



**Isaac Toups
Toups Meatery
New Orleans, LA

Date: August 19, 2020
Location: Toups' Meatery
Interviewer: Justin Nystrom
Transcription: Technitype Transcripts
Length: Twenty-eight minutes
Project: COVID-19

Justin Nystrom: All right. Today is August 19th, 2020, in the year, the crazy year that is 2020. I'm here at Toups' Meatery with Chef Isaac Toups. My name is Justin Nystrom. I'm recording an interview on what else but the COVID-19 and restaurant issue and all that kind of good stuff. I'm doing this for the Southern Foodways Alliance.

So, without too much introduction, Isaac Toups is well known. He's nominated for a James Beard Award this year. We were just discussing that before I started recording, so that's very exciting. Of course, Toups' Meatery has gotten a lot of attention from various media outlets over the years. He's got a cookbook out, [*Chasing the Gator :Isaac Toups and the New Cajun Cooking*], I believe it's called.

[00:00:53]

Isaac Toups: Yep.

[00:00:55]

Justin Nystrom: And he's trying to hang in here, running a restaurant during the middle of a pandemic. So, Isaac, thank you very much for joining us today.

[00:01:05]

Isaac Toups: No problem.

[00:01:05]

Justin Nystrom: I try to do a fairly chronological interview, but we're definitely not on rails, so if we need to loop around on anything, you just let me know. But when were you first aware that there was such a thing called coronavirus?

[00:01:05]

Isaac Toups: I think the last offsite I went to was in Miami before the shutdowns, and I heard about it and it's overseas, and you think, okay, is this going to be like another Ebola, two cases and it'll be gone, or is this like—we didn't know what to do with it until it got here, until the shutdown happened, honestly. I didn't know enough about it, I didn't research it, I had my head down. I'm always very busy. Of course I heard about it. "Oh, yeah, coronavirus. Okay, well, we'll just wait and see what happens." And then—boom!—it was really until the shutdown hit that we went, "Oh! Oh! This is real, real, real. Okay." Yeah, so not a whole lot of preparation. We'd never done this before. We didn't know how to expect. We didn't know how long. The worst part about this kind of thing is the unknowns. We ask, "What are we going to do next month?" Like, I don't know. I know as much as you do, which is nothing. So, taking it day by day, week by week.

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Justin Nystrom: So at some point, you had to shift, like you had to shift from what you were doing to what you're going to be doing. What did that first couple weeks of transition look like?

[00:02:39]

Isaac Toups: We switched gears right away, and I think that's one of the keys to our success, not [?] success right now or we're better off than some of our contemporaries because we did switch gears. We only shut down one day and we essentially dipped the entire restaurant in bleach, cleaned everything up, got everybody masks, got everybody a sanitizer, and then we reopened up the day after that for takeout, at that point takeout business only. We were lucky we kept all of our management and most of our staff. The only staff that got let go, they were already on the way out anyway, so that worked out.

Then we immediately started reaching out to these food organizations. First it was the Red Beans Krewe and then Chef's Brigade and World Central Kitchen, but right off the bat, right off the bat as soon as we furloughed maybe four employees, we told those employees, "Look, you don't have a job, but every day you can come here and get food, get a family meal." We have family meal every day for in-house. This was before. For all of eight years, every day twice a day, you get food. That's not very common in all practices, but we feel it's very important in a restaurant. If you're going to work very hard, laborious labor, you get something to eat. So we said, "Look, you don't have a job. Instead of making ten meals a day, I'll make fifteen. Come and eat every day."

I get a call the very next day, "Chef, my roommate, they got laid off, but he doesn't have any food. Can we make like one extra meal?"

"No problem." So I went from fifteen to twenty.

The next day, twenty was forty. "Okay, you know what? Let everybody know. Anybody. Anybody needs a meal, I don't care if you're in the food industry, I don't care

what it is, I don't ask questions." And it doubled every day. It doubled every day to at one point we were serving—I believe the maximum was 500 meals.

[00:04:24]

Justin Nystrom: Whoa!

