

**Joseph Darensbourg
New Orleans, LA**

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Interviewer: Dana Logsdon

Sound Engineer: Thomas Walsh

Transcription: Debbie Mitchum

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Project: The Lives and Loaves of New Orleans

START OF INTERVIEW

[*Transcript begins at 00:00:24*]

Dana Logsdon: This is Dana Logsdon for Southern Foodways Alliance. Today is Monday, May 25, 2015. We're here with Joseph Darenbourg in New Orleans. Could you please introduce yourself and give your name and date of birth?

[00:00:36]

Joseph Darenbourg: My name is Joe B. Darenbourg – I'm not a junior – and I'm born in 1965, the week of Hurricane Betsy.

[00:00:47]

DL: What does the "B" stand for?

[00:00:50]

JD: Benoit.

[00:00:51]

DL: There's a lot of multigenerational great musical families in New Orleans, and your family has musical roots, and you're a musician, but can you tell us the other multigenerational icon that your family is part of in New Orleans?

[00:01:08]

JD: Joe Darenbourg, Wilmer Darenbourg, which is actually a cousin but we call older cousins “uncle,” and he is a renowned clarinetist for [Edward] “Kid” Ory’s Creole band, but he played with white bands in his early youth, Creole bands in the middle of his career, and then with Louis Armstrong in the ’60s [1960s] with the all-star group that he had, and he got that gig from making gumbo, not from playing clarinet.

[00:01:47]

DL: *[Laughs]*

[00:01:48]

JD: But that’s basically how we know most of the musicians, is by their trades, which brings us here today, I hope, that we’re talking about.

[00:01:55]

DL: Right, and what is the other trade that your family has been involved in for generations?

[00:01:59]

JD: For baking in Louisiana, the traditional French bread baking.

[00:02:05]

DL: And how many generations do you guys go back?

[00:02:07]

JD: Three, but they were, in Baton Rouge and Pointe Coupee, Louisiana, shoemakers and cobblers, but mainly baking was the trade that they were pretty grateful to have a long, thriving career in, so.

[00:02:25]

DL: Okay, great. We're going to go back a little bit to your family history in a minute, but I wanted to talk a little bit about your family's connection to Leidenheimer Baking Company. How long did your father work there and were there other members of the family who worked there?

[00:02:41]

JD: My dad worked there forty-five years – I'm guessing–

[00:02:45]

DL: Yes.

[00:02:46]

JD: –but he mentioned it specifically on his interview – and his dad worked about thirty-five years, and my great-grandfather baked there all his life, is what was said, so.

[00:02:59]

DL: Wow. And do you know the name of your great-grandfather?

[00:03:03]

JD: My great-grandfather's name is Clarence Gervais Darenbourg, and he had many brothers. [One] was a pretty renowned left-handed fiddler in Baton Rouge named Truelle, and we called him by his [t-nom], which was called Caillou [*Pronounced "sigh-you"*], and Caillou can be spelled quite a few ways, like Caillou, [*Pronounced "kye-you"*] but we called him Caillou, and Caillou is kind of like a word in Creole that's sort of like chip off the old block, like a guy who did what his dad did, so it's kind of profound, [*Laughs*] poignantly applicable, so.

[00:03:36]

DL: What do you know about your great-grandfather, how he got involved in the baking business or how he came to Louisiana or the United States?

[00:03:48]

JD: Well,–

[00:03:49]

DL: Can you give us–

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JD: –he descends from–

[00:03:50]

DL: –a little bit of that background history?

[00:03:51]

JD: –Germans that came to Louisiana in 1720, [*Laughs*]–

[00:03:53]

DL: Wow.

[00:03:54]

JD: –so my sixth great-grandfather was Charles Frederick de Ottenburg, and he’s the founder of Karlstein in des Allemands, the Côte des Allemands, the German coast, so they’re all predating America, predating the Civil War, and they were originally Jews who converted to Catholicism, who lived on a Swedish island, and some dealings with Luther caused them to go to Alsace and that brought them from the auspices of France to America to be in these two main regions in Côte des Allemands and the Pointe Coupee side of the family. My mother’s father is from Pointe Coupee as well. He’s from an area they called Happy Jack, so, long connection there.

[00:04:55]

DL: So, as far as you know, was your great-grandfather, Clarence, was he a baker before he arrived? Do you have any idea?

[00:05:03]

JD: He was,–

[00:05:05]

DL: Trained as a baker?

[00:05:05]

JD: –in Pointe Coupee.

[00:05:06]

DL: In Pointe Coupee.

[00:05:07]

JD: Yeah, I don't know by whom, but I think by–. We have a lot of matriarchal cooks and I think – because my dad taught me to sew, which is related to my work in book binding. I'm a master book binder, I guess, from my thirteen years of working in a hundred-year-old bindery in Boston. All the men sewed and they all had a myriad of skills, but my great-grandfather would be extreme that he did not work outside of his trade. They were very proud to do their work, but their work then consisted of him baking the bread, delivering the bread,–

[00:05:56]

DL: Really?

[00:05:57]

JD: –on horse, and there were two nails on the backdoor of the house and he would put the bread, without a bag or anything, directly on a nail. If you had two–

[00:06:05]

DL: The bread itself,–

[00:06:06]

JD: –nails that meant you got–

[00:06:06]

DL: –the loaf?

[00:06:07]

JD: –two loaves, the loaves of bread, and they were the baguette, and they would be–

[00:06:11]

DL: Wow, fascinating.

[00:06:12]

JD: –just hung on a nail.

[00:06:13]

DL: So the business was small enough that the baker would actually deliver the–

[00:06:16]

JD: My father–

[00:06:17]

DL: –bread as well. [*Laughs*]

[00:06:18]

JD: –delivered as well, but in a truck, so, with Bunny Matthews designs on them.

[00:06:22]

DL: [*Laughs*]

[00:06:22]

JD: But Bunny’s–

[00:06:24]

DL: All-around man.

[00:06:25]

JD: –part of the same tradition, visual artist and drummer, so most of my heroes are all visual artists and musicians at the same time. So as my dad had two jobs, we learned that, well, if you can make art part of your job then that would be fun as well.

