

Fabián León
The Ville Taquería—Louisville, KY

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[00:00:04]

Gustavo Arellano: My name is Gustavo Arellano, and I'm here at The Ville Taquería in Louisville.

And today is—the 10th, and yes: the 10th [of February]. State your name and your occupation.

[00:00:18]

Fabián León: Fabián León, chef at The Ville Taquería.

[00:00:22]

GA: What's your date of birth?

[00:00:24]

FL: 6/23, 1978.

[00:00:27]

GA: And where were you born?

[00:00:28]

FL: I was born in Chicago, Illinois.

[00:00:31]

GA: Where are your parents from?

[00:00:34]

FL: My parents are from a town outside of Guadalajara, Jalisco, named San José de la Paz.

[00:00:43]

GA: Is it a *rancho* [village]?

[00:00:45]

Uh, yeah, I'd say it's a rancho. It's, uh—the population is, maybe around 400.

[00:00:52]

FL: Yeah, my parents come from a *ranchito*, *también* [a village, too] I think we were 300, or *algo asi*

[something like that]

[00:00:57]

FL: Yeah, it's a small place.

[00:01:00]

GA: When did your parents come to the United States?

[00:01:03]

FL: Well, if I can recall, I think back in 19—early '70s, they migrated here from, um, Mexico, and arrived in Chicago, Illinois.

[00:01:17]

GA: Why did your parents go to Chicago?

[00:01:21]

FL: I think to find the dream—to find a better place.

[00:01:27]

GA: Did they already have family members in Chicago?

[00:01:30]

FL: I believe that my uncles came here first. And then my followed, and so did my dad.

[00:01:40]

GA: How long did you live in Chicago

[00:01:43]

FL: Oh, I lived in Chicago since I was born up until '90—'92-'93?

[00:01:51]

GA: And where did you guys move to after Chicago?

[00:01:54]

FL: After Chicago, we moved to Louisville, Kentucky—where my dad opened a restaurant here, and we got an apartment close, close to it.

[00:02:06]

GA: In Chicago, what did your parents do as a job?

[00:02:09]

FL: My dad worked, uh, for General Foods—worked at their Kool-Aid division. And my mom worked at Oxford Clothes—uh, sewing shirts and things like that.

[00:02:23]

GA: Why did your parents decide to move to Louisville?

[00:02:25]

FL: They decided to move here to—open a restaurant. To I guess, uh, fulfill their dream.

[00:02:35]

GA: Do you know why they didn't try to open a restaurant in Kentuck— *digo* [I mean], en Chicago?

[00:02:40]

FL: Honestly, I don't know. It's something that I'd have to ask them. It's never come up.

[00:02:47]

GA: How—where you happy when your family moved to—and why specifically Louisville, as opposed to, like, any other state or city? Was there something about the city that drew them?

[00:02:57]

FL: You know, I don't know exactly what it was, but I remember taking a trip to Mexico. We went driving. And on the way back, we stopped in Kentucky—here in Louisville. And 'bout five months later, we were coming back every weekend to find a spot to open up a restaurant.

[00:03:17]

GA: At what point did you realize, “Oh, we're gonna be moving to Kentucky?”

[00:03:23]

FL: Uh, well, it wasn't—it wasn't realizing it (*laughs*), it was, “You know, I'm no longer going to be going to school there. No longer having friends there. We're moving to a new place.” It was, uh, I don't know. I was maybe nine or ten years old. Um, yeah, it was hard. I didn't want to move, but, you know: what can you do?

[00:03:46]

GA: At that point, when you're so young, what were your ideas or conceptions of what Kentucky was?

[00:03:53]

FL: (*Laughs*) It's funny because, you know, growing up I saw cartoons and I guess I listened to stereotypes of people that lived in Kentucky. And, and I thought people sitting on porches with the shotguns and no shoes—you know, that was my conception. Beards, yeah.

[00:04:15]

GA: When you guys moved to Kentucky, were there a lot of *mexicanos* there at the time?

[00:04:19]

FL: Oh, no. They—there weren't any. Any at all. I mean, uh, maybe one or two families that I—I can remember that we befriended them. But that's about it.

[00:04:33]

GA: When—if. Let's see, if you were nine years old, you would've been, when you enrolled here, the second or third grade?

[00:04:39]

FL: Oh, no. I think I was—seventh or eighth grade.

[00:04:45]

GA: So junior high.

[00:04:46]

FL: Yeah. Junior high.

[00:04:48]

GA: How was it, then, as a, you know, young man coming to school here in Kentucky, being a *mexicano* and basically trying to grow up in a state like this at the time.

