

Interview of: Oscar Diaz  
Interviewer: Ellen Brooks  
Interview Date: July 16, 2020



**Oscar Diaz**  
**Executive Chef- The Cortez**  
**Raleigh, North Carolina**  
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Interviewer: Ellen Brooks  
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**Ellen Brooks:** Today is July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020. This is Ellen Brooks interviewing Oscar Diaz for the Southern Foodways Alliance Oral History Project on COVID-19, and we're conducting this interview remotely via Zencast and Zoom.

So why don't we just start with you telling me a little bit about yourself and what you do.

[00:00:21]

**Oscar Diaz:** Okay. My name is Oscar Diaz, and I'm a chef in Raleigh, North Carolina. I'm the executive chef and partner at Cortez, located in downtown Raleigh, and then also at Jose and Sons, which I'm sure we'll touch on further, has actually had to shutter its doors for the time being because of the coronavirus.

[00:00:53]

**Ellen Brooks:** And can you just tell me a little bit about your background, like where did you grow up and kind of your path to becoming a chef?

[00:01:00]

**Oscar Diaz:** Absolutely. So I'm born and raised in Chicago. My brothers and I are all first-generation Americans. So my parents came from Mexico when they were young. My father moved to L.A. for a little bit, then he decided for Chicago, which is a little bit different from what most people experience. A lot of people usually end up in L.A., Houston, stuff like that, but my father went to Chicago, so we were born and raised there, went to college out there, everything.

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Kind of later in life, I decided I just wasn't—I didn't know what I was doing, and cooking just seemed appealing. I don't know why. I actually have no clue. I had never worked in a restaurant, anything, and I'm like, "Chef? That sounds great." I don't know. Anyway [laughs], no, no, I mean, I think it worked for me. It was one of those things where like when you say it, you're like, "Okay, this is either the dumbest thing or the brightest thing," and it was right there for me.

So I moved to Vegas, actually. That was really strange. I just kind of one night decided, "Okay, I'm going to just start looking into culinary school," and I think I just like searched it. This was before cellphones and stuff that were like tracking you all day. The next day, I had a million replies from all these places, saying like, "Yeah, come to culinary school," which should have just kind of warned me that culinary school wasn't for me, how quick they got a hold of that.

I'd already been to college and all that, so it was just—anyway, so I went to Vegas, went to the Cordon Bleu, and after like a month being there, I dropped out. It just was not for me. I just felt it was—it just seemed like—it was a trap for a lot of people to give money. I mean, I have no problem saying that. That school is defunct now and stayed because of that. They were just, you know, one of these places where they give people that are down and out on their luck, and then make them take out these loans. You know, I just didn't like that. I didn't like being around people that were like basically signing up to just give away whatever they have left.

So I dropped out, but I was lucky, I got to work at this awesome restaurant, Alizé, on Top of the Palms Casino, and my chef there, the final chef I had there, Mark Purdy, he was highly influential in just my career, just the way he spoke about, "Hey," like culinary

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school, like he made me feel good, like he said, “Don’t worry about dropping out of culinary school. It’s not like you left Harvard. It’s not like you left anything like that.” He was like, “Some people do well with that, some people need that kind of thing, but,” he said, “honestly, right here you’re going to learn.” He just gave me a lot of confidence, even though technically I kind of sucked at that point. But he helped me out a lot, gave me a lot of confidence.

So I worked my way up in that restaurant, and then eventually I left Las Vegas to move to California, and I went out to L.A. and I worked for the Patina Group at Patina, and kind of the same thing. By this point, I felt a lot more confident, I understood the food. You know, these are Michelin-star French restaurants. I worked my way to being one of the top people in the kitchen, and I decided that it was time to kind of just move on and kind of start figuring out my path.

So I moved back to Chicago, but this is during the recession, and I kind of didn’t pay attention to that, because you’re so caught up in working in a kitchen all day, that you don’t know anything other than kitchen. Like you work six days a week, you know, twelve hours a day, so I kind of was just out of touch with everything other than food. I had this obsession that I needed to start defining myself to the food, which was really important to me because although the French restaurants were great, I felt like I wasn’t going to grow as far as I wanted to grow within them because I wasn’t French and because I had this thing where I wanted to incorporate foods or flavors that were part of what I thought was like the American palate, or just I don’t know about the American palate, but I didn’t understand why everything had to be just like the way they made it, and I understood it was their restaurant, it’s French, cool, but I just felt like it was

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underappreciated, anything that was like Mexican or anything that had like a Mexican American tone or anything on those lines, and I just really wanted to start creating.

I fell in love. I think that's why I wanted to start cooking, and at this point it started making sense that I can form an identity through food, and I really needed that in my life because that was really how I started cooking, because I didn't know what the hell I was doing in anything.

So, yeah, I moved to Chicago, and it was just really tough. I staged at some great places. Nothing really worked out. I had a friend who I had met in Las Vegas, and he somehow moved out to North Carolina. That story I don't know. I remember when he called me and he's like, "Hey, I'm in Raleigh."

