lot of places, too. The one place, and we just went back there, that transformed our lives, gave us a very happy experience, and kind of defied the pandemic was The Ordinary in Charleston. We went in there. It's Mike Lata, very famous Charleston chef. He owns FIG. He also owns The Ordinary, his seafood restaurant. And we were craving seafood. We were touring the coast. We went in there. You couldn't tell there was a pandemic except for the mask mandate which everybody stuck to. It was packed. The food was amazing. It was a busy, bustling restaurant. It just didn't even seem like there was a pandemic.

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And like Cochran was that first time The Ordinary was this time. It was just epiphany after epiphany. It was beautiful. So like I said, we had beautiful experiences and then we had experiences like a restaurant in Charleston a little Greek-themed restaurant where we walked in, nobody was wearing a mask, we walked right out. But a lot of heartbreak, a lot of people really pulling together and working as a team to keep restaurants afloat. After doing what we did in Memphis we really tuned in to how the staff was interacting with each other, and there was a lot of really positive attitudes in a lot of restaurants. I have to say that.

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But the thing that really sticks with me about that whole five-week trip was New Orleans and how-- I wasn't there for Katrina but I saw it on TV, and we had a lot of refugees from the restaurants in New Orleans come up to Memphis looking for work. And to drive into New Orleans, nobody on the street middle of the day, empty restaurants, heartbreaking. But if there's a city that can take that kind of punishment it's New Orleans. But I just felt so bad for the city. I just felt so bad 'cause I have a friend, T.H. Freeland [sp], who helped open Saint Leo's in Oxford. He was, like, the second chef there. He stayed maybe six or seven months. But he travels around, too. Right now he's in Birmingham at a restaurant called Ellen [sp]. We saw him and he was just, like, "Man, it's tough. It is tough here."

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But looking into the kitchen with him there they were all just taking care of each other and just very respectful. Yeah, it was a haunting experience. To go down into the Quarter, to stand in front of K-Paul's, which was Paul Prudhomme's restaurant he had for thirty years-- they closed it in June. And I have pictures of myself thirty years ago before I became a chef standing in front of K-Paul's, very young and just looking like this is where I want to be, this is what I want to do. And that was kind of the "it" restaurant for me at the time. And to stand in front of it again thirty years later, gray hair, in the middle of the pandemic-- we had to use a flash to get the picture because the Quarter was so dead. The restaurant was just dark. There was nothing there. It was very sad.

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It was a haunting experience. I want to go back. That brings up another point. We're kind of in this-- I don't want to say post-pandemic, but everybody is kind of-- we're in this weird comin' out of it phase. Well, restaurants aren't really coming out of it yet. I kind of naively thought that we would have a renaissance. You know, there'd be a restaurant renaissance and customers would flock back and all the cooks would report to duty, and it would just be busy and bustling and a happy zone. But without the cooks there-- and it's a national shortage. Cooks are still on the unemployment-- they've gotten out of the work and they're going to do something else with their lives-- these restaurants are undermanned. And sometimes you can taste it in the food.

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We've gone to restaurants, and I won't name, that we were excited to go to because the last time we were there it was just delicious, and then this time it was just missing that something, that vibrancy. I taught culinary school for nine years and I would talk about how you could taste how the cook is feeling. If the cook doesn't care, then there's a lack of seasoning or there's a lack of sear on that piece of fish. If there's not enough staff the food kind of tastes jumbled, or they use food that they shouldn't be using just because there's not enough people to regulate. We've had a lot of those kind of experiences on this trip where we anticipated a certain level of flavor or service, and it just wasn't there. And you realize when you look around, you look into the kitchens that there's two people trying to cook for two hundred people. And how could you possibly make the food taste like it did before when there was eight people cooking that food?

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So we still have a long way to go as a restaurant community. And I want to be positive about it. I want to say that there will be a new batch of cooks, a renewed interest in cooking in restaurants,

but I think right now the cooks have left the building and it's a serious problem. I'm about to go to Asheville. I'm about to jump back into it and help out but I know that wherever I go they're gonna work me like a dog. So it's scary to me as a 51-year-old man to think about going back into the restaurants right now. So it's a fear I have. The positive out of this is that salaries are great.

