



Molly Taylor
Bywater American Bistro - New Orleans, Louisiana

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[START INTERVIEW]

[00:00:02.21]

Rien Fertel: All right. This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is a Thursday afternoon, October 15th, 2020, almost four o'clock in the afternoon. I am back at Bywater American Bistro for our COVID-19 project. And I'm going to have you introduce yourself, please.

[00:00:27.28]

Molly Taylor: I'm Molly Taylor. Birthday is December 29, 1982.

[00:00:37.00]

Rien Fertel: Thank you so much for being here, for sitting down with me and sharing your experiences over the past seven months now. First, I want to ask, how are you doing and how are you feeling? What's life look like right now? You can answer that in any way you want.

[00:00:47.10]

Molly Taylor: Yeah. It's weirdly normal here. We have really good guests and a really nice team, so sometimes, I almost forget that it's happening. It's definitely—I feel really blessed to have this job and to be here, to be able to make money and support myself. But yeah, it's been hard.

[00:01:09.21]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. You use the word "normal," and that is a word—well, actually, let me just actually ask this, when did it start to feel normal again, that experience, that feeling?

[00:01:22.15]

Molly Taylor: Yeah, I don't know. Like when we first came back, obviously, it was very strange. Then, as time went on, I was just seeing how grateful people were to be here, how happy it was making them. That was making me really happy. Then, when we got busy, it was like sometimes, you could even forget that we had—it just felt like a busy night. Then you'd be like, "Oh. This is all happening." But overall here, I feel really blessed. I know other people have had it a lot harder, so I feel grateful.

[00:01:51.09]

Rien Fertel: So, I kind of want to go back a bit before we start talking more in-depth about the past several months. How did you get here? Maybe where are you from? When and how did you start working at Bywater American Bistro?

[00:02:13.23]

Molly Taylor: So, I'm from Wisconsin originally. I came here from Lake Tahoe. I'm a musician, blues and soul singer. New Orleans has always been like home to me. I came here right after Katrina and volunteered in the Lower Ninth and ended up just falling in love with people and the city itself. And so I'd always been kind of trying to make my way here.

And then, right before I moved here, my house burned down. I lost all my guitars and everything I ever wrote, and it was a big kind of a wake-up call, I was like, "I need to make a big change." So, I just came. I worked at a couple different places when I got here. I wasn't really into any of them. And then I helped open Bywater American Bistro, so I've been here since we've opened. It's been a really great place for me. I've found good friends, I've learned a ton about wine. It gives me freedom to do my art and also make money.

[00:03:03.29]

Rien Fertel: I want to ask about music. Was part of the appeal of moving to New Orleans the music scene here and the music history?

[00:03:10.11]

Molly Taylor: Yeah. My band in Lake Tahoe, we were playing Jazz Fest events for a few years; we were playing the Howlin' Wolf. And I was coming down and playing and every time I left, I would just be crying, like, "I don't know why I'm going back there." So, yeah, that's a huge part of it. Especially the fact that I'm a blues singer.

[00:03:25.16]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. What does—before I ask about working here—what is the life of—because you'll probably be the only musician I talk to—but what is the life of a musician in New Orleans look like right now?

[00:03:40.26]

Molly Taylor: Well, for me, I wasn't surviving off music, but it definitely—I was starting to just get back into playing and starting to play out, and that kind of put—obviously—put a stop to that. A lot of my friends, they're struggling trying to do porch shows for tips. I've sat in on some of those. It's crazy how the restaurant and music is kind of similar where you have this idea that, no matter what, you can always make money somehow. And now, it's like, "I can always work at a restaurant." Or, "I can always sit and busk on the street." Or, "Sit in on a show and make fifty bucks." Or whatever. And all of a sudden, we just couldn't. It was a shock. It was a big shock.

[00:04:22.17]

Rien Fertel: Do you know, do many people kind of work in both realms here? Like, both in the service industry and as professional musicians?

[00:04:32.26]

Molly Taylor: Not specifically at this restaurant, but I feel like, in the long run, a lot of musicians have gig jobs or service industry jobs. Because they're kind of easy to jump in and out of, they're usually flexible. It's cash. Kind of stuff like that.

[00:04:48.23]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. You can go on tour if you need it. Yeah. So, you said you started working here since BAB opened, or Bywater American Bistro opened. How would you describe

the restaurant? If I'm first time walking in, or have never been here before, I've never been to New Orleans before, how would you describe this place?