[00:06:44]

DL: That’s a great approach.

[00:06:45]

JD: And I actually—. What I did inherit is I work for my father's boss from Dillard, who is the head architectural professor at Tulane University, Dr. Milton Scheuermann, who is the director of the New Orleans Musica da Camera, which I'm a—

[00:07:00]

DL: So that's—

[00:07:00]

JD: —musician.

[00:07:01]

DL: —how the connection—

[00:07:01]

JD: I sing—

[00:07:02]

DL: —happened for you.

[00:07:02]

JD: —and I play a medieval fiddle called a rebec, but Milton was my father's boss. He signed the checks and he signs my checks.

[00:07:08]

DL: I did not know that.

[00:07:09]

JD: So, my book binding—. I asked, you know, is this the daily bread, knowledge? Is that baking enough? So, I made a book for the German pope, and they said, okay, fine, and my dad also gave me the blessing that, if I was working with Thaïs [St. Julien] and Milton, that if the world were more like Milton and Thaïs it would be a better place, so I'm very proud to be working with them, and Milton is in his eighties.

[00:07:35]

DL: Wow. So your father worked fulltime at Leidenheimer Bakery—

[00:07:41]

JD: And Dillard University.

[00:07:41]

DL: —and then fulltime at Dillard University.

[00:07:43]

JD: Yeah. He was a foreman of many tasks, even at the bakery. He wasn't just a baker. My dad was a mechanic at the bakery and he was on call twenty-four hours, and he fixed from—. Any machine that worked in there, he fixed it, and he also—. I heard—. I was an entrepreneur early

on and would disassemble machinery that was kaput and I would sell the metal, so I remember cutting copper off things and selling the metal to make money as a kid.

[00:08:12]

DL: Very entrepreneurial. That's actually a theme that's come up in a lot of the interviews with the bakers, is how well-rounded you have to be. You can't just be a baker; you have to wear many hats and you have to be able to, as your father did,—

[00:08:26]

JD: But, the twist is my great-grandfather—

[00:08:28]

DL: —repair things.

[00:08:28]

JD: —would not pick up a hammer, he refused to pick up a screwdriver, and he would at least mention from a distance if he saw and had knowledge about something but he wouldn't physically—. He was done.

[00:08:43]

DL: Right. Did you actually ever work in the bakery, or—

[00:08:47]

JD: Only when they—

[00:08:47]

DL: –be part of the bakery?

[00:08:48]

JD: –placed me. Yeah, they made me bag bread and they made me bring – what do you call it? – messages, and I would take the – what do you call it? – the elevator that was wood and rickety and scary. It looked like some Alfred Hitchcock movie. *[Laughs]* It was half-size so it had a gate and it was open. As you see the old photos you can tell how primitive the bakery was. But, yeah; I have vivid memories there, with those showers. My dad had a really good friend, Joe Tenette, and we would go to Pointe Coupee and visit Mississippi and places where they had camps, and we’d hang out with other Creole families and wonder why we were here with the mosquitoes and the swamp, the humidity. But we had a blast because we meet cousins named Trini-Paul and all these funny country names and stuff. My dad said that was his nickname, “Country,” *[Laughs]* and I never understood, because he has like the Brooklyn accent. *[Laughs]* “Foist” was what we heard in his interview.

[00:09:54]

DL: So how old were you when you would go to the bakery and help out?

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JD: I was born on Orleans and Broad in 1965, so I must have been four,–

[00:10:03]

DL: Oh, wow.

[00:10:03]

JD: –about four or five years old, and up to about fifteen, when–. My dad was famous for riding his motorcycle and I grew up riding motorcycles too, and that’s how we would get to the bakery for Mardi Gras, or on the bicycle; whatever it took. The bread had to be baked. So he taught me, if you want to be somewhere, you’re going to be three types of people, a leader, a follow, or a scapegoat, is what he said, so.

[00:10:29]

DL: He sounds like an amazing person. I heard that he was also the person with the most seniority at Leidenheimer, and he worked there continuously–

[00:10:42]

JD: Yeah.

[00:10:43]

DL: –for many years.

[00:10:44]

JD: I heard that, but I never–. I mean I never thought about it. I just–. Honestly, it would be funny, because he would be on call, so sometimes if he was at home and they called him on a

weekend he would take me with him, and that's when I had more time to get to know the staff and get to know the owners and the family. The Leidenheimer family we grew up knowing pretty well, and I have to say one time when I was in the rock band Mrs. Whann [wife of Leidenheimer owner] came to see my band, and we were a loud rock and roll band on Oak Street at Tupelo's Tavern, and it was an honor for the matriarch of Leidenheimer to come because she was just so gracious and very elegant, and full of stories about her dad and grandfather, not all nice, but she was very loving to us, I mean just from day one, so.

[00:11:40]

DL: Nice. As far as you've heard, or can you describe maybe the way the bakery was back when your great-grandfather, or your grandfather and your father, worked there? Was it a small place or was it always in the location where it is now?

[00:11:54]

JD: I think the original was on Dryades Street in what was called the Jewish neighborhood, and I didn't really know if my great-grandfather was more skilled with the dark breads for that particular crowd, who wanted pumpernickel and sourdough and rye. My dad surprised me; in the interview he said that his dad was the one who knew, because he worked at all of the other bakeries, and--.

[00:12:19]

DL: In New Orleans?

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JD: In New Orleans, and he said Parkview [*sic*] Bakery was his favorite, and they paid four dollars extra to them on the weekends. My dad said the bread there was great when it was owned by the original owners of Parkway.

[00:12:40]

DL: So your dad remembers baking other kinds of breads besides the traditional poor boy loaf that—?

[00:12:44]

JD: Well, he—. Yeah, Leidenheimer baked a few different styles of French bread, but surprisingly my grandfather worked at so many bakeries that he acquired the skills in making all the traditional artisan breads that you speak of today, like at Breads on Oak and a few other places, that are specialized in. I didn't know that, but it was because he was baking at any and every time he could, to probably make up for the hundred days missed at Leidenheimer. But he was beloved, I don't know why, like Pam. [*Laughs*]

[00:13:18]

DL: Your sister. [*Laughs*]

[00:13:19]

JD: My sisters were all raised in the Sicilian tradition of baking bread and cookies and things, and we had to stay, “Please stop bringing me this. I love this but I don’t want it.”

