



Brandon Lally  
Bywater American Bistro - New Orleans, Louisiana  
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[*START INTERVIEW*]

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**Rien Fertel:** This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is a Tuesday, October 20, 2020, just after noon. I am in the Bywater neighborhood of New Orleans, and this is going to be the third Bywater American Bistro COVID-19 Oral History Project interview that I've done. I have a new guest, and I'm going to have you introduce yourself, please.

[00:00:30]

**Brandon Lally:** Yes. So my name is Brandon Lally. I go by "Lally." I'm twenty-seven years old, about to be twenty-eight. I will be doing several do-overs, though. You know, I'm going to get started early on not aging. Yeah. I'm from Washington, Louisiana, in the heart of Cajun country, went to boarding school and found my way down here.

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**Rien Fertel:** So let me just first ask—thank you for sitting down, for taking this time out. We're sitting here in masks. We're seven months into this now, into this coronavirus year. Tell me just how you're doing, how you're feeling. You can answer that however you want. How's your state of being?

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**Brandon Lally:** Honestly, it is better than I imagined it to be. I've always suffered from, like, major depression, anxiety issues, and I think that after COVID happened, I think I noticed that a lot of work had to be done, so hired a therapist. I've been doing all of that mindfulness. I didn't realize that I was much more of an introvert than I had previously thought, so I've been doing. Yeah. Healthy habits and, of course, I don't get down quite as much as I used to, but I think that goes up to a lot of just things you can't control, which is pretty much everything right now. So I just have to leave it to the world.

[00:02:07]

**Rien Fertel:** Yeah. So let's start with how you found yourself, maybe, in New Orleans and at Bywater American Bistro.

[00:02:14]

**Brandon Lally:** Yeah. So let's see. My family's originally from New Orleans, so I grew up in Cajun country and I used to come here and it was just magical: the history, everything. And I grew up in a super old town. I've actually lived in all three of the oldest settlements in Louisiana.

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**Rien Fertel:** Washington, New Orleans. What's the—

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**Brandon Lally:** And Natchitoches. Yeah. I actually think Natchitoches predates New Orleans, which is interesting. So I went to boarding school in North Louisiana, in Natchitoches, kind of bounced around. I was engaged and I was planning to move here. I was splitting my time in Miami. That didn't work out, and I decided to wait another year and kind of do it anyway. My trade has been high-end furniture sales, commercial and hospitality, interior design. I've done some residential stuff.

I ended up in the Bywater because I was working with Ferrand Design and we redid the Country Club. I decided after that—I worked for two young sisters. One of them got pregnant, which is fabulous. The other one met the man of her dreams and was traveling a lot. I got stuck with a little more administrative work than I would like, and I decided I just kind of wanted a change in general.

Right after that, I decided, against everything I'd always told myself, to go back to the service industry, because it's New Orleans. It has to be different. I ended up at Shaya for that. The *Besh* was yet to come, and that was an experience. After that, I just kind of had washed my hands. I didn't know what I was going to do. After I left Shaya, I started working on a real estate project, fixing my childhood home. And I was working with a realtor here in the neighborhood to find land or a renovation project for a quadplex, and I needed, obviously, some way to fund that and something easy, and BAB just kind of fell into my lap. Somebody gave the provisional manager by number. I interviewed and got the job on the spot, so I was actually BAB's first front-of-house hire.

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**Rien Fertel:** Oh, so you were opening staff.

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**Brandon Lally:** Yes, I was number one.

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**Rien Fertel:** And how would you describe BAB, Bywater American Bistro, for people who are unfamiliar with the neighborhood and the restaurant itself?

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**Brandon Lally:** So I'd say experimental American cuisine, and what I mean by that is even this neighborhood, I think, is a great example of, like, what is American now. And Nina [Compton]'s from Saint Lucia, worked in Miami, just bringing a bunch of interesting flavors and combining dishes. I mean, the Spaghetti Pomodoro is one of the *best* things in the world over there. So as far as cuisine goes, I feel like it is high-end service with a more relaxed vibe. Yeah, it was the best restaurant I've ever worked at, while still acknowledging that it was the restaurant industry, with all of its flaws.