[00:05:00]

FL: It was fun. I mean, it wasn't hard. I mean, there was some racism, but, you know, growing up in

Chicago, you learned to deal with, with, uh, different struggles. Um, a lot of the girls liked the difference, you know. I—my cousins were in party crews, and I had other cousins that were, that were involved in gangs, so, you know, I knew how to dance! That was one of the things that, uh, was, was kind of cool. They liked it when I used to dance.

[00:05:33]

GA: What—what junior high did you come to here in Louisville?

[00:05:37]

FL: I—when I came here, I—they enrolled me in a school named St. Rita. And that's where I went.

[00:05:46]

GA: A Catholic school?

[00:05:47]

FL: Catholic school, yep.

[00:05:49]

GA: And what was the name of the first restaurant that your parents opened here in Louisville?

[00:05:53]

FL: The name was—is, still is—El Caporal.

[00:05:57]

GA: Do you know why your parents named it El Caporal?

[00:06:00]

FL: I—honestly, I don't know. The question has never been brought up.

[00:06:05]

GA: What was the—what was the kind of food your family served, or still serves, at El Caporal?

[00:06:11]

FL: Well, they served Mexican food, I guess, for the palate here for Kentucky. I mean, of course they didn't serve, um, at that time no mole, no pozole, no menudo, no things like that. More Americanized

dishes. Uh, but it was good. People—people loved it.

[00:06:36]

GA: Did they only stay with one restaurant? Have they only had that one restaurant? Or did they open other ones?

[00:06:41]

FL: Oh, no. My dad was ambitious. I mean, he, um, he started with that one, then he opened up another one within two years. Uh, and I think within a five-year span, he had six restaurants.

[00:06:57]

GA: Were they all named El Caporal? Or what were the names of some of the other ones?

[00:07:01]

FL: Uh, the first ones were El Caporal. Then he went to Dayton, Ohio, and he opened up another one by the name of Las Pirámides. And that's the other name of his other restaurants.

[00:07:17]

GA: When your dad went to Dayton to open it, did he just go on his own? Or did he go with some *hermanos* [brothers] of his? Some of your *tíos* [uncles]?

[00:07:23]

FL: Oh, no. You know Mexican families, you know! They have to include the brothers and the sisters and the cousins and uncles. He, he took his, uh, brother—well, two of his brothers. And opened up the—that part of the, uh, Dayton, Ohio—that part of the restaurants.

[00:07:41]

GA: Did any other family members join *ustedes* [y'all] here in Louisville?

[00:07:46]

FL: Not here in Louisville. Um, I have other families members that are from the small town of San José de la Paz that opened up restaurants in St. Louis, Missouri, in Nashville, Tennessee—and a lot of different parts in the U.S.

[00:08:11]

GA: Back in Mexico was your family involved in restaurants at all?

[00:08:16]

FL: No. No, they weren't involved in restaurants. They were farmers. That's what they did.

Campesinos, yeah.

[00:08:23]

GA: Why do you think so many of your family members, then, got into the restaurant industry here in the United States?

[00:08:28]

FL: Well, I think it was a wave. I know my dad's cousin—I guess my second uncle, or something like that—opened up the first restaurant—I don't know if it was the first Mexican restaurant, but I remember, uh, the name was El Toro back in the 1970s. His name was Raúl León. He opened up, uh, one—early, early, late '60s, early '70s, and, uh, from there I remember my dad and his uncles telling stories of how he managed to open up, I think, forty-five or fifty of them? He would charter planes and take people back to Mexico and pay for everything.

[00:09:15]

GA: And where were most of those restaurants located? In what states?

[00:09:19]

FL: Uh, they were located in Atlanta. In Georgia. Yep.

[00:09:24]

GA: What are some of your earliest memories of working in your parents' restaurants?

[00:09:30]

(Laughing) Washing dishes. Washing dishes, uh, very early days. Fridays and Saturdays were washing dishes. Um, I was little, and I remember we had, I think, three busboys at the time, and two food runners in the restaurant. And they would come in with these *charolas* [pans] of, uh, *platos* [plates],

you know. I mean, they wouldn't stop. We would have fifteen or twenty bins of plates, and we couldn't stop. We had to keep going, going, going.

[00:10:00]

GA: And did—were your parents almost immediately successful with El Caporal?

[00:10:05]

FL: Yeah, the success was immediate. I mean, it, uh, it transformed me—in a sense that we went from, you know, not really having too much to being able to afford a lot, a lot of different things—it was, it was different. It was different. I mean, I can't say that I didn't enjoy it. It was good—uh, it was good for everyone. You know, the family—aunts, uncles, everyone, you know was involved. Everyone saw the, the fruits of what they, what they planted.