[Laughs]

[00:13:29]

DL: Can you talk a little bit about German Creoles? Is that how you would identify yourself and your family?

[00:13:35]

JD: Yeah, because name first, and, again, crypto-Jewish background of doing things, like cantoring, and things I find myself doing, [Laughs] and my father saying “foist.” I guess we have some [Laughs] strange Ashkenazi background. But I found, after doing my DNA, that we do have a lot of crypto-Jews from Portugal. Really in the etymology of the word “Creole” I had to find out, am I qualified as Creole or what? Do I meet the criteria? And, yeah; it’s down to the root, to the bone, and I was born on Orleans Avenue so people always say, “You don’t have the accent,” and I always laugh and say, “You know, I was born on Orleans and Broad. I don’t know what more I need to audition to be a New Orleanian.” So, thank you. [Laughs]

[00:14:24]

DL: Do you think that your family was hired at Leidenheimer’s because they were of German origin?

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JD: I don't know.

[00:14:35]

DL: Like do you think certain types of bakers were hired at Leidenheimer as-

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JD: I don't think-

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DL: -opposed to-?

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JD: -it hurt them at all, and my dad said specifically that there were many who put on a uniform and who showered at the bakery but had no clue what they were doing, and they were not-

[00:14:54]

DL: Didn't last long.

[00:14:55]

JD: No, they didn't last at all, and he said many people auditioned and had no skills, and they really tried you out and, as you see from the video, they handed them dough and they said, "Here, make me something."

[00:15:08]

DL: Oh, like auditioned.

[00:15:09]

JD: Oh, yeah. I mean—.

[00:15:10]

DL: Can you describe that story a little bit, from your father?

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JD: I wish I could just show you the video, through the tape, because that's all she wrote.

[00:15:16]

DL: So they would actually have to audition to get a job there.

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JD: They made you prove that you could bake.

[00:15:22]

DL: Wow.

[00:15:23]

JD: And I think that's pretty clear. But my most vivid memory is, in that crypto-Jewish tradition, my great-grandfather, they taught me how to make what they called monkey bread but he was actually making challah, so I could tell there was some connection to some Old World tradition that was underlying their crypto experience, that you would see a Sephardic Jew expressing in a different way of being—.

[00:15:52]

DL: But now your family practices Catholicism.

[00:15:54]

JD: Well, yeah, they've been Catholics, because our name was French fried. The real name is Ottern. So *ottern* is an old German word for eagle, Adler – which are jewelers, which are a lot of Jewish people to begin with – but our name derives from the really old language, and it means eagle, and also brother of Aaron – I mean Moses – is Aaron, [*Aharon*]. So Darenbourg, you know, the Germans came here and they were the most—. They weren't indentured, because the John Law Company folded, so they were the largest free population in Louisiana and they were very skilled farmers and they were delighted to not have to be indentured to anybody. So, when New Orleans was starving, the Germans would basically make all the trips to the city and

feed everybody. Then by the time of World War II that culture got destroyed, so somebody like my great-grandfather would not have acknowledged knowing any German because it was illegal to teach, it was illegal to speak, it was pretty aggressive about the animosities to foreigners in that sense, so.

[00:17:05]

DL: Do you think they spoke German in the bakery, when they first came over?

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JD: I don't know. That I really don't know.

[00:17:12]

DL: Or did any of the children learn German ever, in the family, or did they not—?

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JD: I did,—

[00:17:18]

DL: —speak German?

[00:17:19]

JD: —because I—. There were some significant reasons I did, but it's just what we call [*Unintelligible*], a coincidence. But Milton speaks German perfectly and can recite all of Wagner — *all* of Wagner — and my dad took me to see Musica da Camera as a kid, and they've been

around fifty years and I'll be fifty in August, so I grew up seeing Musica da Camera, and they said, "You speak German and you can sing; you're in." So I was in precociously, and they interviewed me for their radio show, *Continuum*, on a Sephardic concert that we did called "A Voice Still Heard." So, you know, like the Vaucresson family that made, you know, they make sausages and things, you know we all have like kosher Cajun and kosher Creole identity that we practice things and really sometimes you—

[00:18:13]

DL: Sausage makers.

[00:18:13]

JD: —just don't know. Yeah. So obviously we like schnitzel, and we like kraut, and we like cabbage, and there were meals that had apples and sauerkraut in it, and to this day we still make cabbage as a treat, you know, and shoo-shoo or chow-chow and all these strange little pickled delights. So, you know, it's one of those Old World things that just won't go away.

[00:18:42]

DL: Did your dad talk much about being a baker at home? Did he share any stories?

[00:18:49]

JD: All the time. He lived it. I mean he loved it and he lived it.

[00:18:52]

DL: So he enjoyed being a baker.

[00:18:53]

JD: He did, because he knew the advantages of it. He could bake at any bakery in the city; he knew everybody in the city; he knew every person in the restaurant business, because when he walked in a place they poured and showered food at him. For example, the first gumbo I ever smelled was from Leah Chase, which was three blocks down, and he would bring bags of gumbo home and I'd see the tomato stained with olive oil on the bag, and I said, "I know Herberts didn't do that."

[00:19:30]

DL: *[Laughs]*

[00:19:31]

JD: But her father would bring my mom's mom filé and thyme back from the farm that they had, so these people were going to Pointe Coupee, going to Baton Rouge, buying supplies; they were doing what their ancestors did since the eighteenth century, so nothing changed. My dad's grandmother fixed shoes in the living room and my dad worked in the shoe shop in Baton Rouge, and even in my work in book binding I have a cobbler's hammer that I'm holding up, that you can't see through the magic power of the mike, but—

[00:20:05]

DL: Oh, wow; that's beautiful.