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**Rien Fertel:** I want to ask two questions there. What made it the best restaurant? And then I want to ask what do you see as the flaws in the service industry, in the restaurant industry, and maybe if there's something particular to New Orleans.

[00:05:53]

**Brandon Lally:** Yeah. So there are a lot of layers there. Let's see. So, making it the best restaurant was the team. You know, we split tips. For the most part, we all have had a career in some shape or form and ended up back at this, and we're all trustworthy from the bat, and it's really wonderful to know that your teammates are holding themselves to the same esteem that you hold yourself. Rosie Jean [Adams] is one of the most angelic creatures I've ever met in my life, so no matter what was happening, you had someone on your team. Also she would never, ever disparage you in any way, and that's a rarity in the service industry.

Let's see. I will say there was definitely some toxic kitchen—as it is in a lot of places. Nina definitely mellowed out. I understand the stress of whenever it first started. I will say Levi Raines was a little bit of a nightmare.

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**Rien Fertel:** The former head chef.

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**Brandon Lally:** The former chef. He is talented beyond belief, but working for that man was really something else. I had specifically—I was in a comfortable spot. I didn't have to deal with that too much. I will say that I have two friends of mine, both *obviously* queer, who dealt with other levels of verbal abuse from that man. I honestly am still shocked to think about it. So, yeah, Rosie Jean was able to kind of keep him in check. There's great communication among everyone. Even whenever the dish pit wouldn't show up, I would call up some friends and we'd all just kind of work together to make it happen.

Other flaws. Let's see. I once—

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**Rien Fertel:** I'm not looking for, like, dirt.

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**Brandon Lally:** Yeah, no, no. I'm talking about the big things. I think once Black Lives Matter happened, that definitely started peeling away a lot of New Orleans, and you see the stuff that you just didn't want to see before. So I'm speaking to the service industry at large here. I found out there wasn't a single black-owned restaurant in all the French Quarter, which is insane. Even with Nina, a person of color, our front of house was overwhelmingly white. And then, of course, the pay system there was great for me, but I just felt like it's still kind of almost a plantation-like structure, where you have the guys

in the back who are making next to nothing, you have servers who—I was making a very comfortable living—and then you have the food runner in the kitchen who are somehow behind me as far as earnings go. So that was kind of hard, and I think they've definitely made the changes already. I know that tips are being split with the whole restaurant now.

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**Rien Fertel:** That's great.

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**Brandon Lally:** I'm not quite sure what they've done as far as pay goes for dish pit, but I'm of the mind that there should be a minimum wage, \$15, period, doesn't matter if they just got out of jail. But, yeah, Nina and Larry [Miller] are also just fairly down-to-earth, easy to talk to. With that being said, I think once all those layers peeled away, I decided it just wasn't for me anymore. I had decided previously, once I had finished college, that it was never going to happen again. Obviously, like I said, BABs was a much different experience and it was pretty wonderful. Also it being right down the street you kind of can't be leaving your house when you're already supposed to be there.

But, yeah, I think whenever the pandemic started, there was a lot going on in my life. In particular, I was throwing all of my money and resources and mental wellbeing into a real estate project. Of course, after you lose your job, a mortgage doesn't happen, so that just kind of died. I'm honestly okay with it. I think the other thing that kind of stuck out to me was I was trying to play the system in New Orleans. There are only a

handful of ways to make money here: that's hospitality, real estate, or doing something with our super-flawed criminal justice system. And I was doing the real estate thing. I was going to build a fourplex, I was going to do an Airbnb, I was going to not really contribute much to society and try to live comfortably. Right before this happened, I remember being at the Porsche dealership, just like test-driving a car, and then once the pandemic happened, I have all this time and I'm marching. I'm like, "Wow, you were really going to do that. How scummy is that?" So I just kind of—I decided to just kind of let that whole dream go.

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**Rien Fertel:** Yeah.

[00:11:21]

**Brandon Lally:** I realized shortly after that, that because I had done my design through apprenticeship, I didn't get my bachelor's degree. I had left the last semester to work for the design firm, figuring it would be easier. With that being said, now that I'm not in the industry, that industry, job opportunities aren't super great. Now everything shrunk and I realized that with all of my experience being in sales, hospitality, aesthetics, not wanting to do anything with that anymore, there's going to be a lot of competition. I realized that I needed to go back to school or do some sort of a change, and I couldn't bring myself to go into more debt, so I started looking where else in the world can I go to school? Germany, Israel, and Argentina came up, and Argentina just kind of stuck out to me.

