

Interview of: Rosie Jean Adams
Interviewer: Rien Fertel
Interview Date: August 19, 2021



Rosie Jean Adams
Bywater American Bistro
New Orleans, Louisiana
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Date: August 19, 2021
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Interviewer: Rien Fertel
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Rien Fertel: All right. This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is August 19th, 2021, a Thursday afternoon, almost 4:00 p.m. And this is another interview with the second round of Bywater American Bistro/CoverwhelminglyID-19 oral histories in that project. And why don't you introduce yourself for us again.

[00:35:59]

Rosie Jean Adams: I'm Rosie Jean Adams. I'm the general manager and sommelier here at the Bywater American Bistro.

[00:36:06]

Rosie Jean Adams: Thank you. So we last spoke October 8th of last year, so some time ago, going on a year, and I reread through the transcript this morning, what we talked about, and one of the first things you mentioned, you introduced yourself as—you said you wear a lot of hats at Bywater American Bistro.

[00:36:26]

Rosie Jean Adams: Yeah.

[00:36:27]

Rien Fertel: And just to start, have any of those hats changed? Do you have kind of more jobs, less jobs? What does life look like here for you now?

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[00:36:39]

Rosie Jean Adams: I would say that now that we're dealing with this new delta variant, we've kind of dipped back into maybe a situation that I or we [laughs] were in last time I saw you, so the hats have kind of remained. We have a lot of—we actually have a full staff right now, which is great, in the front of house. However, it does seem as if everybody is just dealing with a lot of personal issues in their lives, so we have a lot of times where people are calling out for various reasons, so, yeah, I'm still, you know, hosting when that needs to be done, I'm on expo [?] when that needs to be done, taking a section and the server section, and, you know, managing all the while. [laughs] So, yeah, there are still many hats being worn.

[00:37:23]

Rien Fertel: So we're a few weeks in to this delta variant. Can you give us a sense of what it felt like—and you could agree with me or not, but in June when it felt kind of like, I don't know, kind of like a glorious revival of New Orleans and the dining scene and safety, you know, what did that feel like?

[00:37:49]

Rosie Jean Adams: It felt hopeful. I always had a little bit of skepticism going on in my head about that, but it felt good, you know. It started to feel like a real restaurant again. People were excited, people were thinking that, you know, that they could get back to their normal lives, and it was kind of nice to be around them and feel that energy and start to get back to thinking, you know, this is why we have always done this in the first place,

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you know, to provide guests with a safe, enjoyable space, you know, share our many talents in the kitchen and front of house with them, so that started to feel really good, and we were all, like, very excited about it. But it always had a little bit of, like I said, like there's a little feeling in me that's like "I don't know if this is going to last," you know, so it was always like ridden with a little bit of trepidation, but otherwise it did feel good for a while there.

[00:38:42]

Rien Fertel: Am I right in saying that it was the month of June? Or how long did it last? When did it kind of begin and end? Do you remember?

[00:38:46]

Rosie Jean Adams: To be honest, my sense of time is horrible these days. [laughs]

[00:38:51]

Rien Fertel: Whatever you can do. Same here.

[00:38:53]

Rosie Jean Adams: Yeah, but I think—I mean, I would say for, like, about a month or a month and a half is when it really felt like it was getting back to normal, and, you know, it was kind of interesting because it was in summer still, which is normally every restaurant's, like, slower season, but it felt really busy, especially with what we had been doing, and now we had our, like, maximum occupancy available, so we had all the tables

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back and everything, and people were excited to go out, so it felt like—yeah, it felt a lot more normal or for us a little bit, you know, not normal at that time [laughs], but I think it lasted like a month and a half or something before people kind of started—before, you know, the news started coming out about people getting sick again and, you know, all of that. So—

[00:39:38]

Rien Fertel: So what changes have you seen in really the past two weeks since the new city mandates, since the delta variant? What has it felt like? What changes has the restaurant made?

[00:39:49]

Rosie Jean Adams: So we just—yesterday was our first day being open when the city mandate was in state for requiring vaccination cards or seventy-two-hour negative test results, so yesterday actually went pretty well, you know. I was a little bit worried about how people were going to react. I think we only had two instances where guests were unhappy with us for doing that, but, honestly, at this point, with it being a mandate, there is nothing that we can do. There is no legal room really there, so it's just kind of—you just have to tell people what's going on, and then they just have to leave, which, of course, we don't want to be turning away business right now, but we also want everyone to be safe and want everyone to feel safe, so for us and for other restaurants, especially ones in hotels or things like that, I think it's going to be a lot more difficult for them. Luckily, we are very, very lucky that our clientele has overwhelmingly been supportive

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of whatever we need to do as a restaurant to survive, and that's really what it's about, you know. We can't risk being shut down just because somebody wants to come in here and not follow the rules that everybody else has to. So that's just kind of how I explain it to people, you know. It's about, like, us actually staying alive as a place of business, you know. People have jobs here. We don't want them to lose their jobs. We don't want to shut down the restaurant, obviously, so we're going to play by the rules and just, you know, handle things as they come our way.