[00:10:47]

GA: In those early years, did your family also do stuff beyond just the restaurants? I mean, did they do any catering for maybe quinceañeras or *bodas* [weddings] at the time? Or was there even a population of *mexicanos* to have *quinceañeras* and *bodas*.

[00:11:01]

FL: No. Back then, there wasn't any population like that for them to accommodate any quinceañeras or any *bodas*. Um, I don't really remember, remember them doing anything like that.

[00:11:14]

GA: So, given at the time you guys were so far away from many *mexicanos*, how do you think your parents imparted in you a sense of Mexican culture? In other words, how did they teach you Mexican culture so you wouldn't become that much of a *pocho* [Americanized Mexican]?

[00:11:28]

FL: Well, I don't think that, um—you know, I don't know. I was around a lot of Hispanics, a lot of Mexicans. You know, growing up, you know the people that would come and cook for us, you know, were family members. Friends—not, not family members, but friends of our family members. You

know, from back home. I mean, that influence was always there, you know?

[00:11:53]

GA: Was the food that your mom would cook for *ustedes* at home different from the food that she would cook at the kitchen of El Caporal?

[00:12:03]

FL: Uh—yeah, I'd say it was different. It's not—you know, what you cook at home for yourself is not, is not gonna be the same as you cook for, you know, hundreds and hundreds of people on a daily basis. Uh, but the flavors were, were a little different—yeah, so it wasn't the same.

[00:12:27]

GA: In those years would—how often would *ustedes* either go up to Chicago to visit family, or go back to Mexico to the rancho?

[00:12:34]

FL: Well, when we first came here to open the restaurant, I remember every weekend, we had to make trips to Chicago to bring back spices. Bring back *chicles* [gums] that they were offering at the restaurant. So we would go back every weekend. *Eeeevry* weekend.

[00:12:57]

GA: And back to Mexico? How often would you guys go back to Mexico?

[00:13:00]

FL: Oh, we'd go back every year. Every year, every year for vacation, at least two or three weeks.

[00:13:07]

GA: Around what time? Usually during Christmas, during either *la ferias* [village festivals] that your rancho may have—

[00:13:15]

FL: Well—uh, no. We would go back in, uh, the break for the school. Vacation for the kids. Around June, July.

[00:13:26]

GA: And when you would go to Mexico, what would you like to do when you were in Mexico? Like, visiting as a, you know, in your teens and what not?

[00:13:33]

FL: Oh, I used to love going and walking around la plaza, you know? That's—that's what I liked to do. Visiting friends, family.

[00:13:41]

GA: And as you were growing up, did it ever occur to you that you wanted to continue in your family's—in the family business? Or did you have other ambitions?

[00:13:51]

FL: No. I, uh—I didn't really know where I was going to be taking my career, honestly. I mean, I was put into the kitchen at an early age, you know? Twelve, thirteen years old, I was—I was on the line serving. You know, cutting, cutting meat. So, I've always been in the restaurant business, and this is just second nature to me.

[00:14:17]

GA: After you graduated from high school, what did you do then? Did you just get into the family business? Did you get into college? What—what followed?

[00:14:25]

FL: Oh, after high school. No, I went to college for a year and half. Uh, studied business administration. Um, took some marketing classes. But I never steered away from the restaurants.

[00:14:39]

GA: What college did you go to?

[00:14:41]

FL: I went to U of L [University of Louisville], and also went to Sullivan [University], here locally.

[00:14:46]

GA: What was it about business administration that drew you? Just, you figured, “Maybe this is the way for us to make our business even that much stronger with some, like, a business degree?”

[00:14:55]

FL: Oh, yeah, that was my, that was my main, main goal. Was to better what my parents had started.

[00:15:02]

GA: And in those days when you were going to college, you were also working full-time at the restaurant?

[00:15:06]

FL: Oh, yeah. Um, full-time, part-time, I was always there. Always doing something.

[00:15:14]

GA: At—while you were in, cooking there—while you were at your family's restaurant, how do you think the menu changed over the years?

[00:15:22]

FL: Well, over the years, I mean, we added a couple things. It, it didn't really changed much. That's one of the main things that, um, me and my dad are doing now—is trying to change the menu to really reflect Mexican cooking. I mean, because what we had before was more Tex-Mex. I mean, yeah, of course it was Mexican, but not, uh, not your traditional like sopas or gorditas or tortas or, you know, pozole. Things like that.

