

Interview of: Todd Richards
Interviewer: Diana Dombrowski
Interview Date: July 29, 2021



Todd Richards
Soul Food and Culture
Atlanta, GA

Date: July 29, 2021
Location: Remote Interview byway of Atlanta, GA
Interviewer: Diana Dombrowski
Transcription: Sharp Copy Transcripts
Length: Thirty two minutes
Project: COVID-19

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Diana Dombrowski: All right. Today is Thursday, July 29th [2021]. This is Diana Dombrowski recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance COVID-19 Project. We're here for a second interview with Chef Todd Richards.

Hi, Chef. How are you doing today?

[00:00:16]

Todd Richards: I'm doing well. And yourself?

[00:00:18]

Diana Dombrowski: Doing well. Thank you. Thanks very much. We're talking here at the end of July, after a summer of very little mask wearing, and now renewed and updated CDC guidance, so a lot is changing, this week in particular, when it comes to COVID-19 precautions in a big, broad public way. And I'm curious about how the last couple months have gone for you, because when we spoke, we were talking about how you had been experiencing long-haul symptoms with COVID, and I'm curious about how you're feeling today.

[00:01:03]

Todd Richards: Well, I'm feeling well. I am proud to say I'm vaccinated, for sure. Finally the doctor released me to be vaccinated, which is great. I know a lot of people have had symptoms from vaccinations. I really didn't have any except for one day I just felt a little cold, but other than that, I didn't have any symptoms from it. It's great to be one of the people who had COVID and still went to get vaccinated. When people ask me

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about it, say, “Well, you have these antibodies and things like that,” and, oddly enough, I was found not to have many of the antibodies left at all from having COVID last year in March. So anyone who says, “Well, I already had COVID. I’m good,” I would beg to differ, as I really didn’t have any antibodies from having COVID in March of 2019.

[00:02:05]

Diana Dombrowski: Wow!

[00:02:08]

Todd Richards: 2020. I’m sorry.

[00:02:08]

Diana Dombrowski: Yes, yes. And how have your symptoms been with the long-haul? Have they abated, for the most part, or are you feeling with them still?

[00:02:20]

Todd Richards: I would say that, you know, that the regimen of vitamins and things like that have been very helpful. At one point in time, I was doing acupuncture, which was very helpful. There was a lot of things that I did to overcome a lot of the symptoms of it. I still don’t know, you know, internally, you know, what it really has done to the body. I’ve had brain scans and everything like that, because I had cluster headaches after doing it, so those all came back negative. It’s just you never, never know, you know, what is the

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long-term health outcome from having such a destructive type of virus inside you for a long period of time.

[00:03:08]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah. Are those headaches continuing or does the support you're using mainly deal with those?

[00:03:16]

Todd Richards: I would say that they continue. What I've learned about COVID, just being a nerd of the subject right now, is that things that you might have had dormant in your body or hereditary, it does try to attack those things and make your body have those things active. My mom suffered from cluster headaches. I never had any symptoms of it before until COVID, so now that I'm a sufferer of COVID, I have cluster headaches as well. They don't happen as frequently as they did prior to the vaccination, which is great, so there is some type of relief that has come out of it, but still it's really an unknown.

[00:03:58]

Diana Dombrowski: Wow. Wow! That's incredible. Do you—what is it like to work full-time [laughs] while also handling that and doing all the research, as I'm sure you have? [laughs]

[00:04:13]

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Todd Richards: You know, being a chef, you know, we are resilient by nature. It's the nature of what we do on a daily basis. You know, if you look at our health tracker on our phones, we probably log in thousands of steps every single day. So there's lots of just perseverance that we always have to have as being chefs. I really don't let it bother me. I am proudful of saying that I go to work every single day and things like that, and everyone who really, truly knows me, that if I miss work, it must be because something traumatic has happened or I'm having a really bad episode of cluster headache. But other than that, I will say that when you're not only owner of a company, but you're also a chef, that, you know, you have so many people in your organization that count on you to show up and be the best that you can, that I use that energy to keep me going.

