



Todd Richards
Soul Food and Culture
Atlanta, GA

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Diana Dombrowski: All right. Today is January 19th, 2021. My name is Diana Dombrowski. I'm recording here with the Southern Foodways Alliance and Chef Todd Richards for the COVID-19 project. If you would, please, Mr. Richards, would you tell us when and where you were born?

Todd Richards: Yes. Todd Richards here. I was born 1971 in the great city of Chicago, Illinois.

Diana Dombrowski: Great. And what was it like growing up in Chicago?

Todd Richards: Chicago is a really great and fascinating city. One thing that I don't think that people know about Chicago is that it's still a sprawling city, even from the time I was a kid, even currently right now, that the city expands constantly. But Chicago is one of the most segregated cities, I believe, still in this country where people will ask you where you live, and by understanding where a person might live, you definitely know what ethnic group lives in the neighborhood.

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And just qualifying that **by**, if you say you live on the south side, it's mostly African American, southeast side can be mostly Latino, so it really is one of those cities that just by the demographics or the area in which you live people can tell what ethnic group you're in.

Diana Dombrowski: And what was that like growing up for you in that kind of environment?

Todd Richards: It was great for me because I lived right on the border of southside and southeast side, so I was able to get both cultures of strong African American food culture and then a strong Latin food culture, as well. So it was nothing different than going to pick up some tacos, stopping by a soul food place, getting some collard greens, and having them both on the same table at the same time.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, great. That sounds like a distinctive memory. That sounds like something that happened more than once.

Todd Richards: Oh, yeah. My mom was a very adventurous eater, and my dad was not necessarily as adventurous, but he was consistent about delicious food.

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And that really made it great because my dad in his frugality said anytime we ordered something to eat we had to heat up some type of leftover to go along with it. So one of the dishes that I'm most well-known for, collard green ramen, actually was a dish I ate as a kid where my mom would pick up Chinese food, get yaka mein, which is a noodle soup with scallions, soft-boiled egg, and pork belly, and my dad would heat up collard greens and you just put them in the same bowl. So that was a dish that I had almost forty-five years ago. I'm dating myself here.

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter] Very nice. And when you think back to that time period, who was it that taught you how to cook?

Todd Richards: Cooking was a ritual at our home, and it was really what I call a religion of its own, that we were steeped in tradition that every birthday, holiday, and all those were at our home.

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But during certain times of the year, my dad did most of the cooking, and the other times of the year my mom did most of the cooking. Anything that pertained to smoked meats was always done by my dad, and so my barbecue background comes from cooking with my dad. And then, my adventurous eating background came from my mom. But everyone pitched in all the time to cook.

Diana Dombrowski: Great. When did you start to think that was what you wanted to do for a career?

Todd Richards: You know, I failed in other things. I was a college dropout, which I'm proud to say I didn't spend all my parents' money on school. I was at the University of Chicago transferring to Georgia Tech. I was a physics major. And was really just exploring what I wanted to do. And I realized that I was really bored out of my mind and wanted to be more creative than just necessarily book smart. And a little more background, my mom was a biologist; my dad was in data processing.

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If anyone remembers the movie *WarGames* with that big old tape and stuff like that, my dad did that. So my family had a scientific background, but food was such a integral part of me growing up that cooking allows me to do both at the same time. So I really stumbled into this career because I needed a job and started at Kroger in the meat department, but that was in 1992, [19]93, and I never looked back from there.

Diana Dombrowski: Great. That's really exciting. So you were working at Kroger getting your feet on the ground in a certain sense. What was the next step after that?

Todd Richards: I was fortunate that across the street from me there was a restaurant called Blue Ribbon Grill, and they needed someone to work the grill at night. And I've never been one who is afraid to work, so I did butchering at Kroger in the morning and did the grill at Blue Ribbon Grill at night. And the chef's name was Chef Eddie, and his wife at the time was **Joanie**.