There's always something really romantic and exciting about South America. The fact that it's like another European city is really attractive to me, and then also the cost of living is seventy percent less than here.

So I'm at this point now where my financial ruin is around the corner, and I'm not used to being someone who needs. I went to college on a community service scholarship, and having that table turned is really difficult for me. Also, poverty is rising all over the place, and I think, even being poor, I will be in a much more privileged position to actively give back to my community, which is kind of where all of this thing is leading. The world needs a lot of help right now.

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**Rien Fertel:** And was this a—maybe we want to go back to the first week or the first month of COVID. Was it something that hit you, these questions you were asking yourself, did it happen over time, like throughout the spring and summer, or was it like that day, that week?

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**Brandon Lally:** It was immediate. I mean—

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**Rien Fertel:** Really? What did that feel like to have a—

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**Brandon Lally:** Oh, man. So it was hard. I was really surprised, I thrive under pressure. So whenever the whole world is crashing down around me, I somehow put on my sane head. But whenever things are smooth, I don't know where that head is. I realized, immediately, I wasn't getting a mortgage. I'm thousands and thousands in the hole now. There's no actual way to recoup that. There's also just no path to get back to my previous income. Right whenever COVID happened, my grandfather was in the hospital, in the IC with kidney failure. My family's had a lot of health problems since then.

But I did not return to the service industry not *just* because I didn't want to return, but because I don't trust tourists, especially not here in the Deep South, when most of them are supporting the opposite of everything that I stand for. So whenever Nina called me, I told her, "I'm not really into it anymore." I know that she has the opportunity to be the *change* that the industry needs to be, needs to see. So, that was part of our discussion.

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**Rien Fertel:** She called you to come back to work.

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**Brandon Lally:** Yes.

[00:14:59]

**Rien Fertel:** In June or something?

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**Brandon Lally:** I'm honestly not sure when it was, but I know I was definitely one of the first people, and I was like super actively supportive. I'd been there several times already just to kind of visit. One thing that I *was* concerned with, honestly, which is probably my number one, I stopped having patience. And I could imagine the scenario—and I told her this—I can imagine the scenario when somebody comes in there and openly disrespects me. And whatever self-control I used to have, that's just gone. Of course, being at a restaurant like that, that's sort of higher end, there is a level of entitlement that is something you don't experience in a lot of other places, and I was just concerned about how I would handle those situations. Yeah, everything was super emotional and tense when it all began, so I had—also whenever I got the call, I had just decided, probably the previous week, to uproot everything and start planning for a huge change. I was also concerned that it would possibly hinder whatever progress I was making.

But, yeah, so, I mean, health is another big thing. I'm immune-compromised. My grandfather's on immunosuppressants. Even still, it feels super safe out there. I'm just too young and too paranoid to put myself at any risk. But, yeah, I realized mortgage wasn't happening, I realized I was unhappy with the direction my life was going. I realized that the industry needs massive change, and I think that is happening. I just figured there are people whose life—the restaurant industry is their life, and I think that they are going to do great things.

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**Rien Fertel:** Yeah. Before we get to where you're going, did you—I've been asking everyone this question. Did you apply for government assistance? And how was that? Some people have had—we've heard about the range of ease and difficulties in that application process. How was your—if you did it, how was your—

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**Brandon Lally:** Oh, goodness. [laughs] It's been a pretty big nightmare. I applied immediately. I got the heads-up that I wasn't coming back to work, and I was actually at home, at my childhood home, working on the house, and I was like, "Oh, shit. Like, what do I do?" So it took me about three days to apply for unemployment, because the site was just *crashing*. I ended up getting that going, and I didn't have too many issues with that. I did have—I applied for food assistance, and apparently when I did that, there was a change of systems, so I got stuck in the old system and, honestly, could not get through or get any answers to any questions for months, which was stressful.