[00:05:18]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, yeah, that's very resilient of you. I saw, too, in preparing for the interview that you have been in the news. I was very aware that you kept working and are continuing to expand what you're doing, so could you maybe tell us maybe between, like, January and now, what changes have taken place for your business?

[00:05:42]

Todd Richards: Well, that's a great question. We signed a couple deals for restaurants. We're opening a new restaurant called Kuro, and Kuro is the Japanese word for "Black." It is a California cuisine-inspired, southern-influenced restaurant focusing on, like, seafood and items of that way, so you'll find things like crudos, some sashimi and sushi dishes, as well as some traditional southern dishes like fried catfish and other great things

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that we do in the South. We will be focusing on vegetables a good deal in the restaurant as well, as Georgia does grow some of the best vegetables around.

We also are expanding our kiosk locations in food hall, so Food & Culture will be opening in about three different cities over the next year and a half. Lake & Oak Neighborhood BBQ is expanding as well. We're opening Lake & Oak Neighborhood BBQ on the Westside Trail of the Beltline in Atlanta, as well as a kiosk in Knoxville, Tennessee, we'll be doing a small food hall there for Lake & Oak Neighborhood BBQ.

[00:07:01]

Diana Dombrowski: Wow! Congratulations. That's huge. [laughs]

[00:07:05]

Todd Richards: It is. When there's opportunity, you have to grab it, because it can flee really quickly, so it's really just about, you know, doing what's best for the company and all the ladies and gentlemen that work for us.

[00:07:20]

Diana Dombrowski: Yeah, absolutely. That's very professional. I'm really excited to hear about that, because within the food industry, you hear so frequently the impact of COVID being shutdown, and y'all are expanding right now, expanding in the community, and there's a huge demand for what you're putting out there. That's wonderful. I'm curious about how doing business in that public-facing way has changed as well since January. While you're looking to the future and these openings and these

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expansions, how have things changed for your employees as they work with the public on a daily basis?

[00:08:01]

Todd Richards: Well, the public is really great in a neighborhood setting, because we see a lot of these people every day. Especially for those who have worked from home for a long period of time, you know, we see them frequently either walking through the neighborhood. We have a great coffee shop near Lake & Oak Neighborhood BBQ named Perk, so we see people over there. They'll go grab a coffee or something, they'll come sit on our patio and have lunch and work on their laptops. So it's really a great environment to be in the fabric of a neighborhood, to do something.

I would say that it does present challenges, just understanding what the mandates are from the government compared to the state, compared to the city, compared to the county. There's a lot of filtering of rules and mandates that we have to really understand better of what they are. We encourage all our employees to be vaccinated, mainly for their protection, not necessarily—and, of course, the business is at top of mind as well, but because, you know, we can't physically or ask each patron, "Are you vaccinated or not?" So some people choose to wear masks, some people don't choose to wear masks. We cannot ask them to show their ID of vaccination. So we encourage all employees, for their own protection, to make sure that they wear masks, especially if we're going to do indoor dining.

[00:09:31]

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Diana Dombrowski: Yes, absolutely. Do you still have some barriers in place, like some of the plexiglass or anything like that, or has that mainly come down as indoor dining is opening up?

[00:09:41]

Todd Richards: We never chose to do barriers, because we thought that it really was not going to protect employees in our environment the way our establishment was set up that easily. As soon as the person takes two steps, they're going to be outside of the barrier, you know. [Dombrowski laughs.] So it really did not make sense.

So we encourage masks, we purchased an abundance of masks for guests to use. Even if they lost their mask or they didn't have one, we gave them masks. When we first opened Lake & Oak last year, it was all outdoor dining, but we provided bottled water and things like that for our patrons outside while they were waiting in the hot sun, so we did a lot of things to be still guest-focused, but also in protection of our staff.

I will say that we have been very fortunate in both our restaurants not to have anyone who've had COVID, and we have never had to shut down, so we do believe that we have done some of the best practices in order to keep COVID away from our establishments.

[00:10:48]

Diana Dombrowski: Absolutely. That's a stellar record. That's a huge deal. [laughs]
Again, congratulations, because I can only imagine how much work that that took while folks are negotiating the boundaries of other people every day, yeah, absolutely.