[00:04:25]

Isaac Toups: Five hundred meals and we went out and—my wife [Amanda Toups] is amazing at social media, reached out on social media. We dropped our ego and pride right away. We called up all of our purveyors, “Hey, what have you got for discount? Hey, what have you got for donation?” And then we started getting some donations from some higher-ups, people who didn't want to be recognized for it. We had friends reach out. Some people were donating, Venmo'ing us five bucks. “Hey, it's not much, but I'm helping out.” Some people were Venmo'ing us 2,000 for family meal.

So we came out of pocket a little bit and then we started getting subsidized through crowdfunding and whatnot, and then we started pairing with World Central Kitchen, José Andrés, and Red Bean Krewe, and they ran out of money, but right now we're still doing probably several thousand meals. We get a little bit of money for it to help out costs with the labor, obviously, and the to-go containers and the food.

We weren't looking to make any money off of it, and that's fine, but we have this big moral sense of you've got to feed everybody. D _____ didn't tell me that. I didn't need my conscience to kick in. I said, “This is what I do.” So I put my two large crawfish pots and my big large wooden paddle and I made big batches of—sometimes it was

brisket gumbo, sometimes it was chicken egg-drop soup. There was no rules. I make this joke, you know, it was kind of like being on *Top Chef*, like, "I've got four hours of 500 people, I have two crawfish pots, six burners, and a paddle. Go!"

[00:05:51]

Justin Nystrom: [laughs] I feel that.

[00:05:53]

Isaac Toups: So the need for family meal increased, and we were there for it.

[00:05:57]

Justin Nystrom: And this kept some of your staff employed too.

[00:05:59]

Isaac Toups: Almost all of it.

[00:06:00]

Justin Nystrom: Wow.

[00:06:01]

Isaac Toups: So we haven't had to let any of our managers go.

[00:06:03]

Justin Nystrom: Oh, wow.

[00:06:04]

Isaac Toups: And we kept most of our hourly employees. In fact, I recently hired some new employees from other restaurants that did close.

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Justin Nystrom: Oh, wow.

[00:06:11]

Isaac Toups: So now that we have our 25 percent capacity and we're doing these meals and we're doing to-go business, I did some catering for a little private wedding, I'm doing everything. That's the company motto. We do everything.

[00:06:25]

Justin Nystrom: I saw, actually, when I was doing my prep for this interview, that you're hiring somebody right now.

[00:06:30]

Isaac Toups: We are currently hiring a front-of-the-house manager. People were asking us, "What happened to Larry?"

I'm like, "Nothing happened to Larry. We need another front-of-the-house manager. We need somebody who knows about wine. Do you know stuff about wine, service? Are you a clean freak? Come on over."

[00:06:45]

Justin Nystrom: One of those sommeliers from Commander's Palace, huh?

[00:06:48]

Isaac Toups: Right.

[00:06:50]

Justin Nystrom: So you've covered a bunch of my—how did your staff react? I mean, your staff had to be pretty happy that you could keep most of them on, huh?

[00:06:59]

Isaac Toups: They were very happy about that because they know as well as I do there's not a lot of jobs out there right now.

[00:07:04]

Justin Nystrom: There's nothing.

[00:07:06]

Isaac Toups: There's no jobs. No one's hiring. So the fact that they keep getting a check, and they're also very happy to be helping out with community. They see what we're doing and they're part of it, and they're very happy we're doing that. I consider this place a very nice place to work. I look like an asshole, but I'm actually very friendly. So we have a good environment. I keep everybody fed, everybody paid, and times are weird, but everybody's adapting.

[00:07:32]

Justin Nystrom: So when you say 1,000, how many days is that over? How many days a week do you do this?

[00:07:39]

Isaac Toups: We do different things different days of the week. World Central Kitchen is five days a week, Monday through Friday. They come pick it up and we individually plate them and we'll do some days 350, some days 500, so right over 1,000 meals a week with that operation. Then we're still giving out probably right around 100 meals out of pocket every day for anybody who needs it. Like I said, at first it was service industry. Then I'm like, "What am I doing to do, check IDs? You hungry? Stop by. Do you have money? Please come pay for a meal, but if you don't have money, no problem. Either way, I got you fed. Come to Toups' Meatery, eat a good meal."

[00:08:21]

Justin Nystrom: Have you spent much time talking to other restaurateurs during this?