Now I'm on the pandemic unemployment assistance, that thirteen weeks, and I was pretty sick last week, so I actually missed applying, and now I have to make a phone call and get them to fix everything all over again. I've definitely—I've always been a political person. I think that this pandemic has made me far more political. I am kind of thinking that's the direction that my future's going to go anyway. So I've been following incredibly closely with all of the discussions on financial assistance for the American people, and I am shocked and dismayed and a bunch of other different feelings I have.

So I am telling myself that—I know that some of those people in the Senate are actually as horrible as I think they are—but I’m telling myself I can’t imagine living in a world or country where that doesn’t eventually happen. A bill will happen someday. Hopefully I haven’t lost everything by then. So that’s kind of what I’m betting on for now.

One of the great things, I think, that put me in a much different position than a lot of my friends in the industry is I focused a lot on building my credit, so I have the world falling down around me, but I still know that I can continue to buy what I need. But, yeah, it’s really just like understanding what I can control and what I can’t, and just trying to look at all of the scenarios and not just focusing on the worst case.

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**Rien Fertel:** Yeah. And so you’ve alluded several times to that you said no to coming back to BAB, you want to leave the country. Where are you going? Where do you hope to go? When that is possible? What does the possibility of that look like? And what are you going to do when you—.

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**Brandon Lally:** Yeah, so my initial plan is actually pretty laissez-faire. So if I get down to the root of what I’ve been doing, everything in my whole life for, was to travel. Going to boarding school, I was so privileged to be around so many different people from all over the world, from different cultures, and that’s just kind of—that’s my happiest times.

So, I was trying to do this real estate thing and make that happen. My best friend all of last year was also touring Asia, and, then she actually had to fly back from Spain whenever this happened, was staying with me. I was really open to everything, but I realized that the market here isn't going to work. And I've traveled this country and, honestly, there aren't too many other places I would like to live. Maybe New York City, but that's also a whole thing.

So I started focusing, first off, on going to school and what the affordability of that was like. Germany just wasn't—anti-Semitism is on the rise everywhere, and I am not—I'm hoping not to leave this country and go to something socially similar. I already don't feel super safe being a tiny, multiracial, gay Jew. Israel was another option, but I'm done with right-leaning governments, period. Argentina was next on the list, and they have a huge Jewish population, they are notoriously left-leaning, to their detriment, and, I don't know, everything kind of started lining up there. It was like if I'm going to be a revolutionary, why don't I go where they actually start revolutions? Also they are going through horrible inflation right now, which, I'm hoping doesn't last forever, but it will make my transition very easy. I pay like \$700 a month here. I'm going to have a beautiful two-year-old one-bedroom, one-and-a-half-bath multi-terraces for 250 bucks a month.

So my big thing is initially I had thought go to law school. They have an international human rights program that I think is great. I've always thought—it's always been in the back pocket, and that's what my family's pushed me for for a long time. Obviously, they weren't expecting international human riots. I'm also fascinated with maritime law because I think there are a lot of human rights violations that happen *on* the

water. And the great thing about that is I can work anywhere. So that's my big thing, is just trying to get a foundation where I can help humanity and be able to move around.

From there, I realized that I would have to learn Spanish—already planned on it—but I need for myself to just be a little more than adequate to go back to school, especially when you're going to be diving all the way in. So I'm not expecting myself to have a job when I go down there, but the big thing there is going to be that I can settle for any online job, \$10 an hour, whatever. I can put America on the phone, hang up America, and then do whatever else I need to do.

Off the bat, there are a couple of nonprofits I want to work with, one in particular called ICON out of Silicon Valley. They 3D-print homes for housing-insecure people. They had a big project in Mexico. And the way that works: they get the government to donate land so that these houses can actually be given to families, because you can't progress your family's standing whenever you're still trying to put adequate housing. It doesn't work. I think the other great thing is allowing generations to build wealth. Home ownership is how you get money, and that I would consider once to be the American dream, which is *completely* unachievable now.

So, yeah, I honestly don't know what I'm going to end up doing. I know the direction that I'm going in. And not having this big financial apocalypse looming over my head is going to be—I think things are going to fall into place.

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**Rien Fertel:** Yeah, and Buenos Aires was where—

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**Brandon Lally:** Yeah, Buenos Aires, yes.

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**Rien Fertel:** And what does it look like—you mentioned maybe going in December. The plan is to go in December. Is Argentina open or closed to—?