I'm like, "What's like—where or why?"

So, you know, he told me just out of the blue—it was like perfect timing. I literally was leaving one day this place I was helping out, and I was walking home and I'm like, "I've got to figure this out," because now not only am I not identifying myself through food, I'm actually now working at places that I'm not as good as where I was before. So I just started feeling like I needed to do something. I needed to do something, and I guess living in Vegas, I was like, "I need to just gamble a little."

My friend said, "Hey, I have this restaurant in Cary, North Carolina, and they're letting me do whatever I want on the menu." He said, "I'd love for you to come and help me put up a menu."

So we kind of set up a deal. I said, "Look, you try me out. If you pay me this amount, I'll head up there."

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And, yeah, pretty much four or five days later, I'm moving to—I couldn't even pronounce it. It's not that I couldn't pronounce it right; I was mispronouncing. I was like saying "Rally." [laughs] Rally, North Carolina. My apologize to everybody. I know now.

But I just moved out here, and that place was short-lived. Within maybe a month of being there, the owner came up to me and said, "Hey, I wish you would've come before, but, unfortunately, with the recession and all that, I just want to go back into real estate and I can't do the restaurant anymore." So he closed the restaurant. He gave like some bonus money and let us grab stuff out of the kitchen.

So my friend immediately was like, "Well, I'm gone," and he left.

Randomly, someone had told me, "Hey, there's a Mexican restaurant looking for a chef." And I looked at the ad, and it was like "Fine-dining Mexican looking for a chef," and I'm like—I mean, I know about fine dining, but I didn't know what to feel or what to do at that time, so I just kind of reluctantly went, and that's when I met my business partner and his family, actually, at the time, and did a couple of dinners for them. I had never worked in a Mexican restaurant, which is kind of funny, because they were like, "Well, how are you going to do this if you've never worked in a Mexican restaurant?"

I'm like, "Well, I never even ate French food and I worked at Michelin-star restaurants, and that worked out." I grew up eating Mexican. I grew up being around—I understand food now, you know. Recipes aren't a thing that stress me. You know what I mean? I know how to make these foods.

So, yeah, I mean, that was ten years ago, so ten years later, here I am, I'm a partner now with them. We had opened up a place. It was Jabar [phonetic] initially where I had opened up, and I was their executive chef, and we switched it to Jose and Sons,

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which became our kind of like what I had mentioned to them that I'd like to maybe do something different. I'd noticed a lot of the Mexican food in Raleigh was like Tex-Mex kind of, but like its own form of it, and I was just like, "That's weird that all the food's like that here, isn't it?" And I would ask them, "You guys are Mexican. Isn't this weird?"

And they're like, "I don't know." They'd been in it for so long.

So I was able—"What if we just start doing food that's more representative of where *we're* from?" Because, again, it's just been important for me to find an identity, whether it was through food or for myself, and so I started petitioning to them, like, "Hey, we should do like—" I didn't have a name for it, but I was like, "You know, Mexican food with Southeast influences, not Southwest. Like we're here. We use okra, we use this. I feel like those things—and pulled pork here, that reminds me of *Cochinita*."

So we just started kind of riffing with that idea, and we played around. I mean, like, you know, I played around with terms, which I think ten years ago was a little bit more lighthearted. Now it's a little tough. We were saying like, "The Mexan-Dixie Line" or, you know, "Confederexican," you know, just kind of playing around with what the cuisine was, and we didn't have a name. "Well, they call that Tex-Mex. What do we call this?" And I was like, "I don't know."

So we were playing around with that, but we just went into it and we started doing it, and it took off for us, and it was kind of like a leap of faith, because, you know, it's not easy to necessarily introduce a new style of cuisine to a place where people are so embedded with one style, and it's also an ethnic cuisine and it's also in the middle of a recession and it's also going to be like not necessarily point to a picture, \$3-a-plate combo-type thing. So it was a little bit risky, I think, at the moment, if I can recall

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correctly. I mean, obviously you're always nervous opening a place, but I think because of the unfamiliarity of it and the fact that I'm like some guy coming from somewhere else, you know, it was a little bit crazy, but we ended up doing that and it worked out well, was well received.

A couple years later, we opened up Cortez, which was a seafood restaurant, again where we're celebrating everything off of our coast, and just a little bit more open, a little bit less driven by only like our ethnicity plus where we're at, but more like what we feel food is, you know. I see a lot of chefs, you know—I think being a chef, a lot of it is like a freedom to cook and to kind of like you're telling a story with your food, you're telling a little [unclear], so we decided we wanted to open a place that would take flavors of everything that we enjoy in our lives, and like a lot of our experiences have been here in the States, so this is like, if anything, we consider it American cuisine, because, I mean, I used to go to Mexico every summer as a kid, but I have not been back in a long time. I don't travel the world a lot. I'm really within the States. So a lot of what we learned was from here, and we wanted to start representing our food in that fashion.