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Isaac Toups: Not a whole lot, really. It's just kind of my immediate group of friends. I know Mike Gulotta very well. I know Marcus [Jacobs] at Marjie's [Grill]. I know Dan Stein. So we've had brief conversations, but, honestly, I've had my head down here so much that I don't know what's going on unless it's on Facebook. So a lot of other people, they're doing different things. Some people are closed down completely, you know, citing concerns of the safety of their employees and their customers. I get it. I don't know anybody's financial situations, so I'm not judging anybody. You shut down, that's on you. You're staying open, you're just doing to-go business, you're not doing catering. I don't know what Mike's doing. I don't know what Mason [Hereford]'s doing. I wish them well and I hope everybody gets to keep their restaurants, but I know not a lot of my friends can keep their restaurants.

[00:09:16]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, that's hard.

[00:09:17]

Isaac Toups: That's tough. I lost one right before this, and that was a kick in the stomach. Oddly, COVID's helped me get over that. I'm like, "I still have a good restaurant. I own the building now." Funny. Funny story, I bought the building first day of the pandemic.

[interruption]

[00:09:50]

Justin Nystrom: So you bought this the day before?

[00:09:51]

Isaac Toups: First day. First day of the pandemic, first day we shut down, the owner of the building—I'd been wanting to buy it for eight years and he never wanted to buy (sic) it, and then he got sick, and then all of a sudden, he turned to a patron saint and let us buy the restaurant. So we were in a no-win situation. Like, I need to buy this building to secure my retirement one day. [laughs] So, you know, nine times out of ten, most people don't own the building they have the restaurants in; you're renting. So when it comes to retirement, you can't sell anything, so you work yourself to death, unfortunately, or you quit jobs, you find something else. So this way I'm like one day I can sell the whole building, sell the business if I make it there. I mean, one-year retirement. I retire at 70, die at 71, just one year.

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Justin Nystrom: It's a plan, you know. So it sounds like financial sustainability and sort of sustainability of this business in general was on your mind before this.

[00:10:56]

Isaac Toups: Financial stability is tough in the best of years. I mean, the more work you do, the more employees you have, the higher your costs are, so, I mean, what restauranteur's making money? Not a lot of them, not a lot of them, especially if you don't own a chain. Small businesses like mine, they're tough in the best of years, so it's actually tough right now. I mean, shit, it's summer. Summer orders were already slow. Pandemic, everybody paranoid about going out to eat, as they should be, some people not thinking this is real, this is very tough. And we pivoted early, and that's why we're okay, but I wouldn't say we're doing great.

[00:11:40]

Justin Nystrom: So you're doing the 25 percent seating. We're sitting outside right now.

[00:11:45]

Isaac Toups: They legalized a couple extra tables. It's not in the boundary, but I'll take what I can get. Honestly, 50 percent of 25 percent doesn't matter to me, because with the six-foot rule, my restaurant's so small, it doesn't make a difference.

[00:12:00]

Justin Nystrom: How many tables do you have right now?

[00:12:02]

Isaac Toups: Let's see. One, two, three, four, five maybe. Maybe four. And we have these outside, but, you know, we do what we can. No bar seating. So we're trying to just

do everything we can, and it's really kind of a day-to-day, week-to-week analyzation of like, okay, how's the money look? Unfortunately, it's all about the money. You can have the best food, the best food in the world, and your restaurant will close because of money.

[00:12:28]

Justin Nystrom: Oh, yeah.

[00:12:30]

Isaac Toups: On the other hand, we have people putting out absolute crap making money, and that really gets under my skin, restaurants just serving absolute crap, with lines out the door. I'm not going to mention names.

[00:12:46]

Justin Nystrom: [laughs] Maybe I should get another glass of wine for you. [laughter]

[00:12:49]

Isaac Toups: No, no, no. I do enough of these interviews and I'm on TV enough, I'm PC as fuck. [laughter]

[00:12:57]

Justin Nystrom: How many tables do you have normally?

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Isaac Toups: Normally we have—

[00:13:02]

Justin Nystrom: Or seats, I guess.

[00:13:03]

Isaac Toups: Yeah. It's 45 seats inside [unclear] fourteen tables, probably maybe 50 total with the bar. Then outside we fit another 50. So if we're completely packed, I'd say we do 100 total, right around.

