



Brent Tranchina  
Bywater American Bistro - New Orleans, Louisiana

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[Start of Interview]

[00:00:00]

**Rien Fertel:** Okay. This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021, almost 11:00 in the morning. And this is round two of kind of our COVID/Bywater American Bistro conversations/check-ins.

And, Brent, why don't you introduce yourself again and then we'll get started.

[00:00:28]

**Brent Tranchina:** Hi. My name is Brent Tranchina, and I work in the service industry, hospitality industry in New Orleans, Louisiana.

[00:00:39]

**Rien Fertel:** Thank you. So we last met and spoke almost nine months ago. So can you give me a sense of what your work life has looked like over those past nine months?

[00:00:51]

**Brent Tranchina:** So it's kind of been all over the place with respect to Barracuda, but that's just because of their expansion, I guess. We just opened up a new restaurant in the Algiers location. And since then they went from having just the Tchoupitoulas location to get in a commissary, to which I was helping open and run that and get that online in preparation for their number-two location in Algiers, and then that has been open for

roughly a month now. So it's just been kind of very busy and all hands on deck everywhere I go.

[00:01:34]

**Rien Fertel:** I have to say—I will chalk it up to the loss of a viable newspaper in this city—but I had no clue there was a second location. I was at Barracuda, I was at the Tchoupitoulas location, just a couple weeks ago. I had no clue. So can you tell me about how it differs, how it's similar, maybe sort of describe the neighborhood or what it looks like?

[00:01:58]

**Brent Tranchina:** So the Barracuda model in and of itself has kind of evolved with the pandemic, and it was kind of set up—it's set up very similar in the way that it was before the pandemic started, but the pandemic worked in its favor in a really odd way, where it's fast casual, but all the dining's outside, and that's the same model for every subsequent location that they were trying to open up. So it's kind of worked in our favor where we have a small kitchen space/counter space that we only exist in as the employees, and then all dining comes to a window, take their order, sit outside on the patio, and so it's that same exact mantra, ideology, in the Algiers location. The only difference is it's a much smaller location. We repurposed an old gas station, so dealing with that has been kind of ups and downs with HDLC [the Historic District Landmarks Commission], because they have so many rules and regulations and what they can and can't do to the building itself and how you add on to the property and what their expectations are. So, stuff like that.

But it's still a little building, small, people come up to the window, order your food. We bring it out to you. That's the end of service. If you need anything else, you come back in line. It's really helped with, I think, soothing people's food concerns with going out, given everything that's going on, even with the rise of the new Delta variant and having to put mask mandates, and as you said earlier, mentioned earlier, that there's a vaccine mandate if you want to go. All of this is like—being outside has been a big boost for our business-wise, so nobody has to come inside and feel like they're trapped. But then again, it's like New Orleans heat, it's 100 degrees, and it's still hot outside.

[Laughs.]

[00:04:05]

**Rien Fertel:** When the mayor of New Orleans released her vax card and/or recent negative test mandate just a week or two ago, were there any discussions? What were your feelings about that? And were there any kind of internal discussions within the restaurant that you were part of about how this would work at all?

[00:04:29]

**Brent Tranchina:** Yeah. So in typical fashion, the mayor released this information mid-day on a Friday, which is very hard to then prepare for the weekend and get everything sorted out, because obviously it's our busiest moment, is going to be Friday afternoons and Saturday all day kind of thing.

We had moved to actually a mask mandate for our employees, probably, I want to say, two weeks prior to the mayor announcing that, just as the cases were going up, and

concerns for staff, talking to them, saying, “We understand this is a difficult situation because it’s hot in these buildings, but in order to make sure that everybody feels safe and comfortable,” we definitely were like, “look, we’re going to move back to mandated masks inside the building.”

And then what we’re asking the guests to do is that when they interact with the staff, to please have a mask on. So anytime they come to the window or stand in the line, “Please give the space that is necessary for each person who’s standing in line. Be courteous,” kind of thing. “And also please wear a mask.” So that way we just want to reduce the overall potential for spread. Even though the overwhelming majority of our staff is vaccinated, it’s still—nobody wants to be the breakthrough case in a very small environment kind of thing. So, that kind of stuff.

As far as asking people for vaccination cards and stuff like that, I think we’re going to stick with the, “Please have a mask on. Please do this.” If anybody proves aggressive about it, then we’ll be like, “Hey, do you have a vaccination card?” kind of idea. And if they don’t, “Please leave” kind of situation. But as long as they’re willing to comply with the minimum, “Please have a mask on,” we’re not going to push this thing.