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**Brandon Lally:** So Argentina has been much more stringent with restrictions, I imagine in a way that we should have been. They went into super lockdown. Mind you, it's a country in a bunch of different crises right now. They're on their ninth default, so they've been working with International Monetary Fund, getting those things worked out. But poverty was already on the rise, but it's a city of millions of people. Pretty much Argentina is Buenos Aires. So you were not allowed to—quarantine was in full effect. For a while, you weren't supposed to leave your house at all. Then it was strictly stay in your neighborhood. You're still not supposed to go in between neighborhoods right now, so public transit is not up and running in a way that you would imagine. Domestic flights are also not happening there, trying to keep it contained.

So let's say I were to get down there on December 9<sup>th</sup> and things were still in effect. I don't see my life changing very much. I spend most of my time here in this room, in this house. So, you know, I figure whenever things return to some sense of normalcy, it's not going to make a huge difference for me. I am thinking of ease of life. I

am really looking forward to not having a car for the first time in my life, and being in a major metropolitan city where the bakery's around the corner, where the grocery store is just like right there. I can literally run outside for fifteen minutes and make it back into my safe house.

Yeah. So, I mean, another big thing and another altruistic society, Latin America is always much more community-based, whereas Europe and America, it's every man to their own. And one of the big things that I was really kind of terrified about is what happens if I end up there and I run out of money and all this and that. Talking with my friends, I have one good friend in Cuba whose best friend lives in Buenos Aires. They're going to hook me up so I have somebody there. Another one of my best friends is in Brazil. And it's just kind of like, you're not going to starve. Your community and your friends aren't going to let you starve. So, my worst-case scenario there, even though having less is a lot less terrifying than staying and watching kind of the structure that I built up for myself crumble. But, yeah, that's kind of—that's it. It's just a 180.

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**Rien Fertel:** Yeah, that's amazing. And how is your family and your close-friends circle

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**Brandon Lally:** Kind of handling it?

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**Rien Fertel:** Yeah, handling this.

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**Brandon Lally:** So my best friend, Morgan, I mentioned she was in Asia. She had gotten to Spain, probably a week before the pandemic happened, and had signed up for this English-teaching course. She was staying with me and our difference in situation was she was able to get a visa here and then go to Europe. That doesn't work like that in Argentina. You go on a tourist visa and then you do all that there. But the planning of bringing our pets over, all of that, it's been really great to have that support, since she's already done something like that. All of our other friends have been super supportive because I think we're all in a similar position. We're in our twenties, going on to our thirties. This is the time that you *do* something. And I think if there ever was a giant flashing sign, this was it. I feel like I've had huge support from my friends, even have some friends considering moving away now.

My whole life, I've always pushed things off, like actively avoiding relationships, actively avoiding getting too settled into a career because I'm like, "There's something. There's something more." And I think once this pandemic happened, everything lined up, and I think my general anxiety over what the ultimate future looks like has definitely helped.

My family has been surprisingly supportive. Overall, my familial relationships are crumbling and dying, and I kind of have to be okay with it. I was talking with my

grandmother. Her older brother passed from cancer, another sibling was diagnosed with cancer. They have a really big family. And she was saying that she missed me. And of course I miss them, but I've had to make the conscious decision to not speak regularly, because it's really hard to lose respect for someone that you love. And she was saying, "Well, there's nothing that you could do that wouldn't make me love you." And I'm like, "I understand that, but there are things that you could do to make me not *like* you."

So I've been—I think I'm doing this big independence thing. And with healing and working with a therapist, I realized that I had to set some hard boundaries and just kind of cut things off where they are, and I think that's definitely a lot of what I'd have to do with my family. My family's also very small, so it's pretty much like five us of altogether. And, yeah, I think I realized I have to focus, especially now I have to focus on myself, and there's nothing wrong with doing that. I just don't have the—it's not that I don't have the energy—I'm just not going to deal with unnecessary drama, especially not conversations that—. The big thing is the political situation here. It affects real lives. Before, I think, it's always been something that you could kind of like, "Oh, yeah, sure, maybe, whatever." But the decisions that my family are making affects me as an individual, not just financially. That's my Christian side of the family. I'm Jewish. Anti-Semitism is on the rise. That affects me. The Supreme Court. I'm gay. Will I be able to get married here? That affects me. So the idea that people are going back in time has been really tough.