[00:15:55]

GA: Why do you think your parents chose right from the start to do more of a Tex-Mex menu as opposed to doing more of a traditional menu?

[00:16:02]

FL: Well, what I remember hearing is that the *americanos* were not ready for the fl—for the real flavors. You know, they would be scared, you know, if you served them, you know, menudo. Or tacos de lengua. So, we stuck to ground beef and chicken.

[00:16:24]

GA: Do you remember any stories of, like, a client saying, “Oh, my God! What is this?!” or, like, any funny stories involving customers in the past?

[00:16:33]

FL: No. No, no, no. I can't really recall any, any funny stories. Maybe if we, we served lengua, you know, I could've, you know, told you some, but no: none that I can remember.

[00:16:46]

GA: Once you—once you finished college, you're back at El Caporal. At what point do you start thinking to yourself, “I want to do something on my own. Like, my own restaurant. My own take on things.”

[00:16:56]

FL: Well, this happened I'd say about two years ago. A year and a half. When I wanted to change the menu. Um, we had some partners that didn't want to change. So what I—I, I sold all—I sold my interest in the restaurants that I had part in, and I came to do this.

[00:17:23]

GA: What interested you in wanting to change?

[00:17:26]

FL: Well, I think that the palate is more refined. I mean, we're talking about 24, 25 years in, you know, from when my parents first came here. Pioneered the, the Mexican food in Kentucky. And I think that their, you know, Louisville is ready for more authentic food.

[00:17:49]

GA: You know, a lot of—especially *mexicanos*, we like to dismiss Americans not knowing anything about Mexican food. Yet you just—talking to me, you said, you know, that the palate had become more refined. Why do you think the palate has become more refined in Louisville? And I would argue also the rest of the United States?

[00:18:06]

FL: Well, because, uh, the Mexican culture has—its roots are starting to grow everywhere. You know, and with—small mom-and-pop shops coming up, like Taquerías and, and things like that, people will want try it. The more adventurous people will want to try it. And I've seen some success in some small mom-and-pop shops that indicate that, you know, people here are ready.

[00:18:38]

GA: Was there a particular point where, like, one day, you look up and you think to yourself, “Where did all these Mexicans come from?” Like, *de dónde resultaron, o qué* [where did they come from, or what]?

[00:18:48]

FL: Well, my dad, back in the '90s, told me that Preston Highway, where he first opened the restaurant, that it was gonna be another little Mexican village, like in Chicago. He said that we're gonna bring a lot of people here. And I didn't understand it, but I see what he was talking about.

[00:19:08]

GA: Why do you think so many *mexicanos* have come to Louisville in the past twenty years?

[00:19:12]

FL: I think that there's a lot of opportunity here. The cost of living is low, and there is the—the area is growing. Everything is growing. It's a small city. But it has a lot of potential to grow. And I think that's what's happening.

[00:19:35]

GA: Are you seeing a lot of *mexicanos* come directly from Mexico? Or are you seeing a lot of, like, second-wave migration—people who first came, kind of like your family. People who first came to one part of the United States, then ended up in Louisville?

[00:19:47]

FL: Oh, yeah. I think it's, like, a second wave migration. I think a lot of people from California have

came to Louisville. I'd say from a lot of, a lot of big cities. You know, when you go to a big city, the cost of living is high. You know, there's opportunity, but you want to make it better for yourself and your family. And, and the only way you could that is by, you know, going to other cities, other smaller cities that don't have what big cities have. And trying to develop something, you know, to provide the smaller cities with a big city feel.

[00:20:24]

GA: So talk to me, then, about The Ville. What's, what's your philosophy behind the food that you're serving. How are you trying to differentiate yourself from all your competition here in Louisville?

[00:20:34]

FL: Well, I mean, we make the tortillas here. It's hard to do when you're serving, you know, 100, 200 people for lunch or, you know, a couple hundred for dinner. It gets, uh, it gets a little difficult, but we're doing it. Um, some of the different flavors that I'm doing to differentiate myself from other restaurants is—you know, I cook with tequila. I cook with bourbon. Lot of the recipes are recipes that we have had in the family for a long time. I just add twists to them—you know, different spices. But, uh, I think that's what's differentiating myself from other, other restaurants here.

[00:21:20]

GA: Take me through one of your favorite dishes. Like, from, the idea to the experimentation to the final placing to sell.

[00:21:29]

FL: Um—like any, anything that I make here? Or how I, how I thought about it?