[00:41:11]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. And can you talk about how the check-in process works? Are customers allowed to submit, like, a pdf or an image beforehand when they make a reservation, or does it happen, like, at the door when they walk in? How does it work?

[00:41:26]

Rosie Jean Adams: Yeah, we were kind of thinking about that, and like I said, yesterday was the first day that we did, so we're trying to kind of gauge how our guests are going to react to everything. Like I said, it was overwhelmingly positive, the way that people—people were grateful, you know. We haven't done the whole people-submitting-it-before thing yet. Our thought process is, I think, more that we want people to physically have their evidence on them, because, you know, I don't know how this works, but if somebody comes into the restaurant and is checking to see if we've made sure that everybody is vaccinated, I don't know how receptive they're going to be to us showing them our records, you know, especially if it's going to be something like a rest result

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with, you know, the hourly component, like, required. I think we're just making sure that everybody has physical proof on them, you know, whether that's on their phone or an actual card or an actual test result printed out.

[00:42:17]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And, you know, it's been a tough and strange past two weeks for the nation, but arguably more for the city with a lot of cancellations for events that I think everyone was looking forward to for the fall, and especially the service industry. How would you characterize the general feeling?

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Rosie Jean Adams: I think everyone's nervous, you know. We had this whole—this was something that I always was suspicious of, but when it was, oh, it's going to be Jazz Fest, French Quarter Fest, Voodoo Fest, BUKU Fest, everything all at once, I mean, that kind of scared me in a different way, because [laughs] it's like even with just Jazz Fest season for us, it's always crazy, and we were starting to get a lot of, like, large party reservations for that and stuff, and I'm thinking, okay, I really need to staff up now; we need to get everybody trained. If there's s going to be all these festivals all at once and our city's going to be inundated with people, it's going to be nuts, but at the same time, I highly doubt that this can really happen, you know.

So when Jazz Fest got canceled, we had a lot of people feeling relieved, like, a lot of people knowing that that wasn't going to be, like, an insanely stressful time for them, but then we had a lot of people that were banking on that time for their paychecks, and, of

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course, that hurts, you know. We have had some cancelations for those large parties that we got, but I've actually spoken to a lot of people that are still saying that they're coming and they're going to come to New Orleans and they're going to be, like, dining out and stuff. They're just not, clearly, going to Jazz Fest. So that seems—I mean, who knows what's going to happen, you know. It's still a little ways away. But I have had people specifically tell me, like, "We don't care that Jazz Fest isn't happening. We're still coming. Still hold our reservations."

So I don't really know what to expect right now, and the staffing issue is always the one that I'm most concerned about, and right now I'm just going to just have who we have on, you know, because I don't want anyone—I don't want to cut anyone's hours down because I'm overstaffing the place, you know, when this big large tourist event isn't happening. We're just kind of rolling with the punches right now.

[00:44:17]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Well, I just have a couple more questions, but one, you talked about staff issues and staffing issues. Kind of one of the national narratives over the past year is how the restaurant industry has had trouble staffing restaurants, and this is everything from McDonald's to high-end restaurants. Have you seen it here? It doesn't sound like it. But have you seen it, or is it just—or do you know of other restaurants in the city? What have you heard? Is it not a problem New Orleans is having?

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Rosie Jean Adams: Oh, not, it's definitely a problem that New Orleans is having, yeah. I mean, everybody, everybody has had staffing issues, front of house, back of house. Like I said, I think, we've been lucky here. We've always had a pretty tight-knit small staff. We have a lot of our, like, servers have been with us basically since day one, and they're still there, which I was always very grateful that we were able to give everyone their jobs back, especially when we were quite slow right when we reopened. So we have that, but I'd say that our main issue here, like I said, is just it's almost—it almost seems like it's not COVID-related, but I know that it is, it's just everybody's having a really tough time, and sometimes that's related to COVID, but, luckily, we haven't had any actual COVID outbreaks here, but, you know, people have family members that have, you know, passed away or gotten ill or, you know, like, other things that they have to tend to right now. You know, people have kids that they've had to homeschool, and there's all these tangential kind of things about COVID that affects everyone's life, so it's kind of like the daily thing for us, not exactly overall staffing. It's not like, oh, we only have two servers maximum on our staff. That's never happened, so that's good. [laughs]

But it's just kind of every day I wake up and don't really know [laughs] what people are going to tell me, you know. You have to be understanding right now, you know. I get it. Like, I have things going on in my own life outside of work that affect my job, you know, so we try and be understanding, try and have everyone support each other, and just know that—and we've all had those nights where it's like, “Okay, guys, there's only three of us. We're going to do it. We know how to. I'll take a section. Blah-blah-blah will host as well as me, and we'll all run food together.” And, you know, we just try and work together as a team, which we have, but it definitely is not always ideal the way

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that it used to be, because everybody's, like, on a schedule and they all work that schedule unless they happen to get sick or something.