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The old idea that restaurant workers don't get paid what they're worth-- a very, very real consequence of the way restaurants are designed and the financial considerations of a restaurant, you can't pay everybody fifteen bucks an hour. You can't pay your servers fifteen bucks an hour because if you look at the finances like I do you're not gonna be able to stay open. But that's starting to happen and that's a positive. And that needs to be in place if we're gonna get these people back into these kitchens and back into these front of houses. So right now we still have a lot of work to do. There are a lot of customers. The restaurants we go to are typically very busy. Everybody is vaccinated and coming out and wanting to experience what they experienced pre-pandemic and totally understand that.

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There is-- and it's a negative-- there's a certain expectation of a certain group of diners that don't really care what happens in restaurants, they just want what they want. And we experienced that in the North for sure. In the restaurant we opened up, my kitchen, I had two guys and myself. I worked a station and I had two very talented guys that I inherited, and Kristin. Kristin did the pastries and worked the line every once in a while. But there was times where the crush of business was more than we could handle. And Kristin was the general manager and the pastry

chef and some days she was the dishwasher and some days she did the pizza station. Some days she was a waitress just because we couldn't find people or people called out with COVID. That was a big problem.

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And there was, I would say, 10 percent of our customers up there gave us hell about it. They didn't like that we changed the concept from fine dining to a trattoria, very informal kind of pizzeria with pasta. Very simple food. Creative, chef-inspired food but it was very simple, things that we could execute. So that's another problem, customer expectation. I think if I could speak to people about going out to eat, I would say just be patient. If your food takes fifteen minutes longer than you think it will but it's good, just be happy about it. Or just stay at home and give it time, 'cause this scene, this restaurant business, especially in the South, it's gonna take some time. It's not just, okay, everything's back open, we're back to normal. We took a very serious hit.

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This pandemic, it closed a lot of restaurants. Others held on. And we're still in this. We're still in this. And the big problem is that now we have a crush of customers, and we still have those same two cooks in the kitchen. So I hope that answers the question in a long-winded kind of way.

Annemarie Anderson: No, that's great. You keep touching on a lot of the things that I was gonna ask you. I do want to ask you maybe-- so you moved from Memphis and you're doing this work, to New Hampshire. What were some of the maybe differences and similarities between I guess what you saw in the South generally in restaurants and then going up and working in a restaurant in the North? I guess were there any differences?

Spencer McMillin: I hesitate to make generalizations.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

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Spencer McMillin: People in the South, when we left, customers didn't want to wear masks. You had that group of people that-- I don't want to get political-- that were just, like, this is a fake pandemic. This is all a media creation. I'm not wearin' masks. And a lot of my friends got frustrated with it and it was a source of consternation and strife in these restaurants. You go up North, everybody is wearing a mask, they're all worried about it, they took it seriously. Mask mandates in the kitchen. Mask mandates for customers. Contact tracing and all that stuff. So they took it very seriously, and because of that, the last thing I heard, 70 percent of the people up there are vaccinated.

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To be honest with you, that was one of the biggest draws is during the middle of this pandemic we can go to a place where they take it seriously and there's low COVID rates. That was the big draw. Opening a restaurant in New Hampshire, we were in a very well-to-do-- we were in Durham which is the university and there's a lot of old money there. So there was a certain expectation, like I said, from us. And they're reticent to change. They didn't like the changes. That's about all I really want to say without getting too--

Annemarie Anderson: Sure. That's fine.

Spencer McMillin: I don't want to be negative.

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I love New Hampshire. I grew up there. It was just they took the pandemic seriously whereas in the South customers didn't so-- you had 25 percent of customers in the South that just didn't believe it was a pandemic, it was some kind of propaganda, and they didn't want to wear a mask.

Annemarie Anderson: And I'm sure that that's very stressful for you as someone who is working and serving to impact your own personal health.

Spencer McMillin: I wanted to add something.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. Sure.

Spencer McMillin: My wife jotted a couple things down that I didn't mention. The idea of the word-- what's the word, honey?