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And Joanie, fortunately, worked for one of the greatest chefs in the world at that time, Thomas Catherall, who was a certified master chef. And to give people an understanding, I think at that time there might've only been forty-seven, forty-eight master chefs, and he was one of them. And in Atlanta at that time, there was three certified master chefs and one certified master pastry chef. And Eddie told me at one point in time that he's taught me everything that I can learn from him and said that it's time for me to move on. And one of the people that worked with Joanie at the time was Chef Darryl Evans, and he was leaving Azaleas going to the Four Seasons Hotel. And I got a job with him at the Four Seasons Hotel. And actually it was Occidental Grand prior to that and became the Four Seasons hotel during the [19]96 Olympics. And from there he really helped shape my career in the sense of understanding how to prepare all types of food utilizing the same sound techniques.

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And being able to walk into anyone's kitchen or anyone's cuisine and be able to cook was the goal that Chef Evans taught myself and many number of chefs at that point in time in [19]96.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow. Okay. That sounds like incredible training. So valuable, yeah.

Todd Richards: I'd definitely say it was. I modeled myself after that. Any one of my employees will tell you that my goal is for all of them to be better than me because then I know

that, one, they're gonna be well taken care of, and two, I know that my legacy will live on through them becoming better chefs, better general managers, better barkeeps, and things like that.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. I can sense that mentorship that was so important to you is something you really want to continue to pass down to others.

Todd Richards: It's definitely a big part of being a chef.

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Even though we get sometimes a bad reputation of being stern or unrelenting and perfectionists, but one thing that people don't realize right away, the number one thing that we have to be is safe. And we have to make sure that our employees are safe, and also make sure that the guests we're serving are safe. And so it takes perfection in order not to kill anyone or make someone sick or have your restaurant shut down. So people think it's all about delicious food, but our number one job right off the back is to make sure that everyone is safe.

Diana Dombrowski: So after that, you've covered those bases of making sure everyone is safe and you've really honed these techniques and skills under the mentorship that you just described, how did you bring that creative spirit that you were talking about from when you were younger into what you decided to bring to the table?

Todd Richards: Fortunately, my parents wanted to make sure that I had a balance, so my mom insisted I either go to art school or music school, and I chose music school because our house was full of music all the time.

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And so that was a creative process, but if you understand a lot of things with music or with physics or with cooking, that a lot of these things are number based, chords are one, three, five in music. Everyone can do two, four, six, eight, ten. It's hard for people to do one, three, five, seven, nine, just rip that off the tongue. Or when you think about applied cooking, that it's really sort of physics itself. So it was fun being able to use that scientific mind in a creative way because I understood the math of a lot of those things first. And then I just went on gut and instinct and exploration. I have no problem with telling anybody that I am a nerd. I love being called a nerd. I think it's the biggest compliment that anyone can give me as a bookworm or a nerd or anything like that, because studying all the greats and really finding your own way to express yourself is really what being a chef is all about.

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Diana Dombrowski: That sounds really exciting. And it sounds like you have constant opportunities to innovate. I can tell that you've accomplished a great deal as a cookbook author and a restaurant owner. Can you tell me a little bit more about the path from working there at the-- I'm so sorry-- at the Occidental, is that what you said?

Todd Richards: Yeah. Yeah, it was Occidental Grand and the Four Seasons. I followed Chef Evans to two other restaurants, Villa Christina, then Spice. And then, at that point in time, I really wanted to go out on my own. I felt like I was with him for a very long time, and so I started at the Ritz-Carlton downtown. And one of the great things about working for Ritz-Carlton is that their motto is, "Ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen." And my first day at the Ritz Carlton was 9/11.

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So I have a lasting memory of doing orientation, everyone was leaving the hotel because it was low occupancy, and all the guests that were leaving the hotel actually had to come back because no one could fly, no one could travel. And so they pulled us out of orientation, and we all went to work. I knew nothing about that kitchen or anything at all. The only thing I know, that for the next four days I think I slept probably maybe two, three hours a day because we had to take care of all the guests that were returning to the hotel, plus you can imagine no one in the city had anyplace to go. So a lot of people came to the hotel to eat and being in a downtown sprawling area. So it really helped shaped my career of focusing on the guest side of it, as well as Ritz-Carlton has one of the best human resources training programs and really helped me develop my interest in making sure that employees are well taken care of. I did three Ritz-Carltons.

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I ran a five-diamond restaurant, one of forty-two in the world, for five years, and in 2007 opened up one of the most successful airport restaurants in the world, One Flew South, in Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson airport.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Todd Richards: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: I'm [0:11:22.3].