[00:13:18]

Justin Nystrom: So if you were completely maxed out and you're socially distanced, what would that be?

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Isaac Toups: Oh, social distanced? Oh, it's probably 40.

[00:13:29]

Justin Nystrom: So down to very little. And that's not sustainable.

[00:13:33]

Isaac Toups: No, no. It's sustainable, no. We'll survive it, I believe. Depends on how long this lasts. But it won't be pretty. It's going to suck. That's what it is. We position

ourselves in a situation like we'll be okay when this is over. It's just going to suck and it's going to extend some debt.

[00:13:53]

Justin Nystrom: When you say “do everything,” are there things that you’re eyeing that you haven’t started, or do you want to share?

[00:14:03]

Isaac Toups: I’ve got spices coming out with a spice company. I’m writing two books right now after my first one. I’m writing another cookbook. I’m writing a children’s book based on these times. It’s called *The Little Spoon that Could*, or *The Biggest Little Spoon*, something like that. It’s about my gumbo paddle that was cooking 10,000, 20,000 meals so far and it just broke.

[00:14:23]

Justin Nystrom: That’s great.

[00:14:25]

Isaac Toups: Yeah. And so I’m doing TV stuff, I’m doing spices, I’m making my own hot sauce. I don’t stay fucking still. I keep moving. People keep asking me, “What did you do during quarantine? What did you do at the house?” I’m like, “Haven’t been. I don’t know. I’ve been working more.”

[00:14:39]

Justin Nystrom: I've noticed you've been on Instagram and doing these short streaming videos.

[00:14:39]

Isaac Toups: Exactly. That helps out. That brings me more attention. Social media is a real thing. If you're not on Instagram and you want to be out there, get the fuck on Instagram, because it's a wonderful tool to spread your message, spread your brand, and post some entertainment out there. I've got a bunch of videos on YouTube. People love that shit. People love my fat head. I don't understand it, but people love it. I'm just a natural smart-ass. It's shuttin' me up is the difficult part. I'm going to tell you funny shit, regardless. So it's easy for me.

[00:15:19]

Justin Nystrom: I can identify with that. So the—I'm sorry. I just kind of like lost my train of thought.

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Isaac Toups: All good. I do that.

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Justin Nystrom: So the spices, the children's book and all that, you have kids, of course.

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Isaac Toups: I have two children. We're starting homeschooling on Thursday.

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Justin Nystrom: And you've got to run a restaurant and homeschool, and your wife is very much involved in the day-to-day operation.

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Isaac Toups: Absolutely. We are equal partners.

[00:15:54]

Justin Nystrom: Well, I know if I need to get in touch with you, I get in touch with her.

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Isaac Toups: You can just call Amanda, right. Absolutely.

[00:15:59]

Justin Nystrom: So how do you balance it?

[00:16:03]

Isaac Toups: It's tricky. It's tricky, and you essentially get very little—what's the buzz phrase—self-care. [laughs] That's just a bullshit phrase people use. I work continuously, and when I'm not working, I try to be with my children and my wife, and then even when

I'm at dinner with my children and my wife, I'm going to answer emails and take phone calls. It doesn't stop. You want to be successful? Get the fuck up and go do it.

[00:16:33]

Justin Nystrom: So did you apply for a PPP [Paycheck Protection Program]?

[00:16:38]

Isaac Toups: Yes, and we got some. We're hoping the second round kicks in. It's just very tough. I mean, I don't know what we'd do without these loan forgiveness and the loan extensions. We borrowed some money with a low interest rate, which—

[00:16:53]

Justin Nystrom: Fortunately.

[00:16:55]

Isaac Toups: Great, yeah. Don't worry. We borrowed some money with a low interest rate. Don't worry. I'll just have to pay it back.

[00:17:00]

Justin Nystrom: Someday, yeah.

[00:17:03]

Isaac Toups: I mean, so, again, we'll be all right. It's just going to suck for a while. It pushes back retirement, if I was ever going to get it, five years.

[00:17:12]

Justin Nystrom: Seventy-five.

[00:17:14]

Isaac Toups: Seventy-five now.

[00:17:16]

Justin Nystrom: Who's counting? It's the new 55. I may be asking you to get slightly un-PC and political here. What has been your view of the federal, state, and local response to coronavirus?