But it’s nice to have the city say it, so that way small businesses don’t have to police—feel like they’re policing the public when they come to our spaces, kind of thing, because we don’t want to turn away business. Nobody wants to shut down where nobody’s working, kind of thing, especially if you can’t guarantee unemployment pay. So we don’t want to see a shutdown, but we also want to make sure that everybody’s complicit with just being hospitable to each other in that situation.

[00:07:18]

**Rien Fertel:** Yeah. And since we last talked, vaccinations have, of course, come online. What discussions, if any—and you can share, not share, however you want or feel safe sharing, but what discussions, again, internally occurred, if at all, about that? To either encourage a team—I know I saw a popular restaurant here in the city today put an Instagram message up where it was a picture of the entire staff, and they said, “Everyone’s vaxxed. We can assure you that.” I know, of course, businesses can’t force their employees to do this. But what sort of kind of discussion goes on, whether in a positive way about getting vaxxed?

[00:08:15]

**Brent Tranchina:** So I guess a large part of that is on the onus of Brett Jones, who is the owner of Barracuda, and he’s personally taken it upon himself to have that conversation with each individual, not in a way where it’s just like, “Are you vaxxed or not vaccinated?” But like, “What do you need to be safe in this environment?” And I know he’s grappling with the issues like, “Do I push a mandate that you have to be vaccinated in order to work for us?”

And that has been a hard one on him, but definitely trying to be—he’s definitely pro-vaccination, but he doesn’t want anybody to feel like that if they’re not vaccinated, they don’t have a job with the company. So kind of basically saying, “If you’re not vaccinated, why is it that you’re not vaccinated? And is there anything that we can do that would help you provide said vaccination if you want it?” For example, let’s say they don’t have access to a vehicle to get a site. “Hey, do you need us to get you an Uber or

get you a taxi of some sort to get you to a [vaccination site]? Because we'll happily figure that out if that's the issue," kind of thing.

But it's just kind of a—it's a delicate situation for everybody. But we definitely had a conversation. And I don't think anybody wants to mandate a vaccination, nor do we want to shame anybody. So the idea—so I know the restaurant that did that. Can they guarantee that everybody that they hire from here on out is vaccinated? Probably not. Is there going to be a discrimination lawsuit for not being vaccinated? Probably. Right? And I don't think anybody really wants to go through that. But my biggest concern is shaming people for not getting vaccinated, especially if they have some underlying health concern and they're just unable to do so or maybe they're Black and they have a history of hearing about how hospitals treat their ancestors poorly, and maybe have reasonable concerns, and it's not a conspiracy theory, it's just like actual history of unfairness in hospitals and public medication.

[00:10:45]

**Rien Fertel:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Wait. Let's take a quick break here while this—hopefully, they'll shut off the engine.

[Recorder Turned Off]

[00:10:55]

**Rien Fertel:** Okay, we're back. So outside of work, over the last nine months—I should say, our last conversation we talked a lot about chefs, kitchen workers, and kind of the

culture of overworking, the culture of never taking a vacation, the culture of working until your body gives out—

[00:11:22]

**Brent Tranchina:** Yeah.

[00:11:22]

**Rien Fertel:** —and your mind gives out in a lot of ways, and how that manifests. How have you, working over the past year, but also working through COVID over the past year, taken steps to find healing or find calmness or whatever you needed to do? What have you done?

[00:11:43]

**Brent Tranchina:** Ooh. Healing? I don't—okay.

[00:11:49]

**Rien Fertel:** To take care of yourself.

[00:11:50]

**Brent Tranchina:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:11:52]

**Rien Fertel:** And the people around you, I should say, the people you work with, maybe friends that you've kept in the industry who you might see suffer.



[00:12:06]

**Brent Tranchina:** Definitely—so I’ve definitely had an opportunity to speak more openly with people that are my age in the industry, and we have conversations about how do we move forward. Something that I’ve noticed, especially now that everybody has been forced to take time off, now that people are coming back. When we opened up the Algiers location, the biggest problem that we have is some people haven’t worked for over a year, and the exact opposite was now—it’s not that they worked, they pushed themselves and are exhausted. They just can’t work a full shift. Their endurance is not there. This is not a shot at them kind of thing; it’s just really interesting to see how that time off has really affected people’s ability to grind at any pace whatsoever.