Todd Richards: You say wow, I say wow, too, because, hell, it's hard to remember all this stuff. [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Todd Richards: But the great thing about being a chef is that those are great memories and everything, and helped me train to be who I am, but those are not the things that I rest on. I really am a forward-- in a moment to forward thinking, those things are great to understand. I recognize I have those accomplishments, but I believe that my greater accomplishments are well ahead of me, and that's what really keeps me moving and striving in this business.

Diana Dombrowski: Constantly innovating and trying something new.

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Yeah, absolutely.

Todd Richards: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: So when we think about 2020, could you tell us what position you were in and what you were planning for the year, maybe, say, in January?

Todd Richards: January was a great time, and understanding I was a culinary director for Jackmont Hospitality, primarily overseeing Chicken + Beer, which is partnered by Ludacris in Concourse D of the airport, still overseeing One Flew South, which was starting its eleventh year in the airport. And then **you got to imagine** to be ranked in the top five restaurants in the world for over ten straight years as an almost impossible task, and we've done that, to be nominated for Beard Awards and things like that. And then we were embarking on opening other restaurants at that time. And being on the international concourse with One Flew South, we really started to see the financial trend going down not immediately but really around February we saw that trend going down.

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So we were in the midst, as a group, in opening more restaurants, but we really started to see a downturn in revenue. And no one really knew why that was happening.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay. So assuming then, at that point, that it was probably a temporary blip, something that you'd come to understand later. And when did you start to realize that it was COVID-19?

Todd Richards: Being on the international concourse, that was really evident that it had to be something to do with COVID because travel restrictions came in right away. And to understand where One Flew South is positioned in the airport, we have Korean Air Lines to the left of us, and then all the other international flights to Europe centered around that area, as well. So when you saw that immediate downturn from those two, we knew something was happening.

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We didn't know quite sure what it was. Looking back on it now, as well, we had a lot of staff that were sick with things like pneumonia and flu, and who were out for two and three weeks and no one really knew why that was happening. It just didn't seem right that our staff was sick for two or three weeks. We can't confirm if they ever all had COVID or someone just had COVID, but it seems that two or more things are not just coincidental.

Diana Dombrowski: Mm-hmm, yeah. Absolutely. So watching that happen in that segment of your business and your work, what did you end up doing around March when the United States started--

Todd Richards: Well, unfortunately, I was one of the people that had COVID. I was diagnosed with COVID on March 29th, and I can say-- let me give you a little bit more backstop.

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So a couple of our restaurants we did decide to close because it didn't make any sense to operate. Where Chicken + Beer is on Concourse D it's a lot of discount airlines in that area, so we saw an immediate travel dip in that area, as well as One Flew South. Like I said, international travel was not happening. So we decided to close those in the airport. And then, right after that, I was unfortunately diagnosed with COVID March 29th of 2020. And it was really an interesting thing that happened to me, that I literally was standing in line at Kroger checking out, I felt horrid, I drove home probably about a mile or so at the rate of about 15 miles per hour, went inside the house, called the restaurant, told them I was not coming in, and I literally did not leave the house again till about May 5th of 2020.

Diana Dombrowski: Oh, my goodness.

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So you received a diagnosis? Were you tested?

Todd Richards: So I tested negative five times.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow.

Todd Richards: But they knew that I had to have something, and all the symptoms were there. And, unlike others who have fevers and things like that, I did not have a fever. But I can only equate it to the fact of it felt like I was laying on the ground, someone standing on my back and tapping me upside my head with a ball-peen hammer. That is the best way I can describe the feeling of having COVID at that time.

Diana Dombrowski: That sounds excruciating.

Todd Richards: I would say yes. I became anemic, which I never was before. Vitamin B6, 12 deficient, vitamin D deficient.

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And I know we're gonna talk about the rest of the year, but literally I did not feel like I fully recovered until probably around December 15th.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow! How did you learn to take care of yourself during that time?

Todd Richards: I didn't. I could tell you that there was a certain couple of days that I was delirious. I stayed up for about 24 hours straight in delirium. I rewrote my will in delirium, sent it to my wife and to my attorney. They wanted me to go to the hospital, but everyone was sick in the hospital, and I just felt like if I'm gonna go out, I'm gonna go out at home. But they wouldn't really want me to come to the hospital because I didn't have any respiratory problems in breathing nor did I have a fever.