[00:20:06]

JD: –my pride is my cobbler's hammer that I use to round books like this, to do the actual work that I do, so we use many tools in my trade that are borrowed from other disciplines. But, other than candlestick makers, book binders are very famous for German trades, but that's why I think we really are very lucky, that we inherited trades from our ancestors that they never had to leave. They were lucky to withstand Reconstruction. It wasn't always great but they knew how to make food, they knew how to make beer, they knew how to make bread, they knew how to make wine, they knew how to make yeast, and they knew the complexities of yeast in the environment–

[00:20:46]

DL: And metal workers.

[00:20:47]

JD: –that could make the bread taste good, and sweat is another thing that makes bread taste good, believe it or not. That's–

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DL: Can you talk–

[00:20:54]

JD: –an old New York–

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DL: –a little bit about that?

[00:20:54]

JD: –tradition. No, that’s only to do with New York.

[00:20:56]

DL: [*Laughs*] Oh, okay.

[00:20:56]

JD: So that’s not–. Not promoting that. But one weird thing, my great-grandfather would make fig wine, and Germans from that region of Strasbourg and Alsace, they like sweet wines. So, figs were all over the neighborhood and all over the yard and I hated them, and they were slimy, but my great-grandfather would get that and make a wine out of it, and they were masters of it. My dad gave me a recipe for it, so I’ll be happy to share that with you–

[00:21:26]

DL: Oh, wonderful.

[00:21:26]

JD: –at some point, of the sink wine tradition.

[00:21:29]

DL: And what was your grandfather's name?

[00:21:31]

JD: Thomas Jefferson Darenbourg, which is the only American name in our family that– . I mean Thomas is Aramaic for twin and this had nothing to do with it. So I thought, okay; my grandmother washed shirts for Huey Long, and I never understood the connection with that. Why would that happen? So I also wondered–. I asked my dad, I said, “Why was his name Thomas Jefferson?” So, I don't know, and that's another one of those weird mysteries.

[00:22:01]

DL: And have you heard any stories of him in the bakery, how he was–? You said he was very popular as a baker.

[00:22:07]

JD: He was beloved, like my sister, Pam, is at Brocato's, and maybe – because Pam would send me ossa dei morti and really some–.

[00:22:20]

DL: The cookies.

[00:22:21]

JD: Yeah, some pretty-bad-for-you cookies of Sicilian tradition, all the way to Boston when I was away, and she would try to pack it in popcorn and many methods to not break [Laughs] the ossa dei morti, which is bones of the dead,—

[00:22:34]

DL: Right.

[00:22:34]

JD: —of course, because we're very connected to Sicilian culture because all the groceries were Sicilian. They were in our neighborhood, so.

[00:22:44]

DL: Absolutely.

[00:22:45]

JD: And churches and all.

[00:22:46]

DL: And that's actually an interesting—. Another theme that's come up in these interviews is we call it French bread but most of the bakers in New Orleans that make New Orleans French bread are not French.

[00:22:55]

JD: Right.

[00:22:56]

DL: Did your dad ever talk about who the bakers were, or a little bit about that?

[00:23:00]

JD: Well, we called ourselves French because after a point Creole identity had to do with appealing to Creole language, so we called ourselves French. We didn't say Creole; we just said if you're Cajun—. Everyone said, "I'm French. My ancestors were citizens of France," and so we called ourselves French, so of course we said we made French bread because that's what it was. But Cajuns have become pretty cynical to say, "Remember when we used to just go eat? Remember when we used to just dance, instead of this name that's placed on what we do?" So I think that's what's difficult for people to realize, that my ancestors are French, so even the ones who weren't wanted to appeal to that identity because when you went to church they would pray in French, or they would sing in French, so it was just a part of the culture. But then Germans did bring the accordion to Louisiana and what you see from Zydeco on, you're missing a lot of the middle part and ingredients in the bread, which changed over time. The products and ingredients got expensive so they removed sugar and salt from a lot of the bread at Leidenheimer quite awhile ago, so that—. You know, people sweeten it a little bit, and honey and this and that. They got so good at making their product, and we always felt putting butter on bread, that's sacrilegious, because good bread needs no butter on it.

[00:24:28]

DL: So how would you eat the bread generally?

[00:24:29]

JD: We would put our hands through it at night. My dad would bring the hot loaf in and we would put our little hands through it and we'd pull all the middle out, [*Laughs*] and my father would wake up and say, "Who ate all the cotton from the bread?"

[00:24:39]

DL: [*Laughs*]

[00:24:40]

JD: But he also said that my uncle didn't get into the business – another Clarence.

[00:24:48]

DL: Oh, that's right; you had an uncle that worked there also, right?

[00:24:50]

JD: Well, he didn't last at all, because he thought it was a waste of time because when you made the bread two ends of it were worthless, and my dad said, "That's not true. We put red beans in the end of the French bread," and that was like the delight, and then they made the bread pudding and all that other fancy stuff, and my dad, being a painter, they would take bread and put it in water to neutralize the stink of oil paint in a building. It just didn't stop. Bread was, you

know, you made bread like a shim under your chair or the table [*Laughs*] and if it didn't work then the mouse had something to eat.

[00:25:27]

DL: [*Laughs*] So would he always bring home bread when he would—?

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JD: Always a sandwich. He couldn't go in a restaurant without getting a sandwich from somebody that felt, "Thank you for making this bread," because they knew they cared what they were doing, so.

[00:25:39]

DL: So how does he feel about some of the traditional New Orleans French bread bakeries now? Does he feel like they're disappearing?

[00:25:46]

JD: I don't think he knows anything outside of—

[00:25:49]

DL: Leidenheimer.

[00:25:49]

JD: –the world that he grew up in, but, as I said, they hustled on the weekends, because he said he loved it, it made him happy, but it was for the money. They could make some money, and I think he said now, unfortunately for the youth of baking bread today, he said there’s no money in it, it’s like the overhead in producing it, and it’s funny, because pizza has really almost this magic, like not a lot of overhead, and people love it. But, it’s a dime a dozen. But my fascination was when I’d be out at 3:00 in the morning and that Leidenheimer bag was sitting outside, [*Laughs*] how could–? Could that bread last till somebody showed up at–

[00:26:30]

DL: It’s true.