[00:05:09.18]

Molly Taylor: Well, I always kind of thought of myself as too rock-and-roll for fine dining, but I fit in here, because it's casual. There's high-end food, high-end wine, high-end cocktails, but you don't have to—there's no pretense. You can be yourself. You can come in here dressed up or dressed down. I can be myself here. I'm not a server robot; I have autonomy. I'm treated well, and that's making me want to treat other people well. That's part of the reason I like working in the service industry and doing music, is it's like, I'm always connecting with strangers and I don't have to have some long, drawn-out moment where I'm getting to know them, but I have these quick and real connections with people. Especially after we re-opened here, I had so many guests that started crying because they had just been having such a hard time. Saying, "Oh, my God, I finally feel something normal in my life." It almost brings tears to my eyes now, because I felt the same way. It was like, I was so nervous to come back thinking I wasn't ready or I was scared, but I really needed it. I needed to be back and meeting new people. And making people feel good makes me feel good.

[00:06:14.11]

Rien Fertel: It sounds like when you say you needed it, not just financially.

[00:06:17.15]

Molly Taylor: Yeah, both ways. Definitely, my mental health was struggling during quarantine, because I'm a very social person and I crave connection. We had our little community, our neighborhood, and stuff, but I still need—I need more than that. So, I thought I was doing okay, and then once I started back to work, I was like, "Oh, man, maybe I was more depressed than I thought I was."

[00:06:37.19]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Can you take me back to mid-March or early March, when you knew that COVID-19, when this epidemic, would affect your life? Would affect your job? Can you bring me back to maybe what you remember?

[00:06:58.23]

Molly Taylor: I remember the moment when there was a storm coming as well, and then I also had found out they were closing schools. And I had went to this closest grocery store near me, I went to this Whole Foods. I was eating tacos. I was like, "I better go get some rice." And this really wealthy woman took the cheapest rice and then went and bought ten or twenty-dollar steaks at the place. I got in my car and I just cried. I don't know why that was this moment where I was like, "What's happening?" Everyone was silently panicking in there, but nobody was aggressive, but it was like [sound effect] quick, snatching, snatching, snatching. I remember I called my Dad and I kind of lost it. I was like, "I don't know what I'm going to do." My boyfriend's a chef and an artist. So, both of us were like,

immediately, "All right, well." In a way, it gave—just because of the type of person that I am, I always try to find—I don't know, good things or lessons in the struggle. We take a lot of time to make art when we were off. I feel blessed that we both had that to do. But yeah, I think that was the first moment where I was like, "Oh, no. This is real." Because it just doesn't seem real; it still sometimes doesn't.

[00:08:18.17]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Can you talk about making art and being quarantined and being isolated?

Because I think everyone has handled it in different ways. Being productive or not productive, in an infinity number of ways. What has that been like?

[00:08:40.16]

Molly Taylor: I tried really hard not to place a value on productivity during that time. I felt like whatever I did, if I just did one thing every day that made me feel good, I was—even if it was just a walk or something minor, I didn't feel like, "Oh, you have to write a whole album." I wasn't mad at my boyfriend if he wasn't creating a masterpiece. There was moments where I felt really blessed and grateful, when I'd look over and we had the windows open and he was just drawing and I was maybe playing guitar. Or even just, I study lines sometimes. I really encouraged my friends, too, not to do that, because there was all those memes going around that was like, "Oh, you just didn't hustle hard enough." And it's like, "No." We don't all—I think this also really showed me that we put so much value on ourselves as products in the world. So, when suddenly we weren't being

productive in this society or whatever way we thought, we felt less than. And I think a lot of people had to overcome that to realize that they're worth more than how many hours you work, especially being from the Midwest, I've always had like, this, weird work ethic and had multiple jobs. And I've been trying to get myself out of that idea for a long time, so it was important to me to just take it easy and be gentle with myself. And I kept encouraging people around me to do the same thing.

[00:10:00.12]

Rien Fertel: That's really beautiful. How did you stay in touch with people? Did you form a bubble with friends? Did you—how did that work?

[00:10:09.18]

Molly Taylor: I FaceTimed a lot. My dad had a flip phone forever, but I got him to get an iPhone, so I looked at him looking like a thumb for a while till he figured it out. We had a pretty—my neighborhood, we were pretty tight-knit, and I would play music on the porch. And we would yell at each other from across the street. My neighbor next door, his auntie died on a Thursday and his mom died on a Sunday, both from COVID. The way that I would normally support someone is—I couldn't hug him, but we would have really long conversations across the driveway about it, and we ended up being really close. I sent him flowers and then would just check in every once in a while. Pretty much FaceTiming the neighborhood. I saw some friends; sometimes, they would ride their bikes by or just stand on the street. I also randomly bought a bubble machine and would

blast that, and that made all the neighbors come out, and we'd all talk in the street.