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I'm curious if you're comfortable maybe sharing what your vaccination story was like personally, because you mentioned that you had been waiting to get it a little longer on doctor's guidance.

[00:11:21]

Todd Richards: Well, the thing is, is that being so ill from COVID, you naturally want to take as many precautions as possible. It's really understanding that there's these three vaccines out there, which one is the best for you, which is the best for your makeup and your tolerance, of course. I went with Pfizer vaccination, the two doses which seemed to be better suited for what I endured with COVID. The Johnson & Johnson one, we were going to go with first. However, we saw the reports that they were having some issue with it, and to do a vaccine and then possibly have to do it again, you know, months later was just not the best course of action that we took. I will say that my doctor had a horrible bout of COVID as well, so understanding that we were both double cautionary on how to approach vaccines, as we both had the same kind of problems with COVID.

I do believe that it is a personal decision for all people to make, and they have to understand that their personal decision affects not only everyone in their household, but people that they interact with publicly. I don't think that people are, in general, that selfish to say that they don't want to get vaccinated. I don't believe that we have enough outlets in telling the personal stories of vaccinations to better enhance or increase the numbers of people being vaccinated, whereas in my story, I'm a person who had COVID, been a long-hauler, took a vaccination, and really have had no symptoms from it. So that's a difference than some people say, "Well, I never had COVID, and I took the

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vaccination and I was sick for two days.” So there’s different rules of thumb for each person, but the more people that share their stories about vaccinations, I believe that will have a better outcome and better fiscal outcome for individual restaurants in our country.

[00:13:49]

Diana Dombrowski: That makes a lot of sense, yeah. I’m curious if—it seems like your employees are onboard, they’ve gotten vaccinated, this is well understood among all of them, but you’re working with a public that’s pretty polarized on whether or not they do receive the vaccine, and it’s important to remain guest-focused at this time, but have your relationships maybe with customers or other folks in your community changed at all in relation to their vaccination stance?

[00:14:23]

Todd Richards: We have not. We have never had anyone come in and be belligerent about masks. We’ve never had any of those types of approaches in our business, though you can find them blasting on social media and things like that as memes, where you can poke fun at people. I find it hilarious how deep-seated some of these misnomers are. We’ve never had that, and that’s really because our business model is focusing on customer relations. We serve food and we serve beverages. We are in the service business, and by providing service to our customers, people kind of put their guards down. We’re not being adversaries. They know with them we are trying to have the best experience for all guests.

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As owner, my job is to do two things, and mostly protect the assets of the company, and my employees are the number one asset of our company. So I have to do what's best for them first. If it gets to a point where the numbers are going to go back up and we're finding more people are not being vaccinated, then we'll switch our model back to what we did post-vaccine and allow our guests still to dine with us, but also I have to protect the employees first.

[00:15:45]

Diana Dombrowski: Absolutely. Yeah, I'm very impressed by your professionalism and leadership ability during this time, where a lot of the guidance has changed and it really comes down to individual owners to make decisions about what's safest and what's best. I'm curious, having been in that position, as you're looking to expand, do you see any impacts or changes you've made during the pandemic that might become permanent?

[00:16:19]

Todd Richards: Yeah, I do. I would say that the increasing amount of sanitation, like hand sanitizer, things like that, in the restaurant won't go away at all. We will always offer masks for people moving forward. Again, we cannot mandate someone shows us their vaccination card, so we have to put a lot of trust and faith in people, so we will always keep those two things readily available.

I will say that from a business-model standpoint, we have become more flexible in the way these models are being constructed. Moving forward, if another variant comes out that we might have to go back to pre-COVID vaccines, how can we easily switch the

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business back to that model, those things like that we are continuing to incorporate. Just because this was a first one in 100 years does not mean that we'll not see something like this again. Being flexible, I will say, is the best advice I can give to anyone, any business owner, that by switching your model or having it easily able to be converted will help all of us get through these lean times, especially as people are changing their habits every single day.

[00:17:47]

Todd Richards: Absolutely. I've spoken with some folks in the industry as well, who describe changes to buildings in terms of ventilation and outdoor seating that are becoming a higher priority for folks. Did anything physical like that play into the decisions you made for your new locations?