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Rien Fertel: And that leads me to my last question, which is really a two-part question. We're now eighteen months in, a year and a half into COVID, and how have you—I asked this question a bit the first time we talked, and I like asking it to everyone, but how have you taken care of yourself? How do you kind of like do the self-care thing? And at the same time, because you have a—because you're in a general manager position, because I assume, you know, when the owner bosses, like, leave town, as they have, you're really the one in charge—

[00:47:18]

Rosie Jean Adams: Yeah.

[00:47:18]

Rien Fertel: —how do you take care of a team and make sure everyone is taking care of themselves, practicing self-care at this time, which can be just brutal in so many ways?

[00:47:29]

Rosie Jean Adams: Yeah. I mean, that is a good question and one that I have asked myself a lot about, and I kind of stress myself out about, like, if I'm doing a good job with that, but I think that the only thing that I really come up with and that I've seen that I

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think, in my opinion, with our team, at least, works is just to be, like, very open and very honest with people. Like, I explain to people, you know, why things are scheduled the way they are, or why this person is working this many hours. I'm also always telling people, like, "Please come to me. Like, if you feel like you are—if the workload is too much, we can always work something out, you know. There are people that want jobs right now, you know. I can get—if you want to go down to part-time, that's totally fine." Luckily, right now we're only open Wednesday through Sunday nights, so nobody really has ever scheduled for a double. Nobody has ever scheduled for a double. [laughs] We have two days off in a row, which is very, very key. I've worked in a lot of restaurants where that's not the case. So everybody gets two days off in a row that they can relax or they can be with the people they need to be with, which is nice.

Yeah, I just feel like managing, trying to just treat everybody as adults and trying to keep an open mind to what their ideas are, you know. Like, they're all friends with each other, they talk about stuff, you know, without me being there. I'm aware of that, so if they come up with something, "Hey, we've decided that we actually—we all want to work five days a week and somebody will take a cut every night, and we can just choose it that way." If that's what they prefer, that's what I'll do. If they prefer for me to make the schedule three weeks in advance and everybody can maybe cover each other's shifts or something, that's what I'll do. We've switched back and forth between those two things before.

We just have, like, meetings with each other and say what's everybody going through, what's best for everyone. Some people only want to work three shifts a week. Some people want to work five, you know. How do we try and make everybody happy?

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It's not always completely possible, but I find that if you work with people and you give people the opportunity, you know, like I said, they're all adults, they understand that I have a job that I have to do and it can't be absolutely perfect, what everyone wants, but they work with me, I work with them. It's kind of the only thing I can do.

And we just make sure that we check up on people. If people call out because they're sick or something happened to them, you know, everybody's always, like, checking in with them. I'll ask—everybody lives right around here, so, “Hey, do you need me to drop you off some groceries or something?” Stuff like that.

[00:49:49]

Rien Fertel: Just one more question, because this came up in an interview I did just a few days ago. Do you find that your team members or maybe even yourself are talking about their feelings more, like it's become more of, like, a—like people are becoming more intimate in that way?

[00:50:07]

Rosie Jean Adams: Yeah.

[00:50:08]

Rien Fertel: Like sharing?

[00:50:08]

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Rosie Jean Adams: Yeah, I definitely feel that way. I think that we've all kind of learned a lot about each other's lives that we didn't know, like, pre-pandemic, because it's, (a), become necessary for us to kind of—and for people to explain to me specifically—I'm their boss—like, why they either can't work or why they need to work more. I've learned a lot about people's family lives and, you know, like, health issues or whatever they're going through. Yeah, people have been talking a lot more. We've all been talking about our feelings of, like, anxiety and how we're dealing with that, and I've been really impressed just with our staff in general, how they've been supportive of each other in that way, because sometimes all it takes is just coming to work and being able to vent about it, you know, even though on some level we're all kind of going through the same thing, but it's different for every person, so I think it's nice that we all maybe have a platform that's kind of the things that we can all understand, like, yes, we all have feelings of anxiety, you know, worry, and all that stuff, but this is why I specifically feel this way, this is what I do, and how can we help each other and talk through. It's not a solution oftentimes [laughs], but it definitely helps.

[00:51:16]

Rien Fertel: Well, I want to thank you for talking to me again. This was really great.
Thank you.

[00:51:20]

Rosie Jean Adams: Thank you.

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[End of interview]