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So they wanted me just to "tough it out" and see how I was going to recover. And then, from that, after May, I did encounter something called cluster headaches. And if anyone knows what a cluster headache is, it is actually, again, like someone tapping you upside your head with a hammer, but then it feels like someone's putting a screwdriver in your eye at the same time. And they all believe that this is something that is a result from me having COVID and being so vitamin deficient, which we later found out was one of the things that really caused me to have these excruciating pains. And everyone knows I don't miss work at all, and for me to miss work-- I never ever do.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. That must've been so hard to deal with, the physical symptoms and then also as your businesses are trying to grapple with everything. What part were you able to play in leading them through this at that time?

Todd Richards: To tell you the truth, I really stepped away from my role as culinary director during that time.

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I was always having a feeling that I wanted to try to venture out on my own and open up my own restaurants. I am an entrepreneur at heart. And I was just so ill. There was really no PPP plan in place and things like that, so the money that I saved I was using it for basic bills and things like that, did financial hardships and things like that just to keep the mortgage from having to be paid so I didn't burn through savings and things like that or cash in 401Ks. And really, on the other side of it, I was just fortunate that a real estate agent called me about a property that was left vacant. It was Greater Good BBQ, and it was available.

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And I just wanted to really try to find opportunity inside this misery that I was in, as well as that there is opportunity when **economy** fell, there's going to be a lot of turnkey restaurants that come about. So I would say it was great misfortune to being ill, but, really, I had my faculties enough to think about it from an entrepreneur's standpoint that if I was gonna come out on the other side of this, I had to make sure that I had a restaurant of my own to go to.

Diana Dombrowski: So while you're still recovering during this period, when we're talking about October, and you don't feel fully well until a couple months later in December, how did you start planning that next step?

Todd Richards: Just being a person who's had restaurants before, a lot of the things that you end up doing in restaurants are steps that you repeat over and over again. You have to have a health inspection, you have to have a menu, so a lot of these things I already had in place.

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What your food costs, all that interesting programming you have to do, it's a little bit easy when you want to open a new restaurant. But the real challenge was, of course, raising capital in this environment. When you think about it, no one wants to give up any money because everyone is losing money for the most part. And then, as well as just finding the resources to do so. And then, also finding the human resources to do so because so many people were claiming unemployment at that time that it was really something that was really difficult to find. So I knew what the long-term-- we have a six-year lease on Lake & Oak Neighborhood BBQ. I knew what the long-term outcome was going to be once I recovered, but how do you manage it from the beginning stages where opening Fourth of July weekend in the middle of COVID, people don't want to come inside your restaurant; how do you do that?

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And so the iteration of Lake & Oak Neighborhood BBQ probably has changed five times over the period from us opening to current date because we opened as a fast, casual to-go restaurant, then a semi-casual to-go restaurant, then we started letting people sit on the patio. So it was a lot of steps and planning in order to get the restaurant to where it is right now.

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. I can imagine. What was the reception like in July at that opening?

Todd Richards: I think being a chef you have to have a little bit-- I say touched by an angel-- you have to be a little bit crazy to be a chef anyway. You think about it from an art form,

that music is permanent, paintings and photography can be permanent. What we do as chefs, we put food on the plate, we have all this creative juices going, and once it leaves our hands it is never going to be the same as it was before.

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So just focusing your energy on how not to take that craziness and run a business with it is rather difficult to do unless you have years of experience in doing so. That's why so many restaurants fail because most of the time people just don't have enough experience to do so. But the planning part was really just utilizing the experience of, okay, if we're gonna open as a fast casual, well, we've ran fast casual restaurants before, so 99 percent of the items had to be to-go friendly, so we did not put our full menu out in the first place because all the items were not well served for to-go. It's like putting eggs Benedict on a to-go menu. The egg is poached perfectly when it goes into a container. By the time someone gets home it's overcooked. So just knowing things like that with just really smart business sense to also make sure the customer experience was the same as if they were in the restaurant or they took it home was really important to the success of the restaurant in the beginning.