[00:18:10]

Todd Richards: Physical buildings are something that you really have to work with landlords on. Of course, they are in the business to make money as well, so we approach things with landlords, but, honestly, we know that that's really not going to be their model moving forward. Our locations that we look for, we always look for items or locations with patios, because our business model for the first two restaurants is outdoor seating as well as indoor seating, and so that really did not have to change in our location or our seeking location.

I do think what has changed, though, for us as a restaurant group is really understanding customer needs and how we have to be even more focused on a family

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environment as well as an individual environment, and how those two are juxtaposed in the dining scene, whereas you have more people working from home, they might bring their infant child or their toddler with them, so we need to have more space where items such as strollers and things like that, while also making sure that we have enough space for bike racks, as people are commuting differently from their home as well. So we're looking at a lot of things on the periphery, you know, to make sure that we are incorporating these into our business ideas and our business model, to carve out spaces for flexibility for our diners, because they are actually asking for more flexibility because their working conditions have changed dramatically.

[00:19:52]

Diana Dombrowski: Wow. Gosh, that's so much to think about. [laughs] I'm so impressed by the way that y'all have been able to take all these changes as they come and expand and plan for the future. What in the next maybe six months do you see or are you anticipating for your business?

[00:20:25]

Todd Richards: Well, we are really looking at the guidelines for children and what is that going to be, because as fall happens, we don't know if children are actually going to end up staying in school, and if children are not going to stay in school, then we're going to see more parents at home, and we will then look at our model moving forward and how we can incorporate some of those changes, such as we're looking at expanding our kids' menu at both restaurants to make things simpler and easier for our guests.

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We're looking at how can we do better for to-go packaging, where we can stack more items in a bag so one person can carry one bag of items instead of multiple bags. And some of these things are not only just sound business practices, but also business decisions, you know, in order to understand cost and our cost model moving forward. If you look at the amount of to-go business that happened last year compared to, you know, in-house dining, naturally our paper goods' line has increased dramatically because we have to buy more paper goods, and the price of them has gone up because the supply is actually lower because more people are using these products. So it's more complex answers that I can give, but the simplest thing is to look at the guest first and see what they're trying to [unclear], and then we adjust our model around that.

I will say that also what we've seen is that in the summertime, this summer, we've seen more people traveling, and so numbers are lower than what was forecasted, but we do believe that our fall numbers are going to be better than last year as people are returning to hosting parties and things like that, as well, football. Of course, people will be gathering for football, especially here in the South on college game day and NFL on Sunday, so we're projecting to have higher numbers compared to last year in the fall, where our summer numbers are going to be lower because people are traveling.

[00:22:33]

Diana Dombrowski: Absolutely, yeah. When we look now, maybe reflecting a little bit at the beginning of the pandemic, between maybe that March period and now, what would you describe as some of your accomplishments, maybe some of the obstacles that you're proudest of seeing the other side of at this point?

[00:22:58]

Todd Richards: Well, one that we're proud of the most is that we've had zero cases of COVID in our restaurants, and that's really a testament to all of us as owners assisting employees, but employees themselves, I mean employees who've taken upon themselves not to be ill. If they feel like they have a cold or anything like that, we ask them to stay at home. We've asked them to get tested, and the test will come back negative. Those things like that, that employees have taken some personal responsibility for their own health, which is a testament to our organization, because, you know, they don't have to do that. We've all heard of other businesses being shut down for weeks at a time because of positive COVID tests.

I think, secondly, what we're proud of is that we've become more of a flexible model, instead of being so rigid and saying these items have to work exactly this way, that we've actually focused more on guests than ever before, because their needs have changed continuously and constantly almost from day to day with the mandates changing, you know, sometimes daily and even hourly, especially on a border city. Lake & Oak Neighborhood BBQ is in the city of Atlanta, but it's on two different borders of a county, so we have DeKalb County, which regulates one part of our organization, and Fulton County, which regulates another part, who have slightly different course changes for COVID and policies. So we have to navigate between all those things.