[00:17:36]

Isaac Toups: My biggest problem—and I don't even have to go political—is the science-denying. We have some of the most educated people on the planet telling us to do this and do this and do this, and everybody goes, "Ah, well, this Facebook [unclear] denies that, so it must be a fuckin' hoax," it doesn't exist, or it's not serious, when we have fucking scientists and doctors. I've got doctors in my family, like, "Yes, COVID's real. Wear a mask. Wash your fucking hands."

And then everybody goes like, "Oh, that's against my rights and my liberties."

I'm like, "You know what? Do me a fucking favor. Don't let them take your liberty away. Take your seatbelt off as well. Take your seatbelt off. Sorry, you're taking medications? No, no, nope, that's a hoax too. Don't take any medications. Everything that might be safe, don't do it. It's taking your liberties away. You're fucking idiots"

[00:18:35]

Justin Nystrom: So what you're talking about here is more the general public.

[00:18:39]

Isaac Toups: Anybody. I don't care what side of the political spectrum you're on. I don't care if you believe in god or don't. Listen to the people who are smarter than you. That's normally a good course of action, especially when one of the leading doctors of the United States says, "You know, if we just social distance, wear a mask, and wash our hands, this will go away like it has in many other countries," but no, fuck that.

[00:19:01]

Justin Nystrom: What's your customers' response been like? I know you've had a lot of people donating and doing all these kinds of civically-aware things to help you out, but your average customer, your person who's come in or maybe new customers, what is the range of interactions you've been having?

[00:19:20]

Isaac Toups: Ninety-nine percent of my customers are cool. They know us, they knew me, they know what's going on, they know I don't make up these rules about wearing a mask, even though I think they should be enforced. Most everybody's cool, but there's always going to be some jackasses, and it's jackasses that ruin our day. It's the jackasses that come in like, "Oh, I gotta wear a mask? This is bullshit," and they wear it below the nose or they give some of my staff some shit for it. I hate that. "Get out of my restaurant." In fact, nothing makes me feel better than, "I'm never coming here again." I'm like, "Oh, thank god. Thank god."

"I'm never coming here. You just earned a lifetime ban."

I'm like, "I never have to see you asshole again? Ah! I'll drink to that!"

[00:20:02]

Justin Nystrom: There may be some correlation with the bad Yelp reviewer.

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Isaac Toups: Oh, yeah. You know what? Six years ago, I stopped reading Yelp reviews. Never been happier. I listen to my customers that come in. I had a bad review from a very good customer. She called up and was like, "Look, I've never had bad food like this in a restaurant. Something happened." And I went in and found that, sure enough. Like, that's who I listen to. I listen to my customers that come in all the time and they know they can call up, "Hey, this hasn't happened a lot, but I had a bad experience." "Okay, I believe you. Random Yelper? Go fuck yourself. You're not Yelping."

[00:20:41]

Justin Nystrom: What's keeping you awake at night right now?

[00:20:44]

Isaac Toups: The unknown. I mean, if somebody tells me like, "It's going to be like this for a year. Plan for it," okay, I can plan for that. But we don't have that. I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know what restrictions will take place. I don't know when it's safe to go out. Not being able to make a plan is what keeps me up at night.

[00:21:08]

Justin Nystrom: How long can we go?

[00:21:09]

Isaac Toups: I don't know. Great question. If I had the answer to that—I don't know. At this current place, I can stay alive for a little while longer. I'm hoping it'd be really nice by the start of fall if we could go back open, because that's busy season. If I've got to struggle for the rest of the slow season, I'll be okay. I'm normally struggling for slow season. But losing last busy season, losing next busy season, it's going to be pretty tough.

[00:21:42]

Justin Nystrom: You know restaurants that have thrown in the towel, right?

[00:21:47]

Isaac Toups: I've got friends that are losing their restaurants, and some of them are known about, some of them aren't known about, you know, so I'm not going to tell you any news before it's not news, but I know some stuff that you don't, but can't do that right now. I mean, you look at K-Paul's [Louisiana Kitchen], an institution.

[00:22:09]

Justin Nystrom: Blew me away.

[00:22:10]

Isaac Toups: For the love of god, what? K-Paul's? Jesus Christ.