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Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. And during that time, so many of the guidance that was issued and the rules and the different mandates happening at regional and state and national levels, everything was shifting, especially over the summer. What was that like for you as a business owner and also someone who was dealing with COVID?

Todd Richards: The difficulty first was putting personal experiences aside and understanding how to operate a business in it, because you can easily become-- all your phobias

of being ill already can alter the way that you do business. And if that does happen, how do you make the best of it? So with us having everything to-go, we provided people with masks, we provided people with probably more hand sanitizer than they can ever probably imagine using.

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We had bottled water out there for guests because you're waiting in the hot sun. It's July so you're waiting outside in the hot sun, so we wanted to make sure people were hydrated and things like that. So we spent probably more money on just the PPP for ourselves and for our guests than most people would have thought about. And then, secondly, I would say that because we are in the City of Atlanta but we're in DeKalb County, where the rest of Atlanta is in Fulton County, we had two different regulating bodies that sometimes had conflicting information that we had to kind of navigate through. And that was the most difficult part of it because the City of Atlanta could be open, but DeKalb County could say that, oh, you have to close. And we really did not know which one to follow through. But then, once we heard from DeKalb County Health Department to understand that we had to follow them because they provided us with our health permit, then we were able to help navigate through that.

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And I think the final thing was the political and public relations side of things which was very difficult. You can imagine us as chefs and well-known chefs, that media wants to come, people want to come, they want to take pictures with us. We just had a great article in *Washington Post* come out, as well. And so to manage the visuals of people coming up to talk to us and things like that, that people would drive past and say, wow, this restaurant is busy, they're not social distancing, which was farthest from the truth. We moved our tables to the furthest part of the

street that we can do so. We added tables. We have added all these things to make sure that people were able to dine safe. No one was allowed in our building. They're still not currently without a mask on. So those things were challenges, but our experience as a unit and as a team were able to overcome those challenges very successfully.

Diana Dombrowski: I can imagine if anyone would, it would probably be you that could handle that very successfully.

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Todd Richards: Well, stress is a good thing. If you use it properly it makes you better. And it should not make you so bummed out. And one thing that I learned from Chef Evans, that the best thing you can do as a chef or a business owner or entrepreneur is hire people that do things better than you can for yourself. And so I have a great team. I have a business partner in Joshua Lee who worked with me at Chicken + Beer, Max Lager's, and White Oak Kitchen & Cocktails. Of course we have **Catherine** who handles our marketing and public relations. I have Chef **Kitchens** who worked with me for over ten years in the kitchen. And then we have two great partners in **Stephanie** and **McHale Williams**. So I have a team that we all have our parts, and we do those things in our own part and we're the experts in our part, so it made it a lot easier than just one person coming up with all the ideas and trying to execute all the ideas on their own.

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Diana Dombrowski: That makes sense. When you think about the situation in Georgia politically in terms of COVID and also the national election, there's been so much attention--

Todd Richards: That's kind for you to say, "attention," isn't it? [Laughter]

Diana Dombrowski: [Laughter]

Todd Richards: Scrutiny, BS, I can go on and on, but attention, definitely we got a lot of attention here.

Diana Dombrowski: Yes, yes. Attention, perhaps some scrutiny. When the very idea of following these safety guidelines in the first place becomes political opinion and a divisive issue, did you all deal with that with customers that you had? Did that become something you all had to resolve and get policies around together, or are most people as customers on board?

Todd Richards: I would say definitely not all people are on board with anything.

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Atlanta is a unique city that has a strong African American population, is very diverse, but is full of classism. And depending on where you live, certain policies will be followed, and certain policies will not be followed. And when you have celebrity chefs or a celebrity chef team, that brings the not-following-rules people in, sometimes you have to give them an assistance in following the rules. And sometimes you can be very, very nice about it and everything and they will acquiesce and do so, and sometimes you have customers that you just have to tell them, this is not the place for you to eat at this point in time. And I have no problem being the one who does that because, number one, I have to protect my staff. I have to protect the staff. And, again, this is another Ritz-Carlton philosophy is that the number one job of the executive team is to protect the assets of the company.