[00:26:30]

JD: –Maurice’s, at–.

[00:26:32]

DL: So you’re talking about bread being left on a doorstep?

[00:26:34]

JD: On the doorsteps at all the places. You speak of vandalism and stuff, and all the people that are hungry: what kept people from taking the bread from what’s his name, Maurice, at [*pauses*] Croissant d’Or?

[00:26:50]

DL: Oh, right.

[00:26:51]

JD: You know-. Oh, my great-grandfather was friends with all the confectioners, so he knew how to make shoe soles and monkey bread and a lot of fancy stuff, and I think when my youngest sister was born I spent-. She's six years younger than me so they shipped me away because I was pretty inquisitive and I probably wanted to know, "That's not my baby brother," and they didn't want to tell me, so I stayed with my great-grandfather and he would tell me stories. He was diabetic, and so is my dad, so, I mean, they definitely-. And again, they came from sugar cane plantation lifestyles and we were given bottled water with sugar in it as children, so, I mean, we were running wild all the time. But, you know. And Coca-Cola, he loves Coca-Cola, so that's his thing.

[00:27:41]

DL: Can you talk a little bit more about some of your memories of bread and places your dad liked to eat, or things he liked to cook?

[00:27:51]

JD: Well, he would always bring shrimp po-boys home, and not enough, because we ate really fancy shrimp, as many might not believe that Creoles really love shrimp more than-. I mean we never ate crawfish; that was very much a novelty if someone brought it in. He did, once, but we just didn't want it. But, yeah; I just loved walking in a restaurant with him and just

being introduced. We had a close relationship with Kolb's, they were always very kind, and I worked in a printing company behind Kolb's and we would–

[00:28:28]

DL: Kolb's the German restaurant.

[00:28:29]

JD: –trade flyers – yeah – we'd have turtle soup. My great-grandfather used to make [*Knoblauch*] soup, garlic soup, which is I think the only time I have that is like in a Spanish restaurant. So, I mean they were real skilled, but they were, you know, kind of laid back.

[00:28:48]

DL: You mentioned that you didn't like the feel of flour.

[00:28:52]

JD: Oh, yeah. I was never meant to be a baker, but I don't mind touching the dough. The dough is fun, and I grew up making papier-mâché in art and doing creative crafts and stuff, and in my work today I do use rabbit-hide glue and flour and rice as, you know, hard, very serious glues, but it just gave me the creeps. Like, I ran into some sand on the way and now I have sand on my feet and it doesn't feel nice. I don't like grainy, powdery stuff on me. [*Laughs*]

[00:29:25]

DL: In the little trade magazine that Leidenheimer wrote, when your dad had thirty-one continuous years of service and he was the person with the most seniority,—

[00:29:38]

JD: Zip code. [*Laughs*]

[00:29:39]

DL: Zip code, right. [*Laughs*] It's just a great name.

[00:29:41]

JD: That's a t-nom for Leidenheimer's, Zip, because—. I'm sorry to interrupt you.

[00:29:47]

DL: That's okay.

[00:29:47]

JD: Nobody, I don't care who they are, they can't pronounce Leidenheimer, and I am shocked by it because I met an Italian guy, Sicilian, owns a restaurant, Wok N Soul, and he could not say the name, and a lot of people, they tell me—. They call it "Limey Himey."

[00:30:04]

DL: Limey Himey. [*Laughs*]

[00:30:05]

JD: Limey Himey, [*Laughs*] so, anyway.

[00:30:07]

DL: There was a great quote from your–

[00:30:09]

JD: Great-grandfather.

[00:30:10]

DL: –father, that he said his grandfather had told him,

[00:30:13]

JD: Yeah.

[00:30:13]

DL: –that said, “If you work for the company you’ll never get rained on, never get cold, and never be without a job.”

[00:30:19]

JD: Right.

[00:30:20]

DL: And it sounds as though it was very much a secure profession for a lot of people.

[00:30:26]

JD: It was, but, remember, they didn't limit it to Leidenheimer being the end-all for them, and actually my dad had the fear of, every three years—. They were in a union, so they could lose their contract and face strike and face a lot of challenging things. So that stress I think worried my dad. My great-grandfather was too old to join the union, and ironically I have a photo of my sister's wedding reception, which is—. The Bakers' Union Hall is now Ruby Slipper on – Burgundy?

[00:31:05]

DL: Oh, downtown.

[00:31:06]

JD: In Marigny.

[00:31:07]

DL: Oh, okay.

[00:31:08]

JD: The Marigny.

[00:31:09]

DL: Okay.

[00:31:09]

JD: So that I found funny. We have a photo of it, of my eldest sister's wedding, and all our events were there; like if we wanted a party that was our social space, which was an old bank, so that was the Bakers' Union Hall.

[00:31:22]

DL: And that is something that has died off, is the unions for the bakers, the Master Baker Association; well, bakeries themselves are not as numerous as they were.

[00:31:34]

JD: But they got smarter. They invested with the tobacco union and it made them ten times stronger, so my dad said he will buy you a pack of cigarettes because he's living large and very happily, ironically, at the expense of that industry just providing them the best care.

[00:31:52]

DL: And the flipside of that feeling that you always had a job is that it wasn't an easy job. Did your dad share any stories about the hardships of the job, like working the brick ovens?

[00:31:08]

JD: He said he didn't work the brick ovens, there was always gas, and he said a hardship was trying to explain to a dumb person not to sweep around the flames because it would billow and cause all the tiles to explode in the ceiling if they geared up all the flames. So there were a lot of practical things that you had to know, and smart things. I don't mean to be graphic, but he probably pulled somebody's arm out of a mixer before, and did a lot of heroic superhuman things in that environment because he knew it so well. But he worked on all the electrical work, he probably rewired the place, and he said he made thirty-five dollars just if he was there for five minutes. So he, the opposite of my great-grandfather who would not pick up the hammer, my dad not only picked up the hammer but he fed his family and gave us more than we ever needed.