[00:11:20]

**Ellen Brooks:** Awesome. That's great. So just for a little bit of context, do you remember what year you moved down here to North Carolina?

[00:12:05]

**Oscar Diaz:** So that would have had to have been—I believe it's been ten years now, so 2010. It was like the beginning or the end of the year. I remember that. I can't remember

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exactly if it was—I think it was after New Year’s. I want to say I spent one last New Year’s in Chicago with my family and friends, and then I think I came before my birthday, which is in February. Yeah, that it is, because I remember actually I cooked for a friend at his birthday before I left Chicago. So, yeah, I think I got here like in February of like 2010.

[00:12:43]

**Ellen Brooks:** Okay. And then also that is connected to my next question, which was what is your birthday?

[00:12:49]

**Oscar Diaz:** February 11, 1982.

[00:12:54]

**Ellen Brooks:** Okay. Awesome. Great. So thank you for taking me through that journey. [laughs] So, you know, we could talk about a lot of things, but this project is supposed to focus on COVID-19, right?

[00:13:07]

**Oscar Diaz:** Right. Let’s focus. I was on a tangent. [laughs]

[00:13:10]

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**Ellen Brooks:** No, I think that was great. I think it's really important to have the background info, but moving forward, we'll focus on COVID-19. So can you talk a little bit about like the trajectory in terms of like its impact on you and the business? I'm kind of interested in like when did you first hear about it, what were your first reactions, how did you initially respond?

[00:13:34]

**Oscar Diaz:** Yeah. I'm assuming we started hearing about it when everyone else started hearing about it, technically, you know, through the news. Just in general, you start seeing—yeah, I mean, I can't remember at the beginning, honestly, when I first heard of it, but I know that before anything had happened in the U.S. or before any action was being taken in the U.S., it was mainly in China. We had been hearing about it, but my business partner, Charlie Ibarra, he and I had kind of had a conversation before that, because we're like, "Hey, like this thing's kind of crazy." And we just had a general conversation, because I think at that point they started mentioning on the news like it's going to start spreading, and it had started spreading in other countries. I think at that point it was like China, Italy. And we're like, "This is starting to look not good."

And then I think it was like New York, San Francisco, and I went, "Okay, it's like the dominos are falling." And so we actually closed our indoor dining, or just in general seating people indoors. We kind of started following like the New York timeline, because we figured it's going to come, no matter what. At that point, we were certain that it was going to come, and, I mean, it was a little different then than it is now, in the fact that the

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unknown, the uncertainty, I mean, I can't tell you—there was not one person in here that didn't have hands raw from how much we were washing our hands.

And it's just like it's just the lack of information and then how political the information got, and I think that just started driving people to a really stressful time, because we were like closing, yet people were still open, and some people were like, "Why are you closed?" Because we don't know. We don't know. We just know that people are dying. We know that major cities are shutting down. So like for us to think like we'll be all right is, I mean, I don't know if I can swear or not, but it's fucking crazy. Like it's wild to think that that's not going to come. And a lot of people were like, "It's gonna skip us."

And I'm like, "I don't think so." You know what I mean? At this point, like it's gone all over the world and now it's like in our own country. Again, L.A. New York, if everyone's shutting down, I think we're going to be next.

So we started trying to plan according to that, and it was—I mean, it instantly started becoming stressful because you're now pivoting in a way you've never had to pivot, you know. In past time, you may have to pivot because, oh, my oven broke down or, you know, this happened, or it's raining or there's a hurricane, you know, bad weather, whatever the case, snowstorm, whatever, which, you know, are situations in their own, but nothing like this. So really what's happening is that we're being exposed to the fact that we don't know what to even do, and there was no one to look to.

And the odd thing is that I would like to add that, you know, not to try to make this all political and everything, but like even politicians and stuff, they didn't have anything to say, and I feel like a lot of the community started looking toward like chefs

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and like restaurants and stuff to see what to do, and we were the ones, “Okay, we’re gonna close our doors. We’re gonna do curbside. We’re gonna start trying to sell to-go kits,” because no one—like there was no help. There was no aid. There was not like, “Hey, this is something.” There was nothing. It was up to us to make it end. It was just strange. It was really strange to start seeing a community of people that usually are just, you know, that just cook, have to be the ones that kind of start setting a tone for what’s going to start happening, you know.

We started donating food, started trying to help our employees. You know, the first thing we started thinking about was how do we help—I don’t even think PPP [Paycheck Protection Program] had been brought up yet, so we didn’t know that there was going to be any funds, and we were just thinking how can we make this work. So right away, we’re like, “We can’t be a seafood restaurant. We can’t just be serving like these expensive items. We have to now pivot to something that’s easy to go. We have to figure out what staff can get unemployment, what staff can’t get unemployment. The ones that can, let ‘em know, “Hey, right away jump on unemployment,” and then that was crazy for some people because they couldn’t get it because everything was backed up. Just a lot of things started happening. So at the beginning of it, it was very stressful.