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And the number one asset of our company is our staff. So if I allowed someone to come in and to affect our staff, affect and infect our staff, then we're gonna have a closed restaurant for however long it takes to get this out of the restaurant. They're gonna lose wages, we're gonna lose taxes for the city, and we're gonna be labeled as one of those restaurants that has closed. Is there a way to recover from that? Sure. A lot of my chef colleagues have to close their restaurants and they reopen, but managing it from a public relations standpoint is already difficult. But when you have a celebrity chef team that's out here trying to open up other restaurants and be great entrepreneurs, it's a difficult thing. But politically I would say that it really shows where classism happens in this city, and really the rest of the country is also suffering through that same kind of profile.

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Diana Dombrowski: That makes a lot of sense. This is a really chaotic time for people working in food, and you have seemed to tackle all of these obstacles with a very deep and enduring work ethic. Could you tell me a little bit about maybe where that comes from?

Todd Richards: That work ethic came from my parents-- well, I would say my entire family. We were never afraid of working because we partied at the same kind of atmosphere. So it really just became part of the fabric of growing up. And my dad, he worked overnight from 8:00 PM to 8:00 in the morning. My mom, like I said, she was a biologist. I remember being a kid when she was getting her master's in biology, that, in order to save money, I went to night school with her and sat on her lap while she was in class.

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And so to see my mom work a full-time job and then go back to school, and being there with her while she was in class really gave me a sense that, in order to get something accomplished you have to work at it, but you also have to work at it in a correct and smart manner. And I don't think that it's really something that you have to be privileged or anything like that to do. It really just comes from a constitution of, do you want to win? And my philosophy has always been, I hate losing more than I like winning. Winning means that you accomplished something. When you hate losing, you really want to keep working at it, working at it, working at it until it's done absolutely correctly.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Todd Richards: And I get that from my parents, and, like I said, my entire family is like that, my sister, my cousins. We were just a great working family who wanted to have time with each other, and the only way we can do so was to work together to get that done.

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Diana Dombrowski: That sounds like it made a huge impact. And I wonder, how has your family been doing during this time, during COVID? How has their health been and things like that?

Todd Richards: I don't know. And when I say I don't know, it's because they really don't-- we all approach it the same way, that we all want to be safe. A lot of our family members are much older.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm.

Todd Richards: And we all have to make sure that we protect themselves from that, from COVID and things like that, so it's one thing to do so. I think the other thing is that we are spread out across the country and it's really difficult already for us all to get together.

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So we really take time of using video and either Facetime or sometimes Zoom or sometime Houseparty to talk to each other, so I don't think we have felt like you would think other families might have. But still, I think that just watching our elders and making sure that they're safe has been really a focal point for the entire family, to make sure that they understand that we are looking out for their best interests.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm. When it comes to your family in your own household, **did** you all have some sort of pod system, or how did you decide who you were gonna stay safe around or be unmasked around when you had this public-facing work going on, too?

Todd Richards: It was some isolation in the beginning, sleeping downstairs, sleeping away from your loved ones was a choice that we all made.

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I would say also that the other part of it is making sure that your family is staying home and not in the restaurant. Of course they want to support us, but it's equally dangerous for them to be in that same environment as us. And also with our staff. We had to tell our staff that really if you want to work here you really have to stay safe. And fortunately a lot of our staff was young, and a lot of our staff is on social media, so we get to see a lot of things that they're doing. And we have to monitor them. If you're in an environment where we see you without masks on and **without you being** there for a long period of time, you cannot come back to work until you're

out for seven days. And that's not by our choice, that's really the mandate that made it safe for everyone.

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And, too, that really made it just a rule that we're all in this together, and really focusing everyone to be together, which really made us a little bit more successful, I think, than other areas. We only had one real incident of COVID in the restaurant and it was after one of our chefs went to travel and we told them that they had to have a COVID test before they came back. They had COVID so they never even entered our restaurant prior to them even having COVID. So it was a lot of those things that we knew that the best guidelines were there and we kind of followed them to make sure that they are done and being done correctly.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm. When it comes to your own daily routine, now that you found yourself maybe on the other side of COVID in your own life, how is your daily routine different right now?

Todd Richards: It keeps the same kind of daily routine. I'm up early.