[00:33:04]

I was explaining to my niece once, you know, "I used to walk up and down Jeannette Street, and you got driven to Montessori School," and my cousin said, "Joe, you were the first in the family to have air conditioning and color TV," so I just kind of curled up a little bit and kind of went, "Oh, okay." So I just kind of laughed at—. You know, my dad really—. He got us a pool, he painted a hopscotch, he made a basketball goal, he made a tether ball pole, he made stilts, he brought me horseback riding, motorcycle riding, and he brought me on airplane rides at the lake. So, I mean for a dad that wasn't around—. I mean I don't remember not seeing my dad because he would always make me feel included and he would give me five bucks if I fixed a broken lamp. So my five dollar allowance was just going to the credit union at Mater Dolorosa, where I was an altar boy and went to school, and then my mobster sister would get my five dollars every week from playing Pitty Pat.

[00:34:09]

DL: *[Laughs]*

[00:34:10]

JD: So I learned—. And my godmother taught her how to play. So I had to really learn how to budget my money, and I'm not a gambler, so.

[00:34:18]

DL: Do you think your father, or any of your other relatives, thought of going out on business on their own?

[00:34:25]

JD: My father was interested in having a washer repair business, because he apprenticed in a lot of—. I mean he worked across the street at the company that has – on Orleans and Broad; it's a car lot. My dad worked there. My dad apprenticed downstairs at the washer-dryer company. The guy, Devezan, trained him in electrical work. So he fancied the idea but he never wanted to have tenants and he never wanted to take such a risk in the idea that it was pretty vulnerable to have a business that if someone wanted to corner you and sabotage – like with the bar business. I mean if some bar is not liked you're not going to be in business. So I think that was too much gambling for him.

[00:35:19]

DL: But you never think he considered opening a bakery of his own?

[00:35:23]

JD: I don't think, because I think he just saw, you know, to order the large amount of product—. He knew that making small amounts of bread was just impractical. It wouldn't make any sense. He never made it at home. But I did make him explain to me the art of, you know, the science of it, because as close as I got—. I have the book with me, *Six Thousand Years*. [*searches for book*] I don't know if I mentioned that to you. I thought I had it with me.

[00:35:48]

DL: Yeah.

[00:35:49]

JD: Yeah, that's my favorite book, and that was translated from German. Sorry. [*continues to search*] But it had, you know, the intellectual approach to—. Yeah, *Six Thousand Years of Bread*, and that's my favorite book. Do you know it?

[00:36:04]

DL: Excellent. I don't yet.

[00:36:05]

JD: You should because it has all these incredible folk stories about bread making from the early days of ants being the inventors of bread.

[00:36:17]

DL: Yeah. Did your father share any stories about how bread has changed from like what was called the long loaf, like where it was fatter in the center, you know, a little bit heavier bread, to now what we call French bread but is really the poor boy loaf?

[00:36:35]

JD: He has specific names in the interview, so we're going to have to refer to that to give you the specificity, because he had names that are antiquated now. I don't think anybody uses [them]. But my great-grandfather had a great quote. He said, "Love is a condition that has an effect on the mind and later on the behind."

[00:36:54]

DL: [*Laughs*]

[00:36:55]

JD: So, sorry, that was one of my favorite quotes from my great-grandfather. [*Laughs*] I had to throw that one in, so.

[00:37:03]

DL: So, any stories that you want to share that your father mentioned to you, that you found particularly interesting about Leidenheimer's and being a baker?

[00:37:12]

JD: You know the interview with him today was so funny. I mean, last time I saw my dad on Mother's Day—. My mom's never there. She's the one who I never saw because she worked for Luzianne Coffee and for Superior Coffee, and she traveled with her family to Hawaii and all the places where coffee was acquired and learned all about the business of coffee roasting.

[00:37:32]

DL: Interesting.

[00:37:33]

JD: My mother turned me onto Palestinian bread at Mona's, Turkish bread. So, my mother has her own story – she's another interview – but her family were bankers and really worldly and they loved to travel, and my dad really doesn't like to travel because when you're a baker you kind of can't leave your job—

[00:37:57]

DL: It's like leaving the farm.

[00:37:58]

JD: –idle because you might not have it. It's like leaving a farm, yeah. But I have to say on Mother's Day I left my dad laughing, so joyfully laughing inside, because he's so funny; you never know what he's going to say. And the whole interview—. Before we started I said, "Now, I got to talk to you. I got to ask you some questions." He said, "I can answer everything for you,

even people across the street's questions. I can answer for everybody," and he was so lively, and then all of a sudden he's snoring at some point. But, anyway, he is so rich and he gave me Musica da Camera to further my career and interest in art, but at thirteen he gave, instead of having that father-son talk – because he already gave me a motorcycle and a mini-bike when I was looking for my bicycle. I was really upset; I wanted to know where my bicycle was, and everybody was riding their bikes on Christmas. My dad went to Carrollton Avenue and got me a Kelly Springfield green mini-bike with training wheels and I was super bad.

[00:39:06]

DL: *[Laughs]*

[00:39:07]

JD: From Big Wheel on Orleans and Broad to mini-bike, and then motorcycles that Sears made. But my dad, instead of talking to me about that father-son talk, he gave me a copy of the Beatles' *Let it Be* album, back when they made albums, and a copy of Carl Jung's, *Man and His Symbols*.

[00:39:28]

DL: Wow.

[00:39:29]

JD: And, you know, that was that. But the funny part about the bread business that you can't get away from in New Orleans is—. My first job was at a ceramic shop on Oak Street. My—.

[00:39:44]

DL: And you all lived in Carrollton for awhile.

[00:39:46]

JD: We have been in Carrollton since I was five years old. They still live in the same house, same phone number. But I worked at Streetcar Sandwiches and the bread came from Leidenheimer.

[00:39:57]

DL: Oh, there you go.