Then the whole PPP thing was like—it was like a carrot that’s dangling in front of you for motivation, but then it didn’t happen, so we didn’t get the first round of it, and they’re like, “Oh!” The you hear on the news that like thirteen companies got all the money, you know, and they’re huge companies. It was really difficult to not be thrilled, to put it nicely. So that was a little bit—there were stressful times.

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Then I guess they realized the mistake, people started returning the money, and there was a second wave, so we were able to get the money on the second wave, but by then, you know, the game had changed 100 percent like how we did business, who was here, and then we started realizing, for example, at Jose and Sons, that it was going to be very, very complicated to navigate that situation because of the size, because of the—it's supposed to be three weeks or something like that, I think, initially. They're like, "Three weeks? It'll be gone." And that was not the case.

So with every week that went by, you know, it's tough. You might not feel it all the time, but as an employer, you start feeling this heavy responsibility for people that are like, "Hey, what are we supposed to do? Like I can't pay my rent. I can't do this, I can't do that." And then, you know, there were some people that were able to get the full unemployment and all that, and apparently that was really good for them, but then we had other people who weren't eligible from when they started or whatever the case may be, and, you know, they have kids, single-income home, and you just have the crazy responsibility because even though it's not like a promise, but the arrangement, the original contract between employer and employee is that, you know, they will come and provide a service for you and you pay them for that. And that's just like the black and white. But it becomes family, people you know and you see every day.

So it just started becoming really complicated and, more importantly, I think personally people's mental started also kind of going in different directions, because at the same time, we're dealing with a pandemic. You know what I mean? Like something we've never dealt with. So I think there's a lot of internal stress that everyone's carrying

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around, and it's just like things are bursting at the seams, you know, like it's just a big change. It was definitely a stressful moment once we were full on into the pandemic.

[00:20:42]

**Ellen Brooks:** And do you know why you couldn't get the first round of the PPP?

[00:20:48]

**Oscar Diaz:** I mean, there's a lot of excuses as to why we couldn't, right? But I think—I don't know if anything is really confirmed about why, but I feel like—people were saying, oh, if you have a large bank, if you have like a national bank, they're too busy and they won't get it through. You need to go to a small bank. But then I also heard from like other sides that like the deal between the government and banks wasn't 100 percent set up all the way immediately about how the banks were going to be paid back. Even the guidelines, because it wasn't like, "Hey, here's some money to help you out in this crazy situation." It's like, "We're going to give you this money, and it's technically a loan, but if you follow these guidelines, it'll be a grant. But if you don't follow those guidelines, it's just a loan." And that stuff was changing while we were already receiving the money. Like, "Okay, it's going to be 60 percent goes to this." So everything was changing. No one ever wrote us a letter saying, "Hey, sorry you didn't get it because of this." There was no real explanation, so in my opinion, it was just everyone got caught off guard.

And then in the middle of being caught off guard, there's still business to be done, and I think it was a mixture of those two things, where people want to get theirs, and just a late reaction to it. So, therefore—and I think also the fact that they were being exposed,

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you know, when they were staying to say, “Hey, Shake Shack” and this and this, because they got *millions* of dollars, and in the meantime, there’s all these smaller operations that are getting nothing. So, you know, I think that kind of [unclear], but, no, I mean, we never—I don’t know the 100 percent facts of what happened. I can only assume from my end.

[00:22:28]

**Oscar Diaz:** And then so for a while, were you doing takeout from Jose and Sons and Cortez?

[00:22:35]

**Oscar Diaz:** Yes, we were doing takeout. You know, one thing I would like to add is that the community did support, because in all the uncertainty and all the people that were also furloughed of their own jobs, I mean laid off from their jobs and all that, people came out and they were buying stuff, gift cards and shirts and whatever we had to do it, but, unfortunately, you know, if we just want to go down to the actual business aspect of it, we would have never opened up a restaurant or signed a lease with those kind of numbers in mind, you know, where we’re just doing some takeout. I mean, business went down about 90 percent. Our sales went down about 90 percent, but it was nice to have those people because we just, at that point, knew that we weren’t going to pay rent. We were going to put all our bills on the side, so all the money that was being made was just to do payroll, you know.

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I mean, if you had a big bank account and you wanted to dip into it to try to just like keep everyone afloat, that was one thing, but we knew that we wanted to generate enough money to be able to pay our employees, so, you know, again, with the people who weren't able to collect unemployment, we sat down with them. We're like, "Hey, look. We don't know what it's going to be like. We're in the dark as well, but we'll stay open and whatever money's coming in, we're just going to split it amongst staff and just keep everything going and cover the cost of food and keep moving forward." So we were able to do that for a long time.

Then eventually, Jose and Sons had a situation on its own, too, where the lease was up and the landlord didn't want to work with us, and it was too much for us. They just wanted everything to stay the same, basically. They were like, "Look, you guys were here. Just rent it again."