It’s a good and bad thing. It’s a good thing because it makes us recognize that, like, how hard we were working before and how we just pushed ourselves to that limit. What that has done, though, is the people who have worked through the pandemic, they’re now working the longer shifts because they can actually handle it, as opposed to the people who aren’t, who can’t handle it. They need more breaks. And it’s hard to systematize—I don’t even know if I’m saying that right, but it’s hard to create a system of breaks for people in the restaurant industry when it’s just like you’re constantly on call to make something, right? So basically what we try to do in the conversation that we’re having with our cooks today is just like, “Hey, if at any point you feel overwhelmed, at any point you need to, like, step off, don’t just disappear, but say, ‘Hey, I need to step off.’ You don’t have to explain why you need to step off. We’re not going to dive into this idea that you’re not working hard enough.” That’s not what we’re trying to insinuate,

but we're trying to find a way to give them some peace of mind that they can step away from the heat of the system, that they're just like purely sweating out everything that they could possibly have in their body, and then take a break, drink something. Obviously, a lot of people in the industry still smoke or vape, so they—people need to go take a break—it helps them calm themselves, whatever that device is. So give them that opportunity to do it, so that way they feel like they can come back a little bit more refreshed. It kind of does make the day go a little bit longer because there's more breaks involved, but other than that, it's hard to really address the issue of self-care in a way that—we're still grappling with it.

I noticed one thing that we did do for self-care for our employees is that we—I think it's called WeHelp NOLA. We have signed up with them so all our employees can get free therapy through this program.

[00:15:38]

**Rien Fertel:** I don't know about that.

[00:15:38]

**Brent Tranchina:** I think it's called WeHelp NOLA. But, yeah, they provide therapy for service industry people, and they have other things, like, I think, yoga and physical ways of physically relieving yourself through exercise.

[00:15:57]

**Rien Fertel:** Yeah. And it's like teletherapy? You can call someone up?

[00:16:00]

**Brent Tranchina:** Yeah. So we did sign up for that. We just got that at the beginning of August, I believe. It started for us in August. We had to go a week and a half before that for the other location. Because right now we don't have enough people on our staff to get insurance for everybody, to make it an offer, so the best thing we could do is find a program that would at least offer some kind of assistance for our employees. So I keep meaning to actually take the time to sign up for it myself, but I have not, and that's clearly on me, but also I just like I feel like every day that I'm working, I'm just, "I don't have time for this. I need to take care of the people that work for me before I take care of myself."

[00:16:52]

**Rien Fertel:** So how are you taking care of yourself? Because, I mean, you've continued to work, but you've also opened a new place, which has, I imagine, got to be very tough. What have you done?

[00:17:06]

**Brent Tranchina:** So— [laughs]

[00:17:08]

**Rien Fertel:** I don't mean to like— [laughs]

[00:17:10]

**Brent Tranchina:** No, no, no. It's just like I have this really bad habit of—I can't say that I'm really just taking care of myself in the most appropriate way. I do get mental relief on my days off, but that's because I have a hobby, which is photography, and I do that in a—my brain constantly needs to be churning. If I'm learning something new or if I'm challenging myself in a different way that's not cooking, I feel my stress and anxiety goes down overall. So my off days are almost entirely channeled into that. And so I've been doing that to help with my own personal stress and anxiety, stuff like that.

But as far as everything else, I need to spend more time taking care of myself in other ways, whether it's the therapy or exercise or figuring out how to eat better five days a week when I'm at work, kind of thing, but that's a lifelong struggle that I've had being in the industry so long, that it's just like—it's really changed. The industry has done nothing good to help anybody in terms of taking care of their body physically and mentally, and I feel like for me as a person in management, my goal is to make sure that the people under me are better taken care of before I am, but I need to start addressing that in the same way that I address the people I work with. It's like I'm just as important as they are in terms of health and mental stability, and I need to address that at the same time, but I have not done so. It's a flaw that I recognize in myself. It's like I'm always going to put it off rather than take care of it.

[00:19:15]

**Rien Fertel:** And that reminds me of something you said in our last conversation that really stuck with me when I read through the transcript back then. I edited it. And then also this morning I reread through it again, and you said, learning to survive COVID and whatever is coming next is not about learning to survive just COVID. But you said—and I wrote this quote down—you said, “How do you make people feel better about living right now,” in this kind of wider way. It’s not just about this virus, right, and overcoming this virus, but there’s kind of—there should be a larger feeling, I think you meant, about making people feel better in all types of ways. It sounds like you do that in the position you have in the kitchen. The restaurant seems to do a good job of doing that. Do you think—how do you think the industry has done that or—I don’t know. Maybe I just kind of want to revisit—I wanted to revisit this quote that you said, because it kind of hit me. So maybe I’m just asking you to kind of look back at that quote and kind of—

[00:20:35]

**Brent Tranchina:** The honest question is, it’s hard to speak for the industry as a whole, in a way, and a lot of times I feel like I am struggling in that, to make people feel better in that moment, but I also think that being self-conscious about it is the largest step that we can take in that direction. It’s interesting, because it’s like what I’ve noticed, the change in life, checking in on people from when I was starting to cook was when you’d get in, you’d say hello to people, you’d go to work, and then you’re just—depending on the place that you worked, it was just like, “Hey, get your shit done, get it done soon, and then let’s get ready for service.” And it was very much a team sport mentality, where you said anything that was necessary to get it done, but at the end of the day, none of it—nothing was taken personal, right?