[00:39:58]

JD: And I really didn't know anything about making sandwiches, and our lute player from Musica da Camera was my manager there and his cousin was a real good friend. So, you're touching bread no matter what, and people would come in and be very descriptive about how they wanted their shrimp fried to the consistency of a pert nipple, and, yeah, I didn't know what to do with that, so I just kind of went in the back and yelled [*Laughs*] such, and somebody came out with some shrimp and the customer was happy. So I just dealt with the communication of the sandwich making at Streetcar, but the best thing was when Susan was on David Letterman and he was always being a dude, so he got her to say, "Well, who are you, honey?" She said, "Oh, I'm manager of Streetcar Sandwiches in New Orleans," so what better plug could you get than David Letterman in the day, when Streetcar Sandwiches was the happening place, uptown, Oak

Street, Willow Street where I grew up, and I ended up growing up playing music on Oak Street and Willow Street, to this day. I mean-. [*Laughs*]

[00:41:06]

DL: Can you talk a little bit about why New Orleans French bread is only made here or how difficult it is to make it other places?

[00:41:15]

JD: It can't be made anywhere else. My uncles tried to take it to Baton Rouge, as in process, and the hard water is what my dad says is-. He says – I don't know – but he says hard water is what we have that's different than well water, the kind of water in Baton Rouge that smells like eggs to me, that we really never fancied. So, sulfur water ain't going to cut it.

[00:41:39]

DL: Right, right. And having lived in different places outside of New Orleans, do you miss New Orleans bread when you're away?

[00:41:47]

JD: No. I like bread-. The best bread I've had-. I like Turkish bread and I love Italian bread a lot, and I like-. I went to Berkeley, California and had some wonderful bread, and I lived in Berlin where there was Turkish bread everywhere, and when I lived here there was Turkish bread everywhere. All my Turkish friends make bread really well, and different varieties of bread. So I've been around it, and really enjoy the ethnographic identity of different groups of

people making bread, like the Greek bread. I've had mahlepi spice, which is a cherry pit roasted that makes a spice that happens at Easter, and in the bindery the nuns would bring us the bread that the monks made.

[00:42:33]

So, you know, bread is a way of life, and this book is really great, *Six Thousand Years of Bread* by H.E. Jacob, and this was originally in German and it's my favorite. [So I'm] more scholarly than I look, but this is pretty much as close as I'm going to get to baking anything soon.

[00:42:56]

DL: Did you ever feel like you weren't continuing on a family tradition?

[00:43:00]

JD: No, no, because this is a—. Knowledge is a daily bread, and I really feel I found my niche in it, especially the legacy of the job that my dad had at Dillard further on to what made me intrigued to join this group that's going to help me do the Creole project next that I'm directing, because this is directly linked to what I'm doing now that identifies who we are and preserves who we are, and really puts on the map for the first time about, you know, our ancestors that were builders of the French Quarter. My dad's paper route was in the French Quarter. My paper route was on St. Charles Avenue and I couldn't hurl the newspaper up over the big fences and, you know, way different upbringing. But there was a point I was working upstairs at Mushroom Records, downstairs at Kinko's, and playing at the Boot on the weekends, and then twenty years

later playing at the church on Broadway, two doors over from Mushroom Records; I'm playing in the church with Musica da Camera, playing troubadour music. So, I mean, [*Laughs*] I miss that. There's nowhere in the world that I feel that—. How can you top that?

[00:44:21]

DL: Mm hmm. Do you think your dad ever felt like he wanted to rebel against that tradition of being a bread baker?

[00:44:28]

JD: No. He said he loved it, and I think he loved feeding his family and he loved feeding the community, because there was a time somebody was trying to impress me to tell me what their dad did, and he said, "What does your dad do?" I said, "My dad bakes the bread for the community," and it's a noble trade, because his grandmother wanted him to be a carpenter – because his name was Joseph, of course. But I was always proud of him because he was smart. He really got counseled early in school—. I think he probably had a slight dyslexia. I think I had it too because I really wasn't a great student, but I got to study at Harvard for free and play in the orchestra, [*Laughs*] you know, so some of the C students run the world, you know?

[00:45:17]

DL: Yeah. So a lot of people, I think, that used to bake were born into the family, and now people choose it as a profession. Did your father think of himself as a craftsman or an artist?

[00:45:31]

JD: No. He said he was making money.

[00:45:33]

DL: He was making money.

[00:45:34]

JD: Yeah. But he's not a romantic about that. He loved doing it, but he didn't gild the lily about it at all. He just knew it was—. He had a good work ethic and he was very lucky actually to tap into that trade that was very important to them, so.

[00:45:53]

DL: Great. Is there anything else that you would like to mention that we haven't touched on already?

[00:45:59]

JD: There's a word in Hebrew describing the month I was born, which is August 28. My sign is Virgo. In Hebrew, when you say you're born in Bethlehem: *bet* is house and *lechem* is bread, and *lachma* is bread in Aramaic. So, I was born in the house of bread, and when you think about the profound sort of cabalistic, Sufi, philosophical aspects of bread being sacred, I really started studying a lot of folk music and traditions of people, their stories of bread, from Armenian, Turkish, Greek, and it's such a lovely story to be a part of, especially long-standing, traditional. So it's deep in my DNA and I feel very blessed, and even blessing the bread on

Fridays for the Shabbat is just very special. I've been part of rituals of bread all my life, so that's pretty much where—

[00:47:18]

DL: Thank you. That's—

[00:47:18]

JD: —I stand on it.

[00:47:19]

DL: —really beautiful.

[00:47:20]

JD: Okay.

[00:47:20]

DL: Born in the house of bread.

[00:47:21]

JD: *Bet lechem.*

[00:47:21]

DL: Thank you.

[00:47:23]

JD: All right.

[00:47:24]

[Transcript suspended]

[00:48:19]

DL: Joe, can you tell us a little bit about some of the dangers of working in the bakery, from your father's stories, health-wise?

[00:48:28]

JD: Well, machinery, and fatigue, and also if you're older you can inherit the lung problem they have with dough. Inhaling flour can be really uncomfortable and it can affect your breathing, and at old Carnival in New Orleans a lot of lampooning happened – that was banned – with flour. People used to throw flour in each other's faces and it would cause them to choke, so there are many levels of flour, you know, being used as a weapon [*Laughs*] as far as–.