And I'm like, "We're in the middle of a pandemic. It's a really weird time to sign away something that's going to keep going up in cost and not knowing where we're going to come out." And it's just a very large venue compared to Cortez. It's a *way* larger venue. Even at 50 percent, if we were to be able to open it now, again, as a business model, we would have never opened up with that. We'd have been like, "This is not going to work for us." So we just knew that we couldn't do it, so we've been looking at other places to move it to and stuff, but the reality was we just couldn't do it there. So all the reality started hitting, right? Because rent's still due.

Then we did get the PPP money, but, you know, that only covers so long. We got it a little bit late, so we already had put money in before that. Rent had been paid up before that. Then you get it in two, three months, and it just starts running out, you know,

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and you're trying to pay everyone. Yeah, we just had to shut it down because of the reality of it. At this point, it's a gamble. Do you want to try to carry this out and see how long this lasts or do you just, you know, cut ties there? So we decided to cut ties with that place.

But at Cortez, we've opened up now that they've allowed the 50 percent. It's a little bit of a smaller restaurant, a lot bit of a smaller restaurant, but we have an outdoor patio, we have a back patio, so we decided it'd be good to open up, you know, follow all the precautions and just keep our businesses afloat.

[00:25:49]

**Ellen Brooks:** Yeah. And what's the vibe there these days when people come in and, you know, you're trying to do [unclear] normal?

[00:25:56]

**Oscar Diaz:** Yeah, so the vibe is different. So the restaurant is never completely packed. We don't allow it to get packed. So, you know, just being someone who's always been in restaurants, a packed restaurant is like what everyone wants, right? Like everyone kind of complains about it a little. They're like, "Oh, it's so busy!" But it's like your day goes by faster in a rhythm, everything works. So the vibe from the part of the employees and staff, it's a little bit strange to see it so empty and kind of slow, but, you know, as far as guests are, there's a lot of people that are happy that we are open. There's a lot of people that still come by and say, "I wanted to come with some friends and have dinner, but they don't feel comfortable."

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So there's a split, you know. There's definitely a split, whether it be political, whether it be science-based, whether it be comfort-based or, you know, whatever the case is, but, you know, it's a strange place to be. Everyone's been happy, everyone's been super receptive, we haven't had any complaints about anything. We're trying to do our best to keep—we all wear masks. We're doing our best to comply with everything, all the information that's out there to keep everyone safe, but I understand how some people don't want to still come out and stuff.

But on our end, you know, PPP's pretty much done, so we have to start figuring out the future, because everyone says "the new norm," well, the new norm for us is to figure out how to make all this work, because nothing else is—I don't see a giant change that soon, so we have to figure out how to make this situation that we're currently in work for us. If not, it's going to be the difference between us having a business or not.

[00:27:43]

**Ellen Brooks:** Yeah, that was gonna be one of my questions about kind of like what do you see for the future, like what do you think is gonna happen and like kind of like what plans do you have.

[00:27:57]

**Oscar Diaz:** Yeah, so I think one thing that happened right from the beginning, when I was thinking about pivoting, is that aside from changing the style of food that people do to lower food costs, aside from changing also like—so we [chuckles]—pre-pandemic, I guess we were pretty fancy or something, because we never did takeout food, and that

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was kind of by design because we have such a small place, and all these like to-go containers take up a lot of space on our little pass that we have to put food, and we were always packed. Quite frankly, it was just like a hiccup—it was a big hiccup in the night when we had to do to-go, and people were like, “Yeah, four dozen oysters to go,” and this, and I’m like I just don’t feel comfortable always selling stuff like that. You know what I mean? Like oysters to go, I don’t know what’s gonna happen with it, and I don’t want the review from it, you know, whatever. So we just really didn’t do it. We would do some, but not really.

So now we’re definitely—we’re like, well, we need to do it, so there’s small things that have changed, like the style of food, what you sell. Everyone in the community, like I see a lot of restaurants now, you’re having to get smart. You’re having to almost create like other businesses within your business. So like I think there’s another place that just started doing like soft-serve ice cream, and they were like a coffee shop. You know, we have a pastry chef here, and we started selling his ice creams to go. We started doing—we know we need to do more. We did these gift boxes where we’re trying to sell things. We just have to redo, like we have to be selling something all day, business. You know what I mean?

So that’s kind of one of the things that has changed, is that it’s forcing people to be creative to an extent where we’re now making sure that even though there’s less business coming in, we’re still pushing out some sort of service, some sort of good, so we can get that to-go business, we can get the in-house business, we can get the gift card game. So we’re trying to move in that direction.

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As for the future, you know, what we're trying to do is, again, just really tighten down on our numbers and expand our reach with our sales, what we're willing to do, because we don't really have like the best, you know—the problem is that because all these phases that we can do this, we can do that, you know, right now we've been, I think, in Phase 2 for like three weeks longer than we were supposed to be already, so we can't even make plans, so we're just trying to work the best that we can with what we have right now at this moment.