[00:21:36]

GA: Yeah. Like, give a shout-out to, like one of your favorite dishes. One of the ones that you think is like—if you were going to be, like, on Top Chef, this would be the, the one dish that you would take out there.

[00:21:46]

FL: Maybe barbacoa. It takes a while to cook it. Um—and I think the flavors can be very, very complex. It's very, very good—very tender. Uh, when you get to the final, final stage. So I'd say barbacoa.

[00:22:05]

GA: So without revealing all of the secrets--'cause I know chefs like to keep their secrets. But just give us a general overview of like—how do you, how do you make barbacoa. Like, if somebody wanted to make barbacoa, what would be the steps that you would give them?

[00:22:17]

FL: Well, you've got to first pick what kind of meat you want to use. Um, then you gotta pick the flavors that you want to implement into the, into the meat. And—cook it for a good six and a half hours.

[00:22:36]

GA: Do you roast it? Do you marinate it? Sautee it? What do you do?

[00:22:39]

FL: Oh, yeah. No, anything that you do that you want to be, you want to have a good flavor, you have to marinate it at least—you know, twelve, twenty-four hours before you cook it. And the way that I make the barbacoa, I steam it. I steam it for about six and a half hours.

[00:22:57]

GA: Do you steam it just here in an oven, or do you have, like, kind of in the old country, *con hojas de maguey* [maguey leaves]? Or how do you do it?

[00:23:04]

FL: No, I don't have—the availability of *hojas de maguey*. But I do use *hojas de plátano* [banana leaves]. It keeps the, keeps the moisture in. Doesn't dry the meat out. And it gives it a nice flavor.

[00:23:20]

GA: And then after you're done with the barbacoa, you serve it in tacos? Or do you like to serve it also as a *platillo* [meal]? Or how do you do it?

[00:23:27]

FL: Well, here at the taquería, we serve it as tacos, or we put it in tortas, burritos, quesadillas. But, no: here in the kitchen, we'll—we'll eat it with the consommé. With—*arroz* [rice] and tortillas.

[00:23:45]

The Ville Employee: And onions.

[00:23:46]

FL: *Cebollas, pico de gallo* [Onions, pico de gallo]

[00:23:47]

GA: Yeah, the way you usually eat it in Mexico.

[00:23:49]

FL: Yeah, the way you usually do it in Mexico.

[00:23:52]

GA: What are some of the—some of your other dishes that, if someone would come to The Ville, you would recommend they try as first-timers?

[00:23:59]

FL: I'd say you have to try tacos de carnitas, or, um, tacos de rib-eye.

[00:24:10]

GA: Where did you get the idea to do tacos de rib-eye?

[00:24:13]

FL: Um, well in Mexico, they do them all over the place. You know, they serve the whole, the whole slice—a whole piece of rib-eye, thin-sliced—on a taco. And, and it leaves a lasting impression on you.

I remember the first time I saw it, I said “Wow! It's a whole piece of steak on a taco!”

[00:24:31]

GA: What kind of spices do you rub it with?

[00:24:33]

FL: Oh, I use different ones. I mean, I'll use chile pasilla, chile morrón, chile guajillo. Just depends.

[00:24:43]

GA: Is it hard to get those chiles and all those Mexican ingredients nowadays? Or is it harder now than in the past? Or is it easier now?

[00:24:50]

FL: Oh, it's a lot easier now. I remember back when my dad first opened up his restaurant in '89, we had to go to Chicago every weekend to bring back spices. *Eevery* weekend, we had to go back. Um, but now it's a lot easier to obtain the spices and the, the peppers, the chiles. It's a lot easier now.

[00:25:10]

GA: On those trips to Chicago, like what would you and your dad do? Just take a truck and load it up? And it—yea.

[00:25:17]

FL: Oh, yeah. They—he had to buy a big, big van. I think it's like an eighteen-passenger van. They took the seats out of it, and we would drive every weekend to go get spices and fill it up. He would fill the whole the thing up.

[00:25:35]

GA: And how long is the drive from Louisville to Chicago?

[00:25:37]

FL: Eh, you're talking about four-and-a-half, five hours, depending on traffic.]

[00:25:41]

GA: And nowadays, where do you get most of your produce from?

[00:25:45]

FL: Our produce—we obtain it from—there's terminals here in Louisville that offer vegetables. That's

where we source our, our, most of our products from. Or, uh, distributors that have come into the market.

[00:26:02]

GA: How did you decide to open The Ville in its present location?