[Laughter]

[00:11:07.06]

Rien Fertel: What neighborhood do you live in?

[00:11:06.20]

Molly Taylor: I was living in the Riverbend at the time, right by Snake and Jake's.

[00:11:14.14]

Rien Fertel: What do you remember—were you here the last night the restaurant was open? Can you kind of describe what you remember about that day and that night?

[00:11:23.27]

Molly Taylor: Yeah. We did a crawfish boil because it was our anniversary. It was really casual, but then there was this undercurrent of, I guess it was fear, but maybe more just the unknown, like we didn't know. I remember just washing my hands like crazy and feeling all this anxiety, and then kind of at the end of the night, Rosie Jean actually pulled us all together and was like, "You know, this is a great crew." She is the best, and she kind of stoked us all up. We don't really know if we're going to see each other next week, and this is—we're such a small staff. Especially now, but even then, we saw the same people every day, five days a week.

[00:12:09.13]

Rien Fertel: When did you come back to work here?

[00:12:13.02]

Molly Taylor: When we reopened, July 1st.

[00:12:16.26]

Rien Fertel: What did that look like for you personally? What did that feel like? Did you have—
what were your feelings? Were you apprehensive, were you excited?

[00:12:27.15]

Molly Taylor: I was nervous. I was also excited just to have something to do and to see
everyone again. And then once I got here and realized how well we were doing stuff,
we've really been holding it down here and doing all the things right, so I felt safe. But
obviously, before I got here, I didn't know. I had no idea. We were still getting that extra
money, so it felt like, "Oh, should I go back if I'm still getting this little bit of money? Do
I wait for a couple more weeks?" And I just wanted to be back. So, yeah, it was scary, but
as soon as I got here, it was fine.

[00:13:05.25]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. You mention money, I'm guessing that's government assistance.

[00:13:04.04]

Molly Taylor: Yeah.

[00:13:08.13]

Rien Fertel: How was your experience applying for that? Because I've heard all types of stories about how easy it was or how difficult it was or how it never even came through for some people. How was that for you personally?

[00:13:23.20]

Molly Taylor: I just, again, felt so lucky. Everything was pretty simple. My boyfriend, it was easy for him, too. We just were smart with the money. We just paid bills and put stuff away. Yeah, I know it was really hard for a lot of people. I keep saying, I struggled, obviously; I think this is a weird situation where we're all hurting in different ways, suffering's kind of relative. No one's is more or less, in a way, but I feel it was lucky. I was lucky.

[00:13:52.29]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. So, when you're back in the restaurant, and we have to take all these new P.P.E. precautions, what did that feel like? Serving, the restaurant industry is, I think, a very physical type of job, right? There's running, there's lifting, there's all this stuff. What did that feel like while wearing a mask? Did you wear a mask? How were the rules here, and what did it feel like?

[00:14:25.01]

Molly Taylor: Oh, yeah, we were wearing masks. We wear masks from the time we walk in till the time we leave. It sucked in the beginning. People just don't—it's not natural. Now, it's weird. We'll be driving and I'll be two blocks away and I still have my mask on. I don't even notice it. But it was definitely hard in the beginning. When we put the tables outside, that was a new thing, too, where we were just out there; it was so hot. But we all just got used to it. You get used to it, it's weird how adaptable we are and how things just become second nature, I guess.

[00:14:56.02]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. How have the—what has your experience been with customers wearing masks and adhering to the rules that are posted everywhere in the restaurant? How has that been?

[00:15:14.17]

Molly Taylor: We, again—I feel very lucky to be here because we have pretty—most of our guests are locals, most of them are pretty conscientious diners. They know what's going on. We've had a few people that—nobody when I've been here that's outwardly refused or left, but they'll scoff sometimes, or be like, "Oh, I just have to wear it to the table and take it off." You're just kinda like, "Whatever." It's part of, also, already being in this industry, we already deal with people like that. Like I used to tell, when we first started, I'd tell the guys, like, "People were already kinda jerks sometimes prior to this. They're not gonna be

any different." So, it's really on us to manage our own emotions surrounding it. If I just get angry every time someone is dumb about something, then I'm just gonna be angry all the time. And I don't want to be. And also I realize that when people sit down and they start eating and drinking and having a great time, they get up to go to the restroom, they're not purposely not putting their mask on; they just forget. We're not used to it. You just say, "Hey, can you put your mask on?" And they're like, "Oh, oh my God, I'm so sorry." I've done it, so I just try not to be angry or annoyed.