Kristin McMillin: What?

Spencer McMillin: Pivot. Pivot's the word.

Kristin McMillin: Oh, pivot.

Spencer McMillin: You probably heard it a million times. We pivoted up in New Hampshire from-- they were doing ala carte dining, dining room dining three days a week and then trying to do takeout and it wasn't really working.

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So when we went up there, we did delivery, we did family meals, we did takeout, and we marketed it. And that's really how we saved the restaurant. And all my friends in the South and all over the country, that's how we save the restaurant industry is by pivoting the model from fine

dining to takeout. You got Grant Achatz up there in Chicago makin' burgers, takeout burgers.

Daniel Boulud, all these famous fine-dining chefs are just pivoting to burgers. And we definitely took that model and ran with it up in New England.

Annemarie Anderson: That sounds great. Yeah. I will say I was doing some internet sleuthing to prepare for this interview, and I would eat all that pasta that you guys made. It looked really good! [Laughter]

Spencer McMillin: Thank you. Yeah, we had fun.

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I say we kind of dumbed things down, but we really didn't. We went a lot more pre-boxed. I made the bread, I made the pizza dough, I made the pasta. Josh [sp], who took over, super-talented guy from high-end kitchens in LA, he was doing super-creative stuff. So during this pandemic situation where we had to make the food more approachable, we made it higher quality too. So yeah, I'm glad you saw that because we took it seriously. We had a kitchen. I have cooking talent. Kristin's an amazing pastry chef. Josh was an amazing cook. Why not actually cook? 'Cause food that you throw love into and your heart into and your expertise into tastes a lot better than the crap that comes out of a box.

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Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

Spencer McMillin: So yeah, good point. We did take it seriously, the cooking angle.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah. It looked like it was very thoughtful food that would be delicious to eat.

Spencer McMillin: Thank you.

Annemarie Anderson: I have a couple more questions 'cause I want to let you guys go and have a great rest of your day.

Spencer McMillin: Sure.

Annemarie Anderson: But I'm wondering specifically, in the last interview you talked a lot about kind of your philosophy and what this pandemic has kind of-- I asked you about "a new normal," and how this has kind of like impacted your idea of working in a kitchen. But I'm wondering, when we spoke last you were on the road, you were traveling, you were doing this work and then you've gone into and spent seven months in a kitchen. I wonder if you could talk about specifically how the pandemic has impacted your philosophy and your ability and your kind of understanding of running a kitchen day to day?

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To be honest with you, when I went up to New Hampshire, I just did what I do, I cook, I look at finances. Kristin and I really dug down deep, figured out what the problems were, and then fixed 'em. So I think Kristin's more philosophical about what we did up there than I am. I just went in and did what I did. As far as running a kitchen during the pandemic, I can definitely say 100 percent that it created kind of a-- working with those guys and with Kristin in that kitchen kind of created a "band of brothers" mentality. At first, we needed to get business in there or we were

gonna close. And a lot of times when you inherit a staff like I did you have some reticence from the staff to adopt your philosophies and your ideas.

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But those two guys with Kristin and myself, we all became this kind of one mind, and we figured out what we needed to do to get business in the door. We executed that plan. We were successful and then we just kept tweaking it as we went. And if you look at OpenTable right now where most of our reviews are they're just, like, off the charts, five, people love it. They really loved what we did. And that gave us a sense of pride to keep pushing it. And I worked in forty-three kitchens in my life, most as chef but some as just a cook-- I started at 1983-- that was probably because of the pandemic and because we built something great during the pandemic, we all had really a bond.

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I still keep in touch with those guys. I text Josh every other day, find out, "How's it goin'?" We see what dishes he's pumping out of that kitchen right now. They're super creative, super delicious, using local stuff. And we formed a bond like soldiers at war. And I've had that before but not to this level. So does that answer it kinda?

Annemarie Anderson: No, it definitely does. That's fascinating and beautiful.

Spencer McMillin: Yeah, it's definitely a band of brothers situation. We fought a war, we had an objective, we achieved the objective, and then we all just kinda looked around at each other and went, "Hell, yeah. We did this!" And those guys are still up there doing that and I'm proud of them. It was kind of a disparate group.