[00:26:07]

FL: The area. I, I picked out—I was looking at—the best area that I thought that I could put this Taquería in was here, St. Matthews. I looked for, I'd say, a year, for a spot here. And I was looking at the place across the street. But I found this spot, and when I saw it, I saw it was available, I said “This is it. This is gonna be it.”

[00:26:36]

GA: Describe the neighborhood for people who don't know Louisville. Like, what kind of neighborhood is St. Matthews. How—or, St. Matthew. How is it different from, from other neighborhoods in Louisville?

[00:26:43]

FL: Well, the spot where we're in—St. Matthews—you're talking about, it's, uh—it's like a party district. I'm surrounded by nightlife, by bars. And during the day, I mean, we have a lot of families that come here and eat, but during the night, it's mostly, you know, college kids. You know? People that are out drinking, having a good time.

[00:27:11]

GA: Do you try to do promotions at the local universities to get people—or like, let's put it this way: How did your parents promote El Caporal back in the day?

[00:27:23]

FL: Back in the day, I don't think they, they really needed to do any, anything. Uh, it was the first authentic Mexican restaurant that I know of. And the waves just started coming.

[00:27:36]

GA: And how do you promote your restaurant?

[00:27:38]

FL: Well, I, I do a lot of—I send out coupons in the mail. I use EDDM from the postal service—every door direct mail. And Facebook. Facebook is, is, very powerful tool, if you know how to use it.

[00:27:55]

GA: How do you—some, some restaurants know how to use it, some don't. How do you use Facebook?

[00:28:00]

FL: Well, I'll—I'll public—publish, or post, you know, things that we do on a daily basis. Um—different things that we're cooking, you know. I'll post them, or I'll submit offers. You know, pictures. Just lettin' people know what we're doing.

[00:28:20]

GA: Do you see different crowds coming in—or, do you do Twitter and Instagram and those as well?

[00:28:27]

FL: No Twitter. We do have an Instagram account that we upload pictures periodically. But I, I see—well, right now, we're seeing a lot of Hispanics. A lot of *mexicanos* that are coming in to try our food.

[00:28:45]

GA: Do you—how were the first couple of months in opening this restaurant? Who was the help? Like, were your parents helping you with this restaurant? Did you have friends you? Maybe other *primos*

[cousins]?

[00:28:56]

FL: No, not, not here. Not, not for this one. It was just me and my girlfriend. Me, Nazmi [the niece of Patricia's husband], and, and my mom, um, you know, helped out in the beginning—I had some workers that started off with. I started off with one other person helping me. And it was just me and that other person. You know, the weekends—Fridays and Saturdays—were rough. Sundays were

rough. I mean, I was in here, in here by myself. But, uh, you know, some, some days I remember that the wait was, you know, fifteen, twenty-five, thirty minutes for food. And, uh, man, when you're a chef and you, you've gotta send the food out quick and you, you don't have anymore help, you start getting, uh, nervous. But, no: I, I—calmed myself down and I—you know, I've been doing this for a long time. So—regroups your mind, and keep going at it.

[00:29:56]

GA: You've seen how hard the restaurant industry is with your parents—you know, long hours. Really, it's a really risky business. So what drew you to want to con—you know, continue your family's business into the second generation?

[00:30:09]

FL: It's just what I know how to do? You know, and um—I've played, I have played around with different flavors, you know, in cooking as much as I've had with margaritas, with drinks. You know, so to me, it's, it's not a question, it's just what I do.

[00:30:31]

GA: Do you guys serve any alcohol here at The Ville?

[00:30:35]

FL: Oh, yeah. I serve cervezas. We have margaritas. And I'm also doing something new that I don't think anyone has ever seen: bourbonritas.

[00:30:45]

GA: Describe what a bourbonrita is.

[00:30:47]

FL: A bourbonrita is a margarita—traditional margarita but no tequila. We're using bourbon. What they make here locally in Kentucky.

[00:30:56]

GA: What kind of bourbon do you like to use?

[00:30:59]

FL: Oh, I've experimented with, uh, Maker's Mark, Woodford Reserve, Jim Beam. But what I like to use in my margaritas is Old Forrester.

[00:31:12]

GA: What does—what do you think is it about Old Forrester that works best for your drink?

[00:31:17]

FL: It's a balance. It's—the flavors. I, I like them. I mean, I've tried Maker's. I've tried Woodford. And it just doesn't give me the, the confidence that Old Forrester does when you drink it. It's, it's there. It's—that's it. That's what I want.

[00:31:38]

GA: Do you ever think of bringing other Mexican drinks to your restaurant? Like, micheladas, or palomitas [a Mexican cocktail], or mezcal and other drinks like that?