[00:16:24.12]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. In your opinion, what has the—I'm going to ask this question, like, at a couple different levels, but the first one, on the smallest level, what has the restaurant, you think, done really well during the past seven months? And what do you wish, if you care to share anything, was done differently or what needed changing after y'all as a team figured it out or maybe asked for changes?

[00:16:57.12]

Molly Taylor: Well, I think, basically from the beginning we were doing it right. It was more like little things like realizing we shouldn't put candles on the table or that we weren't gonna fold napkins for people like we normally would.

[00:17:10.13]

Rien Fertel: Why no candles? That's not obvious to me.

[00:17:08.04]

Molly Taylor: Just because people can be touching it. They would be sneezing on it, whatever.

Less things on the table that different people are going to be around.

[00:17:18.06]

Rien Fertel: That makes sense.

[00:17:22.04]

Molly Taylor: Yeah, just little things like that, where we were like, "Oh, we need to whatever, have—." I guess that's really all I can think of, little moments where I'm like, "Oh, Larry, should I not be folding those napkins?" He's like, "Oh, yeah, we probably shouldn't be doing that!" [Laughter] We're just used to doing things a certain way. But from the beginning, I think the major things that made us feel safe were happening, and I feel safe here. I mean, it's relative, because who really knows? [Laughter]

[00:17:54.02]

Rien Fertel: Right. Because I've ordered out several times over the past months, but I haven't eaten inside. What do you do about napkins?

[00:18:03.18]

Molly Taylor: If people leave them on the table, we just leave them on the table.

[00:18:06.04]

Rien Fertel: Oh, so this is folding if they were to go to the restroom kind of thing.

[00:18:07.06]

Molly Taylor: Yes. So, normally, what we would do is—you can see now, you've come in and the tables will be set. Now, we bring the settings each time for each table, and then it's like a fine dining principle, when someone leaves their table, you fold it and put it back. We don't do that anymore. Just like little things. Maybe we're clearing stuff a little quicker, sometimes, or different things. It's just nothing—I can't think of anything, none of us were ever angry or had to come and be like, "Oh, we need this." We were pretty well-taken care of as far as that, and we also take care of ourselves; we're pretty responsible adults that work here. We don't want to get sick. We don't want anyone to get sick.

[00:18:45.27]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. I guess it makes sense, I mean, just thinking of this now, but a fine dining restaurant does not have salt and pepper shakers, so that—.

[00:18:56.04]

Molly Taylor: Right, yeah. Even that, normally we would bring this little thing with the salt in it and the spoon. Now, we give it to you separate. We don't bring sugar caddies to the table, we bring you the sugars you want. It's just little adjustments. I think it's weird, because I

feel like people, also as diners, have to learn to adjust their expectation of service. And for us, too, we pour wine; some people don't want us to pour their wine. Normally, if they buy a bottle, we'll pour it. If they don't want it, fine. If they don't want us to pour water, fine. We'll leave stuff on the table that before this, we wouldn't do. Now, I think it's on both sides. The guests also need to realize that this is something that's happening. Moving so we can get around you and stuff like that, little things like that, that we normally wouldn't expect prior to this.

[00:19:50.08]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Re-asking my prior question, on a local, at a city level, on a state level, on a federal level, what has—in your opinion—worked really well for people in the service industry, or for you personally? And what has not worked well, what's been a disaster? If you were in charge, what would change?

[00:20:10.23]

Molly Taylor: Well, if I was in charge, I would have given some sort of a bailout to the industry as a whole. I feel like I only know, kind of, my restaurant, I feel the way that we've done stuff here on the small scale is good, but I feel like, in the larger scheme of things, it's been mishandled grossly. I just feel like, in general, in our country, we're always looking out for the big guy, and now the little guys are really suffering. It's hard for me to watch. There's nothing else we can really do. Nina's been working hard with that independent restaurant group, trying to get that funding, but it's like you can bail out the airlines for

billions of dollars, but we need money. We're the people that keep it going. So, it's frustrating.

[00:21:00.17]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. What do you think's going to happen to this city? I think we all think about it, we talk about it with each other, we are a city reliant on a tourist industry, on the service industry, especially. I know Bywater American Bistro has been busy, but what do you think is: best-case scenario, worst-case scenario?