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I'm up early anyway, so I'm usually up between five and six. I would say that I still have my espresso or macchiato in the morning. I am a routine person. I put on my music. I think that the biggest adjustments that I've had to make with COVID is the amount of different vitamins I have to take. I have to give myself B6, B12, and D injections weekly in order to make sure that my vitamin level stays high enough in order to do so. And really, it is more important now, opening two restaurants within six weeks, I have to make sure that my levels stay at a great level, which they have been consistently. I'm a walker anyway. I love to walk, and so I'm increasing the

amount of walking that I do. And so my usual routine hasn't changed much. I would say that the increase of things like walking more, being in better physical health, which I thought was already in good shape, to be in even better shape.

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And also figuring out that you can't go to the doctor to get these injections, that you have to learn how to inject yourself, which is something I never imagined I was gonna have to do. It's something that now I can do it with no problem. It used to take me 50 times to start and stop, like I'm going to stick myself and you just do it, now it's just one time, boom, put a band-aid on and keep going. So it's just a lot of those things that become part of normal routine in an abnormal world.

Diana Dombrowski: Wow. When you look to 2021, what do you anticipate or what are you planning for yourself and for your restaurants?

Todd Richards: The biggest things that we're going to do in 2021 is, like I said, we're opening up two more restaurants this year. One is SOUL, which is based off of my cookbook, *SOUL*. The second one is Kuro, which is a seafood sushi concept that we're opening.

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And then, I think thirdly, it's really, after we get these two open, I'm writing another cookbook as well. The working title is *Black White Church All Over*, which is a furthering of soul where we talk about the migration of food out of Africa and we're expanding more into the Caribbean, Jamaica, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Mexico. And then, also explaining farther into more of the country where we talk about the Appalachian influences, Chicago being a big hub, Texas, Mexico because people don't understand how much African food really made

Mexican cuisine what it is, and how it traveled to California. And so it has an over-reaching goal of making Afro cuisine where it's uniting people of African diaspora across the world through understanding where food is.

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And these are all big tasks, but I'm a big task person. I like the big tasks in order to make the world a more delicious and unified place.

Diana Dombrowski: Very ambitious, as ever. How about the restaurants themselves?

Todd Richards: The restaurants themselves are really **great**. And I don't say it in a sense that guests are not important because all guests are important, but as my role in the company, my role is really in making sure that the staff is trained, well developed, and that they have all the tools that they need to make sure that the guests are taken care of. And then, the other side of it is new product development, new business development. And then, the final side, which is probably still one of the most important, is managing the assets which include the financial side of the company, making sure that we're managing the books correctly, P&Ls and things like that correctly. So that is a big task in its own, and each one of those require a different part of my brain to get there.

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But it really is something that I've been trained for and that we have people in the company who do other things better than me to do so. If you ask me to be the marketing and PR person, I will tell you no because I don't find it as interesting as I used to when I was out there every day searching for that type of reward. My reward now comes from our financial well-being and then the staff development.

Diana Dombrowski: That makes a lot of sense. We've talked about your personal experience with COVID and then how y'all have handled the pandemic within your restaurants. When you think about the Atlanta community at large, how would you describe the impact the pandemic has had on the place where you live and the city that you know?

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Todd Richards: Well, the city itself, not only did it go through the pandemic, which is still happening right now, we also had a reckoning in our country with race relations and class relations, as well. So the City of Atlanta really had a difficult time to really balance those things out, because outside of the Atlanta Metro area, you have a different environment that can be somewhat challenging of the norms that we have in the city. So I really believe that the city has become more galvanized together when you think about the political ramifications of seeing two Democratic senators, one being African American and one of Jewish descent become senators in the State of Georgia, that shows that there's some progressive things happening here.

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But it also shows that we still have conservative values here in the fact that one of the senators is a preacher, and another shows some progressive values that we have one that is young. And that really makes Atlanta a great city to live in and why it's progressing so well, because we have that balance of new and old, tradition and modernism, and they often fight each other, but that's really what makes a city great, is how you can find that conflict and prosper throughout all the conflict that is happening.

Diana Dombrowski: When it comes to your own service in the community, I know that you're on the board of Wholesome Wave, and I wonder how much you've been a part of their work or watched their work change over the last year, too?