[00:31:47]

FL: Oh, yeah. Right now, me and my dad are in the process of, uh, bringing another menu—to the El Caporals. And we're working on mezcal—I mean, I make micheladas here. But I don't call them micheladas. I call them Mi Chela Helada [My Frozen Beer]—you know, it's the same thing. Um, but I'm—we're working on the menu right now to where we, we want to bring out the mezcal in cooking, you know, and drinks.

[00:32:24]

GA: So describe what mezcal is to, like, someone who doesn't know what mezcal is, describe the flavors and, really, what it is.

[00:32:30]

FL: Well, mezcal is a little different than tequila, I think that it's the process in which they age it.

[00:32:39]

GA: How is the flavor different from tequila?

[00:32:42]

FL: I think that mezcal is a little drier than tequila. They're—they're not similar, but—it's different, different notes, different flavors.

[00:32:55]

GA: How do you think it lends itself well to cooking? You say you want to introduce mezcal into the menu with some dishes. So what are some of the ideas that you have with mezcal and food?

[00:33:05]

FL: Oh, I like to use mezcal in, in fish. Um, the fish really can—bring the flavors out of anything you put into it. It's, uh, it's a good conductor.

[00:33:21]

GA: Give us an idea of one dish—one fish dish that you're going to use with mezcal. Or like, do you use a specific kind of fish? Other *especies* [species], or what?

[00:33:30]

FL: Well, I don't know. I'm thinking that maybe we could do some cod, or maybe some mahi with some mango and some mezcal. Maybe a mezcal-mango glaze.

[00:33:45]

GA: That sounds really good. Describe what a michelada is.

[00:33:49]

FL: Michelada is a—it's a tomato-based cerveza. You add spices and tomato juice. Some salsa and you—you drink it. (*laughs*)

[00:34:11]

GA: What's the different twist that you do here. That, compared to your competitors?

[00:34:16]

FL: Well, I make the salsa here. I don't use, we don't use—some people use Cholula, or Valentina. I make all that in-house. I don't outsource any of it.

[00:34:28]

GA: What kind of—how many different salsas do you have here? And what are those salsas?

[00:34:33]

FL: Oh, wow. We have árbol-agave miel, tomatillo verde, tomatillo rojo, jalapeño, molcajete, habanero. I have scorpion. We have mango avocado. We have escabeche [pickled carrots and onions] that we make in-house—.Let me see, am I missing one? No, I think that's it.

[00:35:03]

GA: Do you—do you find that the *americanos* like the less-spicy ones, or the spicy ones?

[00:35:11]

FL: Well, just depends. When I first started, I was making all the salsas really spicy, really hot, you know? And I had to tone them down a bit because a lot of the customers were telling me that they were too hot. But now, now that we're seeing a lot of Hispanic, they tell me that the salsas are not hot enough, so I keep chiles in the back so if they tell me it's not hot enough, I'll try to feed them chile de árbol or something.

[00:35:38]

GA: Like a secret menu just for Mexicans?

[00:35:41]

FL: (*Laughs*) Yeah, you got it.

[00:35:41]

GA: *O los que saben* [For those who know]. Talk to me about the tortas. 'Cause one thing that I've always been surprised at is that tortas are not more popular than they currently are, you know? For *mexicanos*, we love them, but it seems like Americans are just learning about tortas.

[00:35:56]

FL: I don't know. I don't know. I remember tortas since I was little. You know, I don't know why they really haven't caught on. But we sell a lot of them here—a lot of tortas. I mean, I'll go through about 50

or 60 teleras every two days.

[00:36:12]

GA: So most—a lot of *mexicanos* still use, they'll use tortas. Just a bolillo—a French roll. Can you describe for the listeners what a telera roll is?

[00:36:22]

FL: A telera is almost similar to the bolillo. The, the difference is that the bolillo—uh, it's a little harder on the outside. The bolillos—I've always known them to be used in tortas ahogadas in Guadalajara. I think that's the difference.

[00:36:41]

GA: And where do you get your teleras from?

[00:36:44]

FL: I get my teleras from my local baker here in town.

[00:36:49]

GA: When did they start making the teleras? 'Cause I—even in Southern California, I've noticed that teleras have only become popular, like, I would say the past decade or so.

[00:37:02]

FL: Well, I, I don't know if they've become popular. I just know that the baker makes them for us. Um, I don't think he makes them for anybody else.

[00:37:12]

GA: Have you found your family making a lot of these, like—friendships with other restaurant owners? You know to help each other out: maybe one place offers one kind of food, and another place offers kind of another kind of food, and neither one will keep each others' menus? Or have you seen that the restaurant industry here for *mexicanos* has been, you know, pretty rough, pretty tough with each other?