And then you get to a point where people start asking, “How are you doing? How are you doing? How are you doing?” And that can be answered in so many different ways. But now we’re asking people, “How are you feeling?” And that’s the big change in what I’ve noticed, just like it’s not, “How are you doing?” because people are going to be like, “I’m okay,” or whatever, but, “How are you feeling?” And people have to stop and think and realize, “How *am* I feeling?” in trying to address that. I’ve noticed that across the board, it doesn’t matter if they’re younger than me or older than me, everybody’s got a feeling, and you have to address it in many different ways. And then it’s like trying to address—it’s like, well, “How am I feeling?” And is that feeling affecting the way that I ask people how are they feeling? And it is. It 100 percent is. So trying to address that and be aware of everybody else’s feelings and trying to juggle all of this at one time is insanely difficult, and I’m sure other industries are doing it, and I’m sure there are self-help books and this kind of stuff of, like, how can you talk to people about all this stuff.

But I think as far as the industry is concerned, it’s like I don’t know if other places are asking this question. I did talk to a chef the other day. They came to Barracuda, and we’ve never met before, but I know who this person is, and we did plan to meet up and have coffee and talk because we come from very similar backgrounds of rigorous demands and execution, to now we’re at places where it’s just like, “Hey! [applauds] How is everybody doing today?” And it’s very hard on us both, because it’s just like—

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**Rien Fertel:** Because it’s a more casual restaurant?

[00:23:59]

**Brent Tranchina:** It's because you can't treat people the same way.

[00:24:01]

**Rien Fertel:** Oh, I see. Okay, okay.

[00:24:03]

**Brent Tranchina:** And we both come from a background of just like, all right, well, if I don't get this done right, not only will I be told that I didn't get it done right, but I will be expected to do it better and faster in—and then be berated, for lack of better words, that I didn't do it right the first time, for the entire evening. They almost shame you into feeling that you're not good enough, but now everybody else is just like, "We don't want to be that chef or leader. We don't want to be that kind of leader." But it's also like how do we prevent ourselves from falling into the same habits, because it's just like every generation of new chefs is always addressing a new concern, like how do you become a better leader without falling into the habits of what you were trained or what guise you were put under while you were coming up, kind of thing.

And the industry has to get better, because I don't think anybody wants to be that asshole. I just—even the people who are assholes. And, look, my favorite chef I've ever worked for, biggest asshole I've ever met, in a long shot, but he's still my favorite chef, just even if that's the case. So it's just like you can have a love/hate relationship with the whole thing, but I don't want to be like him in terms of friendliness, or lack thereof. I still want to have high expectations for the people that work for me, but I don't want to shame

them. I don't also want them to ever feel like they can't come to work and say, "I'm having a bad day." And then we say, "Oh, okay, well, that's fair. We all have bad days. Maybe you don't need to be on this station. Maybe you need to be on this station." Or maybe we just need to be more aware of what's going on so that if a mistake does happen, we tell you, "Everything's fine. It's just tacos. It's just food." This isn't high stakes. We're not performing the medical needs that are on the frontline right now. We're just trying to make sure that people get what they pay for, which is literally food. So—

[00:26:33]

**Rien Fertel:** So I think that's a good place to end. I want to thank you, unless you have anything else to add.

[00:26:37]

**Brent Tranchina:** WeHelp NOLA. I mean, figure it out. [Laughs.] The more therapy, honestly, is better, even for people who are stubborn and don't want it. But I honestly don't know what this industry will look like ten years from now. And it's a scary thought, because I will probably still be in it ten years from now. And regardless of whatever the new normal is in this vaccine, booster shots and the idea of wearing masks more and more and more, that's all just such minor stuff in comparison to creating a new normal in kitchens for people to want to come to work and not fear it. And I've seen it both ways, and I've been the person who's received that fear and I've been that person who's given



that fear, and it's shitty either way. So how do we not do that? Or just how do we be better to ourselves and the people that work with us? It's time. So, yeah.

[00:28:07]

**Rien Fertel:** Well, thank you.

[00:28:08]

**Brent Tranchina:** Thank you.

[End of Interview]