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Josh told me the first day I met him-- he gave me his notice. He said, "This is not the kind of food I like to cook. I'm just here helping out, living with my parents during the pandemic. As soon as I can I'm getting outta here." Charlie [sp] had a big family to feed. He was making an hourly wage. It wasn't very good. And I could tell that he was gonna get lured away unless we did something. What we did initially was just give them buy-ins, say we need you guys to give us your input. They did and we rescued both of 'em. And now those two guys that were one foot out the door each are now runnin' it. So nobody's gonna stay there seven months unless they feel that bond, and they definitely did. So it was a very beautiful situation and one that I'll never forget.

Annemarie Anderson: That's wonderful!

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Well, those are all the big questions that I have for you. Is there anything that we didn't talk about that you would like to mention?

Spencer McMillin: The Caritas cookbook. Little about me and my writing. I went to University of Memphis, which was Memphis State at the time, to study creative writing. I didn't know what to do with it but just that I was interested in reading and to see if I could write. And I just kinda floundered. I wrote a couple magazine articles but never really wrote anything of note. And what happened at Caritas during that pre-pandemic time where we were doing partnership dinners with Jonathan Magallanes, who I think you've interviewed--

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

Spencer McMillin: -- Kelly English, all the big Memphis chefs came and donated their time, donated food, and did these dinners which were the foundation of the Phoenix dinners we did later.

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It was a feel-good situation and I decided to illuminate that and to be my first writing project. So along with Maria and David Benton, our photographers and our layout people, we put together this cookbook. And it's not a high-gloss *New York Times* best-seller cookbook, it's kind of a-- I call it a yearbook. It kinda looks like a high school yearbook. Kinda looks like a group of students put it together. I'm gonna send it to you. When you look at it, you'll be, like, oh, yeah, this is-- I call it a garden club ladies' version of a glossy cookbook. But it kinda tells the story of how Caritas started with us and how it ended when the pandemic hit, and how beautiful that whole year was.

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So it's called *A Caritas Cookbook, a Year in the Life with Recipes*. And it's my narration of the events and the chefs and the concepts that we came up with for Caritas. So I'm very proud of it and I want to send you a copy if you'll give me your address.

Annemarie Anderson: Sure, yeah. Cool. Well, is there anything else that you'd like to add?

Spencer McMillin: I don't think so. We're gonna be constantly keeping tabs on this restaurant scene and I'm gonna be in there fighting in the trenches with everybody else and I'm just hoping it gets better. We're gonna put a bunch of positive energy into it. Wherever Kristin and I work,

we'll be better off because we're gonna put that positive energy into it. But I'm a little worried about it, to be honest with you. Will it ever go back to pre-pandemic levels?

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

Spencer McMillin: But that's it. I'm hopeful. Everything in time.

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We just gotta train cooks. We just gotta get the cooks.

Annemarie Anderson: That's what everyone I talk to no matter what project I work on, they're like, "We can't find people to work."

Spencer McMillin: Yeah. It's like blacksmithing. The blacksmiths of the world kinda disappeared. Butchers. You've got the trendy restaurants with the trendy butchers and that whole thing, but butchery is still a disappearing art. Farming. We gotta keep these arts going. The craft of cooking. Culinary schools have closed. There's not a whole lot of interest in learning like I did, just going in as a dishwasher and working your way up. So what are we gonna do? These are the big questions that I think about. How are we gonna get back to pre-pandemic levels where you have enough staff, you have enough customers, and it's a perfect symbiosis?

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And to continue feeding people and bringing pleasure.

Annemarie Anderson: Yeah.

Spencer McMillin: Right now it's still in that schizophrenic one person doing three people's jobs kind of-- and that's not a sustainable model.

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Annemarie Anderson: That really is not. I guess we'll have to see, won't we? [Laughter]

Spencer McMillin: Yeah. Yeah, we will.

Annemarie Anderson: Well, I appreciate the time that you took.

Spencer McMillin: Absolutely.

Annemarie Anderson: I'm going to stop recording now.

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[End]