We do know that in the future, I mean, we're definitely not trying to look into getting into large restaurants anymore like that. A lot of things are changing. Services that you use, having a restaurant, there's *tons* of services that you pay that really don't do anything for you. It's just kind of like you pay them. It's how a lot of businesses make money, like, for example, Open Table, where you get charged a bunch of money for reservations, this and what. Getting rid of a service like that, you know, taking home linens and washing them yourself, like you have to start cutting costs wherever you can, because there's just—you can't run it the same way as before. Even before when things were good, margins can be pretty tight in this industry. Now you really, really, really have to be frugal and just smart and available to do something all day.

[00:31:26]

**Ellen Brooks:** Yeah. And you talked a little bit about kind of like the restaurants and the restaurant folks being kind of looked to for leadership. What kind of happened? And I think you had said something when you and I first talked about kind of like where

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restaurants fall in like the hierarchy of businesses? Are those two things related? Does that make any sense?

[00:31:48]

**Oscar Diaz:** Yeah, I mean I don't remember exactly what I had spoken with you about, but I think it's kind of like how what I was touching on right now, maybe, where, you know, when things are fine, like I feel like cities are always really quick to be like, oh, so-and-so city, or, "This city is amazing. Look at our food scene," and then they name that chef, and every time you hear about a city being great, they're always talking about like the restaurant scene, the dining scene, arts, this and what, but yet we get treated like second-class businesses. You know what I mean? Like we're always in the bottom because the margins are small. When things like this happen, nobody was there to back us up, yet people start looking towards us and there was a lot of leadership in the community that went out and just started trying to reach to politicians, do this, do that, like really start helping the people, because if we don't make that noise, no one cares about it, you know? They're like it's taken for granted.

Like, yeah, I'm trying to remember what also I told you that day. I feel like I made more sense when I mentioned it that day. But I definitely do feel that we're raised to this super high level of like, you know, showing us off, like, "Wow, look at this. Look at what they've done. Look at how you want to come." We have so much value to the city. We hire so many people, there's a giant workforce in this community. The amount of money we bring in to cities and states with, you know, what we do, and then all this happened and everyone forgot about us, you know.

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Like for example, here in Raleigh or North Carolina, there's like the Abasically, where you get your liquor from, which I felt was kind of—well, I think it's a bad system in general, but, you know, their sales went through the roof, right? Because everyone's now not going to work, there's depression around, people start drinking, whatever. They have free time, they're enjoying themselves, whatever the case may be, people are drinking. And at the same time, we're not allowed to sell alcohol anymore, which is part of our business model, right? Like we pay a liquor license, but they're like, "No, you can't sell booze," even if it's in a packaged thing to go, because whatever. Bible Belt reasons, whatever it may be. But yet they're through the roof, their sales, which if you really wanted to help this industry that they so much used to show off, they would've said, "Hey, people can come and treat restaurants like an Abasically store in their neighborhood," the income, get the mixers and get ten ounces of booze, whatever, if it's closed, put it in their car. They could have done something to help us, but they didn't. They made things very difficult for a lot of businesses to really make it. Like you're just now selling to-go food, which also, in general, costs a little bit more money because you're putting everything in containers. Is it ecofriendly, is it this, is it that?

So I just felt like it was kind of like you got abandoned, like, I mean, I don't know if everyone else felt like that, but I definitely did feel like that, like when the show was on and they wanted to show us off, they'd bring us out, but then when it really came time to do something for these places that make your city so vibrant, it was like, "Eh, we're gonna worry about other things." So it was just unfortunate.

I do think, in general, this industry has some issues that are going to be dealt with here in the near future after this, because it's just a lopsided kind of thing. We're paying

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payroll taxes. Just a lot of things were still going on while we couldn't even function as a proper business. So it just seems like people are making money off us and getting [unclear], or not [unclear], but like they're benefiting off of us for free. I don't think it should be that way.

[00:35:29]

**Ellen Brooks:** Yeah. And you talked a little bit about, you know, how stressful things were, especially at the beginning, and kind of the responsibility you have towards your employees. How do you personally kind of cope with that kind of pressure?

[00:35:43]

**Oscar Diaz:** [laughs] Oh, man. I'm not sure that I cope very well all the time. I mean, you try to do your best, you know, because it's a weird thing. It's kind of like you're trying to keep everyone's glass half full, but at the same time, you got to keep your pitcher half full, and so it becomes complicated because you do start—you know, the reality of everything starts hitting you the same way it's hitting everyone else, and some people are looking at you like, "Hey, what are we going to do about this?" And I'm like, "Oh, god, let me process all this other information first."