Also I've gotten involved in all of this psychology and whatnot. I'm trying to figure out how did the boomers become what they are? And I decided that it's just

ingrained PTSD. Think about it. Your grandfather was in World War I, father was in World War II, friends in Vietnam. You have all of this chaos. Whenever you really kind of put it together and then also think about Civil Rights Movement. I recognize that when my grandfather was young, he was a white doctor's son in New Orleans. Of course life was good.

It's just, yeah, I've just been trying to make sense of the world, and in doing that, I've had to make sense of my family, and I think I've decided—I've already decided, a long time ago whenever I left for boarding school, that your family is who you choose. And I have just been super blessed ending up in the same spaces as some of the most incredible people, and it's been ten years now and we're still going strong. My friends and I are spread out, but we still talk pretty regularly. And I'm excited to have a space that they can come and hang out and that I can also run away and do.

I also had a couple friends that have stayed, extended stays in Argentina, and that was another big thing. I have a friend who is a lawyer in Dallas, was in Beijing working for a while, but in between law school and undergrad, he spent a year in Buenos Aires and said it was his favorite city ever.

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**Rien Fertel:** Wow.

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**Brandon Lally:** So that's how it happened.

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**Rien Fertel:** I spent two weeks there over the holidays six years ago, but we'll talk about that off tape.

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**Brandon Lally:** Oh, yeah. Awesome!

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**Rien Fertel:** It's one of my favorite places in the world. I just have one more question.

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**Brandon Lally:** Yeah, of course.

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**Rien Fertel:** It's a two-part question. When you go, and Argentina is far away, far away south of here, it's a long flight or couple of flights. It's not like going to, I don't know, Mexico City where you get on a plane and come back two days later or something.

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**Brandon Lally:** Or Cuba.

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**Rien Fertel:** Or Cuba, right. So what do you think you'll miss? Or have you thought about this? Or maybe not miss, both, about New Orleans and about Louisiana? You've spent all your life here, or it sounds like that. And then the second question is: because you chose not to reenter the restaurant industry, what have you missed over the past few months or what do you not miss about front-of-house work?

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**Brandon Lally:** Okay, let's see.

[00:35:52]

**Rien Fertel:** And you can answer that in any order you want.

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**Brandon Lally:** I think there are a couple other things, for sure. So, I mentioned doing a lot of personal work. I am Louisiana Creole, and I have actively passed my entire life, so I think I am just getting, for the first time, kind of researching my own culture, figuring out where the hell I come from, and that's super Louisiana. I feel—I've already lived in all of these places—I can do that intellectual work on my own from anywhere. New Orleans will always be my favorite city, but it is my favorite city because of its history and because of the European attitude. This is hardly the United States. So I don't know that—I mean, aside from most things being in Spanish, I feel like the pace of living is

going to be even more chill than it is here. That's what I'm hoping for. So as far as the U.S., I will miss variety. I will miss being able to get whatever grains and spices I want from anywhere. Other than that, absolutely nothing.

As far as the service industry goes, that's honestly a pretty quick answer. I haven't missed it a single day. I love going back there. I miss the camaraderie. As far as being a gear in that machine, I was pretty confident of it last time that I would never go back. I'm 100 percent certain now.

Now, with that being said, that does not mean I won't have anything to do with the restaurant industry, period. I think if I do get involved again in something like that, I would be an owner, and it wouldn't be a business move; it would be something for the community, I think, and something I wouldn't have to be too heavily involved in. I am notoriously indecisive. There's like law school. Do I want to go to—I'm going to Buenos Aires. Do I want to bounce over to Brazil and study Brasilia architecture? Am I going to be an architect? Do I want to do furniture design? I honestly don't know what that is. So I'm hoping I'll just be doing a lot of stuff. But I've worked in enough restaurants now that if I ever do end up in some sort of environment, I can be pretty certain it won't share the same flaws as the American dining system.

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**Rien Fertel:** Well, I think that's a good place to end, unless you have something else you'd like to add—

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**Brandon Lally:** I think that's great.

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**Rien Fertel:** —about the past seven months. Well, thank you for doing this, for sitting down, for sharing your story.

*[End of interview]*