But to really reiterate, I really look at the employees and how proud we are around employees who really are not only concerned about their own health and safety, but the health and the safety of the other employees and our guests, of course.

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[00:24:51]

Diana Dombrowski: Absolutely, yeah. I, again, am just so impressed by the resilience that you've shown and also the emotional intelligence of your employees. [laughs]
Because working in those positions is just so—has been very difficult for people that I know, and navigating especially for those with children, just the last few months of the last year and a half has been like, it's been very difficult, and some part of becoming vaccinated really marks a milestone in getting through or getting past. Especially with the CDC guidance, I think, we all know that we're not at the end of whatever this looks like. We're not post-pandemic in any way, shape, or form. Emotionally I'm curious about how the staff or maybe leaders of the staff, maybe managers, decide to set a tone for their employees and kind of lead the way with staying motivated in the middle of that.

[00:26:12]

Todd Richards: It's really quite difficult, because, again, we are a barbecue restaurant and you would imagine that the barbecue restaurant would be busy in the summertime for barbecue, but, however, you know, our city in Atlanta, people have traveled. They're traveling a great deal. I originally had to pick someone up from the airport, and I thought it was actually a holiday season in December compared to being summer in July, by the number of cars, the number of people that were there.

So we really have to really focus on our full-time employees first, making sure that they're getting their hours and things like that, because those are the people that are going to be here the longest. A lot of our part-time employees have traveled. They are

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required, especially if they're going to a hotspot, to get a COVID test before they come back to work. We require that, because we don't know what they have been exposed to. Some have decided to work on other projects in the community, community service and things like that, so it really has given us the opportunity to work with the employees who want to be there. And the employees who want to take off maybe for the summer or do things like that, we give them the option. And the great thing about having an organization where people want to come back, when they want to come back and their position is open, we open them back with open arms, because they have been with us. Some of them have been with us prior to us starting this company, and some of them just continue to want to be involved in our organization, regardless if they're just seasonal or they're full-time employees.

[00:28:03]

Diana Dombrowski: Absolutely. Hearing you say that, it's very clear why your business has been so successful. [laughs] And, again, congratulations. Those are my questions mainly about reflecting over the last year and a half. I wonder if there's anything additional you'd like to share about what your experience has been like.

[00:28:27]

Todd Richards: I would say that the biggest experience that I've learned is that I probably have reverted back to understanding my times in working at hotels, where you have to be multitask and flexible in the model, because we in hotels naturally have different type of guests every single day, and when you utilize your experience in

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understanding how employees, first of all, should be treated, and, secondly, how guests' expectations will change daily, you have to treat everyone with kindness in order to understand how profitable your restaurant is going to be. When you're very rigid in your approach to food service, your hard lines can easily take you out of business or your hard lines can easily give you a bad standing in the neighborhood that you're in. So I would just say that I encourage people to look at their models, be as flexible as you can, because we don't know what the final outcome of this pandemic is going to be, but also invest time in your employees, because they are also guests in each and every location that you're representing.

[00:29:56]

Diana Dombrowski: Wow. Yeah, I'm so impressed by your consistency when it comes to that hospitality value, and I really want to thank you for spending this time with us and allowing me to ask you these questions. I really appreciate your openness as well and think that what you've shared is going to be a great resource for people who are trying to learn about this time. So thank you very much.

[00:30:28]

Todd Richards: It's my pleasure, of course.

[00:30:31]

Diana Dombrowski: The next step here is to get this transcribed and to send the transcript to you, but we are planning to have the interviews public around early 2022,

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and Wholesome Wave Georgia may also be using some of the audio, maybe using some earlier video in different types of media that they create as well. I really hope to stay in touch. My plan after the transcripts are collated is to take a look and let other people know what themes are coming up, because this is a really, really vibrant and interesting group of interviewees that we have. Yeah, I'm really, really grateful for your time.

[00:31:16]

Todd Richards: I am very happy to always assist in speaking about the wonderful world of food and beverage and hospitality.

[00:31:28]

Diana Dombrowski: Thank you very much. Thank you again. I'll pause or stop the recording now.

[End of interview]