And, in general, you had a lot of people reaching out to you, because everything hit at once. Like aside from the pandemic, then it was just like I think everyone just—I feel like the country just kind of snapped, like everybody started letting everything out and, you know, the protesters started going out. There were a lot of people also asking for things, like, "Hey, we're trying to raise money for this group of people," or for servers

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and for this. And like I said, we were trying to raise money for our people, but then, in general, to try to raise money for everything, it's like, "What if we do a dinner?" And I'm like, "Well, we can't get people in the restaurant."

So we were like limited, but, again, we were trying to collectively get together and create something to help everyone. It felt very frustrating because we were limited in what we can do, and in being limited, you just start feeling helpless. And there was just a lot going on that you know that you could help if things were a little bit more normal, but they weren't. So what if you donate your time and you come and you cook at someone's house and this and that? I'm like, "Those are all great ideas, but like we're in the middle of a pandemic. It doesn't really work."

So it was just stressful. I mean, I don't know. I had some conversations with some people, personal conversations, like, "Hey, how you doing?" People, I think, were maybe not openly saying like they're freaked out, but like I do believe that it was taking a toll on people. You could see it on their face. You could see it on their morale. Like at first I think it was like, "Okay, this is just like a thing. We'll take advantage of the days off, go out and just kind of relax, get my home [unclear]." But then it started becoming like, "What is really going on?" And that's where you started noticing it on people, like frustration about money or just in general. Yeah, it was eerie, almost. It was like the restaurant looked different, not all the lights were on, we were just in here slowly cooking. So it was stressful from all aspects.

We're trying to figure out the game on how to help the situation in general, you know, in the city and within our own business. It was a lot to digest, honestly, at once. I almost can't put it into words, because I don't want to make it like a sob story, because

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I'm sure everybody was going through it, but like, you know, when everyone was like, "We're all in this together," we literally were, and like the whole world. So there were some moments where we were like, "Okay, we're not the only ones," but, nonetheless, uncertainty of everything was always there in the back of your mind, and a little bit stressful, honestly.

[00:38:56]

**Oscar Diaz:** Yeah. And how—like this is gonna be a very general—just like how are you feeling today, like right now? How are you feeling about all this?

[00:39:05]

**Oscar Diaz:** Right now I'm feeling a lot more hopeful. I never lost hope completely or anything like that, but, I mean, I think you kind of lean into the situation you're in, and so we've started finding our way. We hired back some people. So I think that feels good to know you can kind of get a team back together, that the morale seems a little bit more upbeat. So I feel good about that. So we got our immediate community back. Like our people, our employees, they're all here, we're all working towards something.

We're back to—I don't want to like simplify who we are, but at least for me, I'll speak for me on this, there's like this peace that comes. Again, I got into cooking for finding an identity, and then all of a sudden, you get thrown into this pandemic and kind of lose your identity, and your identity's actually threatened at this point. It's like will we ever even get back to having a restaurant? So now we're pushing out food, and it's almost like the therapeutic part, like we're actually putting beautiful food on a plate

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again. For those little moments, you're kind of like, "Okay, I remember this. This is normal. We get done with work, we're tired, we go home."

It's a little bit of a different pace, but at the same time, I'm still now trying to be proactive for what's to come, so, again, I'm doing what I was doing at the beginning of the pandemic, where I'm looking to other states, other countries, whatever, to see what's happening there so that I'm not caught so off guard again. We went through it once. I'm sure we can go through it again. So we're just—it feels a lot more optimistic in the fact that we went through the first part of it, so if it comes back again, it's like let's do it. We'll take it head-on. We'll go through it again. You know, we lost what we lost in *Jose and Sons*, but our fight's not done. We're not trying to throw in the towel and be like, "It's over," let our mental go completely to trash. I think we're staying positive and we feel optimistic.

We see that people want to come out and people want to do the right thing, but, more importantly, you know, we know that this is going to be a little bit longer than what we all expected at this point, so we're just hoping everyone does the right thing as well and maybe make this a little less political and just everybody wear a mask. [laughs] Like, you know, like just start listening to science a little bit more.

So, yeah, I mean, currently today I'm optimistic. I'm definitely not like turning a blind eye to it, but I'm optimistic because we at least have our little family back, and there's comfort in that. There's comfort in having your people around you and putting out a craft that you like, and kind of just forgetting about things for a little bit and going back to, you know, quote, unquote, "normal" times. But, yeah, you just get to focus on your passion for a little bit and joke around with your people, kind of like it's a stress relief,

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you know. You get the group back together. But we're definitely positive. We're hoping we can move forward.

[00:42:15]

**Oscar Diaz:** Okay. And I want to give you an opportunity, and we can ignore this if you'd prefer, but I just wanted to give you an opportunity to talk about the SFA [Southern Foodways Alliance] meeting that was supposed to be this fall, if you want to talk about what you were supposed to do and now what you're supposed to do.