[00:49:05]

DL: What did your dad call that, when–?

[00:49:07]

JD: I don't know.

[00:49:08]

DL: Did you say dough lung or dough in your lungs?

[00:49:12]

JD: I don't know what the specificity is. I can ask later on but I don't know the name, but he did mention that. I know that's pretty vivid.

[00:49:22]

DL: Okay.

[00:49:23]

JD: And so then you talk about needs to be protected by higher powers in environments like that, so if you're from a large company like that, where you're not family, you're going to run into the union, which were contracts every three years and pretty much put your job in jeopardy, and my great-grandfather was too old to have been a member of the union but my dad still is a union member and he kind of, you know, [*Laughs*] actually does pretty well for being retired.

[00:49:59]

DL: So he still gets benefits.

[00:50:00]

JD: Oh, yeah, but he really just—.

[00:50:01]

DL: Do you think there more than one union–

[00:50:05]

JD: Bakers' union?

[00:50:05]

DL: –that represented the bakers?

[00:50:06]

JD: I don't know. As I said, my sister's–. We would always have our functions, family functions, at the Ruby Slipper location on Burgundy in the Marigny, events, and that's where their union hall was.

[00:50:22]

DL: And it was for the bakers' union.

[00:50:24]

JD: And it was for the bakers, so I would think there would be more. I know there had to have been for Bunny Bread because when I was a kid there was a moment when we didn't like French bread; we only liked sliced, soft Bunny bread that you could ball up in your hand and make these little gummy things that tasted so great.

[00:50:45]

DL: *[Laughs]*

[00:50:46]

JD: Embarrassing, right?

[00:50:48]

DL: Yeah. *[Laughs]* Can you talk about—?

[00:50:50]

JD: But they gave stickers.

[00:50:50]

DL: *[Laughs]*

[00:50:50]

DL: They gave Bunny Bread stickers—

[00:50:51]

DL: I know.

[00:50:52]

JD: —and it was on. *[Laughs]*

[00:50:53]

DL: And I remember smelling it in the factory.

[00:50:54]

JD: And I dug that. Every time I go past Leidenheimer now on the motorcycle I smell certain points of the dough at different points and I recognize it and love it, still to this day, so 1890-what? Yeah.

[00:51:08]

DL: Yeah. I hear that your father's photo is still in the bakery.

[00:51:14]

JD: Yes. A neighbor of ours went to visit and said, "Oh, there's Mr. Joe," and either a friend didn't believe he knew [*Laughs*] my father [had offered this kid-.] Poor kid grew up on our street and was a really good friend of my dad. I saw a young guy in a Chinese restaurant on Broad and he had a Leidenheimer shirt on and I said, "Can I take your picture for my dad?" and he was so gracious and such a nice guy. He said, "Well, I've only been there four months," but I just thought it was so sweet to see a young person, you know, that did get the job. My friend, our neighborhood friend, didn't get it, but.

[00:51:54]

DL: And actually I heard you mention something about-. Obviously the generations of bakers, like your family, have disappeared to a certain extent, but you were talking about some new things that Leidenheimer's doing for the labor force,-

[00:52:13]

JD: Yeah. In their–

[00:52:14]

DL: –offering classes?

[00:52:15]

JD: –representation they have extended out to a lot of the new immigrants coming to New Orleans and instead of letting it be this frivolous account of knowing instructions on how to make bread they give English lessons to people who are in need, and it makes sense because in quality control, which my mother, working at Luzianne Coffee and Superior Coffee, roasting, and tasting, and baking bread is not a frivolous thing, so if someone makes a mistake it can't be that you don't understand. So I think it also protects the owner of the company or, you know, the business in general, because it's known for its quality and if something's wrong or changed–. They probably have standards that they want to maintain, and that, I think, is a pretty nice option to find out when I did, so.

[00:53:20]

DL: Can you talk a little bit about, in your book and your studies but also just in observing your family and your relationship to bread, some of the importance of the role of bread to life and the symbolism, both for us as New Orleanians but also for you personally and just in general in the world?

[00:53:39]

JD: I like the idea of how bread actually touches our whole community and I was very proud of my father for doing this work, because someone asked once, “Oh, what does your dad do?” and I said, “He feeds the people.” I understood that profoundly because, even in my name, *jow* in Persian means barley, and I play an instrument from Iraq called joza. So there are all these types of words and little fragments of words that you just can’t get away from the profound levels of bread being part of our lives, and I’ve studied a lot of cultures, from the Druze, who hold bread sacred, the Armenians, the Greeks; many people hold bread sacred, and it’s inclusive, and I’m just really happy to be born into this and share so much with other people that have a camaraderie around it. It bonds us. I mean we’re doing this now and this really is kind of profound that bread has brought us together.

[00:54:53]

DL: I’ve heard it referred to as the great equalizer.

[00:54:56]

JD: Well, I don’t know about that, but–

[00:55:00]

DL: [*Laughs*] We all love it.

[00:55:00]

JD: –some people are so particular about their breads. I once asked my dad, “Can you bring me some sesame seeds?” So he brought a bag of sesame seeds home and they weren’t cooked. I said, “Can you cook these?” and he said, “You cook them.” So of course they’re popping all over the pot and everything and I have no clue. So, yeah; in my studies I was going to stick to the study of the daily bread, which was knowledge, and I just hung it up. My apron is for book binding. I was just never meant to [*Laughs*] get in an oven environment. But, you know, I’m going to do it, because every time I go into Breads on Oak they try to put me to work and they’re really nice there and I really do enjoy their bread. I always get the olive bread and bring it to my sister. And on St. Charles Avenue, where Willie Mae’s newest place is, there was a cool bakery in there and they would make a bread that had dill in it and it had cheese in the middle and it was round and it was just–

[00:56:02]

DL: Daily bread.

[00:56:02]

JD: –butter. It was daily bread. So, there you go.

[00:56:06]

DL: Thank you.

[00:56:08]

JD: Thank you.

[00:56:08]

DL: Thank you for participating and sharing your family's story.

[00:56:11]

JD: Thank you. Shalom.

[00:56:15]

END OF INTERVIEW