[00:22:15]

Justin Nystrom: There was a time when they were basically printing money.

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Isaac Toups: Exactly. So you just don't know, just don't know.

[00:22:23]

Justin Nystrom: What would you like to see happen?

[00:22:30]

Isaac Toups: Boy, I'd really like to start everybody following the rules and this would be over, and I'd like the government to really step up its game and help these small

businesses out instead of these large corporations. I've got employees, without this job, they were already living paycheck to paycheck, but I own the place, I live paycheck to paycheck. I barely have any savings; it's gone. Is the government going to step up and actually help? We pay taxes, pay a lot of fucking taxes, in fact. Why can't some of those taxes go to just a little bit of help? Get off your fuckin' asses. Senate's on break right now? Nice. Yeah, their paychecks are still clearing, right? Government at work? My ass. Government didn't fuckin' feed people down here. We fed people down here, and that's a fuckin' shame. This is fuckin' America. Best country on the fuckin' earth? My ass. Best fuckin' country? People are hungry, homeless, don't have food. And the Cajun had to step in with his crawfish pots to give them food? Bullshit.

[00:23:42]

Justin Nystrom: So when are we going to see that kids' book?

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Isaac Toups: Oh, I don't know. It's still all in the brain. I told it to my wife. I made her cry. [laughs]

[00:23:53]

Justin Nystrom: I like that idea.

[00:23:54]

Isaac Toups: It literally came out of literacy—not literacy. It came out literal, like I'm cooking back there and this spoon, this large gumbo paddle that had just been worked to death, cracked, and I'm like, "This spoon has done more to feed people than—I need to keep this spoon and save it. This spoon has a fuckin' story." And then it came to my brain, and I'm like, "Oh, yeah!" And the pots and the pans were all getting together, and the spoon kicked in. It's like the little spoon that could. So, hopefully soon.

[00:24:28]

Justin Nystrom: So if we can get the virus under control, of course there's a lot of talk about New Orleans not being able to get—it's going to take years for us to recover our tourism business. How important is tourism to you here?

[00:24:44]

Isaac Toups: Before this happened, I'd get actually a lot more tourists than I ever thought I would, so tourism is nice and tourism definitely makes a difference, but I'm not super reliant like a lot of other places in the French Quarter are, so I have a good local following and I'm surrounded by neighborhoods, and most of my clientele is, but tourism hurts. When it's not there, it hurts. When we don't have the conventions and we don't have the doctors coming in and we don't have the sports games, it hurts. It hurts. There's not a damn person out here going, "Oh, yeah. No tourists? We're doing just fine." No. Even when the tourism is busy and I don't get any tourism, so let's say the French Quarter's packed, the locals aren't going there. The locals are coming to me. So it works

both ways. I get tourism, no problem. I don't get any tourism, no problem. The locals are staying home. They come and get the pork chop.

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Justin Nystrom: Did you at least have a good Mardi Gras? I know Mardi Gras is different for different restaurants.

[00:25:43]

Isaac Toups: Mardi Gras was fine, but it was the last hurrah.

[00:25:48]

Justin Nystrom: So the idea is for me to come in a few months, in December, and do a follow-up interview. What would you like to see by December, other than people following the rules? What would make you feel like you are on the road to recovery as an institution?

[00:26:10]

Isaac Toups: Dining room back open full capacity. I mean, I shoot myself in the foot; I'd rather be safe than sorry, so I'd rather wait it out a little while longer, make sure this is cool before we open up back. But me opening at 25 percent capacity with a six-foot rule, I ain't gonna make it.

[00:26:32]

Justin Nystrom: Well, very good. We're trying to keep these interviews kind of short, not take up too much of your time, focused on COVID-19. Is there anything you'd like to add to this?

[00:26:43]

Isaac Toups: I think we caught everything. Again, you know, if you want to make a donation, it's @toupsmeatery is our Venmo. If you want to come in and eat, come in and eat. We got all the favorites, the meatery board and the pork chop. If you can't afford a meal, you come see me too. Either way, come see Toups.

[00:27:04]

Justin Nystrom: Excellent. Thanks so much, Isaac.

[00:27:06]

Isaac Toups: Anytime.

[00:27:07]

Justin Nystrom: Great.

[End of interview]