[00:21:35.00]

Molly Taylor: Well, I'm afraid for neighborhood bars. I'm afraid for little spots like that. I feel, in a way, like I can't talk too much on it, since I've only actually lived here for a few years, I don't want to overstep my bounds with what I actually think, but I worry about—I just worry about what makes New Orleans “New Orleans” is the community, the second lines, the bars, the music, and the little places that are getting hurt are what facilitate a lot of that stuff. It's like a chain reaction. I lived—I moved in the middle of this, but when I moved over by Snake and Jake's, our local guy, Juan, he just cruised over one day with his mask and his gloves and his dogs and he made our drinks that we would normally drink and brought us yeast so we could make bread. That's a community thing. People don't realize that, I think, in a lot of other places.

[00:22:28.12]

Rien Fertel: He works at Snake and Jake's?

[00:22:26.26]

Molly Taylor: What?

[00:22:26.26]

Rien Fertel: He works at Snake and Jake's?

[00:22:30.06]

Molly Taylor: Yeah, yeah, he's like the dude at Snake's. He just cruised over, brought us our drinks that we would usually make, and had heard Dan talking about how we needed yeast to make bread and he had picked some up for us. And those are the things that I'm missing. We all are. I hope that this city can at least recognize that. I don't know. I don't know how to say it right, but to protect the heart of what it is here. I think that goes for a lot of things that are happening right now.

[00:22:59.25]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. I mean, I think you're right. I mean, the bad news from the business world here has been neighborhood bars closing one by one, especially several in the neighborhood we're in now, in the Marigny-Bywater. People think of them as institutions. They service locals, primarily. What else—there's a lot of talk about—we're

seven months in, we don't know when this is going to end. The holidays are coming up, which are a very different time of year for everyone, but in New Orleans, in a bunch of different ways. We're only a couple months out of the Mardi Gras season. How are you feeling? A lot of people talk about burnout right now. What's your state of mind? How are you emotionally feeling?

[00:24:03.09]

Molly Taylor: I guess I'm working really hard to just live in the present. That's some advice I've gotten from my dad, where he was like, "Whatever happens, we'll deal with it," kind of thing. I tend to worry and stress, and I feel connected to just humanity as a whole, so I'll get sad and down. I've definitely been fighting those kind of things. But mostly, I'm just trying to take every day at a time and try to make something out of it. I have, like, no idea what's going to happen. And the election. All these things. It's just scary, it is really scary. If I start thinking about all of that, I just can go down a rabbit hole that I can't get out of, you know what I'm saying? I have to be proactive and making changes where I can. Other than that, I have to let it go.

[00:24:57.17]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Just one or two more questions, why do you think people have been gravitating towards this place? In the past couple months since you've reopened the dining room feels full a lot of times. You said, very early on in our conversation, that it's

busy and almost feels normal. What do you think it is about this place? What's going on here at Bywater American Bistro?

[00:25:27.29]

Molly Taylor: Well I think, for one, the food here is just really good. Chef Nina's just got a good way of making comforting, beautiful food. I think people also were really craving a full dining experience. I think that we, as a staff, are really good. I have a lot of people that come in to see me that are become friends, we have good regulars. The wine is really good. I also think when we started putting outdoor tables, that was a nice touch, too. I just feel like there's something about this place now. I've also kind of—I feel like we're going to be getting a lot more forever people that will be coming in here. Like they came here, this was the first restaurant they came to, and they had such a great time. They're like, "Oh, man, I didn't come here very often," or, "I didn't get a chance to come here." So, I don't know, it's a special place.

[00:26:22.21]

Rien Fertel: You have people coming here that starting coming during the coronavirus shutdown.

[00:26:25.20]

Molly Taylor: Yeah, yeah.

[00:26:27.13]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Is there anything else I'm leaving out, anything I'm forgetting? Is there anything else you want to add?

[00:26:33.08]

Molly Taylor: I don't really know. I just, I guess I just want everyone to be okay. I want everyone to keep pushing to be positive and to help each other where we need help. And support us. Support local restaurants; support bars that need you. If your neighbor's a musician, see if they're okay. Check on people. As far as—I don't know. I just want everyone to be okay.

[00:27:02.29]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Well, I want to thank you, and thanks for sitting down, for taking time to talk to me.

[00:27:10.23]

Molly Taylor: Yeah. Thank you. I hope it was okay. [Laughter]

[00:27:09.28]

Rien Fertel: It was great, thank you.

[End of interview]