[00:42:33]

**Oscar Diaz:** Yeah. So I was supposed to do the opening dinner for the fall symposium, which is a huge honor. I mean, I've been to the fall symposium, I believe, three times now, two times. But, you know, I was excited. I was asked to go and cook that first dinner, which is really cool because everyone shows up the first day, there's like this really cool energy, I think there's like this excitement, there's like unknown, like, "What is this?" I remember the first time I went, I was like, "What is this?" And it kind of reminded me of—well, I went to military school for a long time, too, but it reminded me of like college, like first day you show up and you're like, "Who's going to be my friend?" And you're like walking around with a name tag and you're all lost.

But it was going to be really cool because to break—you know, to open up that night, you get to make a dinner for all these new guests that are there. It's a big dinner. A lot of great chefs have been able to do stuff before. So I was asked to do that, and I was

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super excited, and then the pandemic hit, but it was like way early, so I was like, “Oh, two to three weeks, we got this.” [laughs] Little did I know.

But then eventually I was contacted, saying that, “Hey, we’re gonna have to cancel it. It’s going to become like a digital format.” It was supposed to be on the future of the South, the whole—it’s going to be on the future of the South, and so now instead of just cooking a meal that kind of was going to be representative of what we think the future of the South may look like, now I’m writing an essay. This is wild. [laughs] I’m excited for that. And then propose a menu that is, you know, something that I think would be like a future-of-the-South menu, and then two recipes from that menu that can go out and be made at home by people, which I thought was a great idea because, you know, not being—I mean, I’m from the South, as far as I’ve been living here for ten years now, my parents are from Mexico, that’s like real, real south, but I was born in Chicago, but having been here for those ten years, I’ve seen a little bit of the change in general, even how southern food is perceived throughout the nation, let alone how it’s being cooked out in the South, and with all the minorities now that are out here and how food is changing, you know, the proposed menu that I had is—I do think there should be a lot of like smoked foods that are now done ethnic, like *Cochinita* but smoked.

I can speak for Mexicans in general, but I know that there’s like Indian chefs and Thai chefs and Vietnamese chefs, and it just becomes something that happens. Having lived in L.A., I kind of saw that like back in the days, the cultures were very separate, but these last years I have been to L.A., in certain parts the cultures are kind of meshing, starting to become one, so that you go to a bar and you’ll hear hip-hop, you’ll hear Banda, I mean Snoop Dogg’s maybe Banda song, like a Mexican Banda song, and I think

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it's not a fusion, it's just like a thing that happens, like people know Bastor [phonetic] and Bugogi [phonetic] and Shawarma and all that as much as they know hot dog and hamburgers.

So that's kind of what I vision this proposed menu to be like, is a marriage of, you know, what really is defining like American, and I think that's the future, in general, of a lot of places, but I think the future of the South is going to become like—yeah, I don't know if I'm making myself clear, but it's going to be more meshed with the people that are living within it. Like we're not just going to be Paula Dean anymore, because we're not. And the Mexicans who live here don't have to make this like made-up Tex-Mex menu, because we're more than that.

So that's the proposed menu I had, but, nonetheless, I'm still super excited. It's a little different writing an essay and all that. I can talk for days, I guess, but I don't know about write for days. So pray for me on that one. [laughter]

[00:46:52]

**Ellen Brooks:** Yeah. Well, you know, when we share this transcript with you, maybe that will help you do that.

[00:46:57]

**Oscar Diaz:** Right. [laughs] Hopefully, hopefully. I mean, I've already written some stuff and all that, but I feel good. I was just making a joke the other day. I'm like the last thing I had to do with an essay was like, you know, they called *cholos* out in L.A. and stuff like that, essays. I'm like that's the last association I had with that. But I'm on it.

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Lucky, my business partner's great at writing, so he's gonna proofread [?] with me. But, nonetheless, I'm excited. I mean, it'd be great if we could still have gone and met up, but, you know, obviously nothing is like that right now, so hopefully by next year we'll be in the situation where—

[interruption]

[00:47:44]

**Oscar Diaz:** Hopefully we can, by next year, get everything back to normal or, you know, closer to normal, but I'm excited, nonetheless, to put all this forward.

[00:47:53]

**Ellen Brooks:** Awesome. I think those are all the questions that I wanted to cover. Was there anything else that you wanted to add that we didn't talk about?

[00:48:01]

**Oscar Diaz:** No. I mean, did I clarify most things? Yeah?

[00:48:07]

**Ellen Brooks:** Yeah, I think, yeah, I think you did great. I think you did great. [laughs]

[00:48:13]

**Oscar Diaz:** All right.

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[00:48:13]

**Ellen Brooks:** Yeah, so if there's nothing else that you think—and if you think of something, you know, you can always email me. Like I said, we're potentially going to do another interview in like, you know, six months or a year or something, to check in.

[00:48:28]

**Oscar Diaz:** Yeah, good.

[00:48:29]

**Ellen Brooks:** So, yeah, all right, so I'm gonna stop the recording over here now, if that's okay, but you want to stick with me on Zoom?

[00:48:35]

**Oscar Diaz:** Yeah.

[00:48:37]

**Ellen Brooks:** Okay.

[End of interview]