Todd Richards: I would definitely say the work changed. Our biggest fundraiser, The Southern Chefs Potluck, which we usually have in a big field, sometimes at Serenbe. We moved it in the city in 2019.

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Had over five hundred people come to that one. And then to have it done virtually this year in 2020, you can imagine that all the people that usually come and eat delicious food didn't have the opportunity to come eat delicious food. So we had to change that. We ended up delivering meals to people. We became creative in how we were doing the virtual fundraising. We called on a lot of people to come in and support us, the volunteers. So that's one challenge. Another challenge is, too, the mission that we really support farmers' markets and try to get people healthy, delicious food. So you can imagine that if you cannot go and gather into places, including, at that time, outside was still considered a gathering place, that we could not service the community in the same normal manner because the lack of people that were coming to the market, as well as that the economic impact on the people that are already in need who were on unemployment getting less money than they normally would have, how is it that they then can spend money on more expensive vegetables and things like that, as well?

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So there's a big shift in focus on the biggest, largest fundraiser, a big shift of how we got more fresh fruits and vegetables to more people, and then the shift of what is this new economy, a

virtual economy gonna look like moving forward? And that really, I think, on the other side of this is gonna make us a stronger organization because we really tapped more into that virtual aspect than I think we did previously in previously fundraising efforts.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm. Yeah. I know the Giving Tuesday campaign was a big one, and even more important because so much was happening virtually. Did that figure in very much to your own work when you're thinking about planning the cookbooks or the restaurants, as well? Did you have a lot of that part of your daily life shift to doing anything virtually?

Todd Richards: I would say definitely.

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I saw myself being asked to do more things virtually. I would say that our PR team learned a lot about virtual. I don't think any of us have any background in video filming and things like that, and we learned how to do that, as well. I think we all deserve-- especially Catherine probably deserves a couple of photo and video credits online for the things that we did ourselves instead of having a team usually sent by a publisher to come out and do. But also just understanding what our guests want from us, how they want information delivered to them, how we have to look at now our own social media posts. And we can see that there's a difference in between us just posting a stagnate picture, the results we get compared to when we do videos and things like that. We get a much more receptive audience from that.

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And I will also say that if you look at from the standpoint of Wholesome Wave, when we have more virtual and live content, the reception we get is more than ever before. And I really believe that's because people still want to be entertained, and restaurants are in the entertainment

business. I know it says food and hospitality business, but really, we're in the entertainment business. And the more that we can do to reach our guests and provide them with care and genuine comfort, and if we do that through the virtual means, that means that when we all can get back to gathering again, we should have a better experience overall for our guests, and that's really what we're here to do.

Diana Dombrowski: Um-hm. Those are most of my questions that I have for you. Is there anything else maybe that is significant to your experience of the last year that you'd like to share your thoughts or feelings about?

Todd Richards: Well, I really believe that people have to understand that not only does a mask protect themselves, it protects other people around them.

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And to not wear a mask in public when you really are trying to make sure that the people around you **are** safe, it does pin you as being overly selfish, as well. I think also that the thing I want guests to understand is that their experience is the most important thing. And by coming in the restaurant wearing a mask, using the hand sanitizer, things like that, it gives us care and comfort that you're not only looking out for yourself, that you're looking out for us, and it eases our attention as operators to provide you with a better experience. And before, I believe that guests can get away with a lot of things in restaurants and things like that, that customers were always right, but in this environment, I believe that it's a give and take, that if we all work together, we're both gonna be right.

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Diana Dombrowski: Thank you very much for your time. Thank you for sharing. And the next steps, as far as this interview processing goes, will be to send you the audio and the transcript. And the Southern Foodways Alliance has also hired a photographer who'd like to come and take a portrait of you sometime in the next few weeks. Her name is **Lindsey** and she'll be getting in touch. So I want to thank you for your time. And I'll conclude the interview portion right now. Does that work for you, as well [0:49:37.0]?

Todd Richards: Yeah.

Diana Dombrowski: Okay. All right. All right. Thank you. And you're familiar with using Zencast but--

Todd Richards: Yes.

Diana Dombrowski: --when we finish the recording, if you could let it load for a few minutes so the audio file can process fully, then we'll have both yours and mine in that high-quality format.

Todd Richards: Okay.

Diana Dombrowski: Thank you.

[End]