[00:37:34]

FL: No. I'll tell you, every, every menu here for the last—for a Mexican restaurant is the same as my dad's menu. All around: all around Louisville, all around the surrounding counties and small cities—the other restaurants here were workers that used to work at my dad's restaurant. That, that they were able to take the recipes and reproduce them and open up different restaurants. And it's the same menu. That's part of the reason why me and my dad are now in the process of refining our menu and differentiating it from any other restaurants. You know, I—me and my dad were talking, and he—twenty-five years ago, he came here and brought the—this style of food. And I told him—I said, “Look, twenty-five years is a good run. It's time to redefine what you're doing, and let's, let's do it again.”

So I'd say that this Taquería was sort of a pilot for what is to come at the—El Caporal. Because we weren't sure how the people were going to react to some of the things that I do here. I mean, like my pollo asado. I mean, I marinate it in tequila and oranges and *limones* [limes] for a good 24 hours. And the flavor is outstanding. I didn't how people would react to it, but it is—it's phenomenal, the way that people have responded to what we're doing here. They love it.

[00:39:20]

GA: Why—let's put it this way: What are your plans for The Ville. Are you, you know, are you always refining, trying to create new menu items? Are you looking for the next restaurant that you're going to open? Or, what are you thinking?

[00:39:36]

FL: Well, for me—food is always an evolution. You're always evolving into different things. Different flavors. Trying to create different spins on, on, some of the old methods. Some of the old recipes. But, no: what I have planned for The Ville is—at least—I don't know, maybe a good nine, ten locations here in Louisville, in key places. And then we'll see how it goes. I might, uh, franchise it. I don't know.

[00:40:18]

GA: I forgot to ask what's your mom and your dad's name.

[00:40:21]

FL: My mom is Consuelo Garcia. My dad is Jesús León.

[00:40:28]

GA: What were—when it comes to. I'm sorry. That's one of the things I've noticed in Louisville: there's a lot of people who open up multiple chains or, you know, multiple restaurants with the same name, or family members opening up other restaurants in Louisville. Why do you think, why do you think that is—so many people opening different restaurants within the city limits as opposed to going to other cities?

[00:40:50]

GA: Ah, you know, it's—it's—it's hard to say. But I know that here in Louisville—it's almost the same restaurants. The same people. My—my dad started back in '89, and the menu that is came out in all the other Mexican restaurants is exactly the same as my dad's. And it's always someone that had, had worked for him.

[00:41:23]

GA: How does that make your dad feel that so many of his workers have basically taken away his recipes? And how does it make you feel? Like, in some ways, it must be flattering: your family's this pioneer in introducing Mexican food to Kentucky. On the other hand, they're just jacking your recipes.

[00:41:40]

FL: Well, you know there's several ways to look at it. The way that I look at it is, we should've had—you know, some sort of non-competes. Or should've had—you know, should've guarded the recipes a little bit better. But nevertheless, it's still good to know that, you know, what you brought to the table is being duplicated. But, like I was telling you earlier, that's what me and my dad are doing now. We're—we're going to be creating a different menu with different style food and hopefully we're gonna, we're gonna give this thing another shot for another twenty-five years.

[00:42:23]

GA: You said earlier that you talked to your dad and said, “Look, you had a great run. At 25, it's time to do something new.” What was his reaction to that?

[00:42:31]

FL: Well, at first, he was a little apprehensive about it. He didn't, uh, he's like, you know—my dad's got a little bit of the old school in him, of course. If it's not broke, why fix it. But, uh, that's not the case here. You know, food's always evolving. So I told him, you know, it's time, time to change a little bit. You know? I opened up the Taquería—I'm, I'm four and half months in, and we're, we're doing really good. I had the local newspaper right an article about us and say it's the best Mexican food they've ever had. It's pretty good.

[00:43:11]

GA: So now, he's full steam ahead with, like, trying to reinvent and trying to experiment.

[00:43:17]

FL: Yeah, he's on board. He's on board.

[00:43:20]

GA: Where—where do you find the time to experiment for the next dishes? Either for The Ville, or for your dad's restaurant?

[00:43:28]

FL: In the mornings. Or at night, whenever I'm cooking for us. You know, I'll find that I've got—you know, some time, and I—let's say that I had an idea, or I saw something. And I've got to—I gotta put it down, I gotta put it on a plate. So I'll start cooking and experimenting.

[00:43:55]

GA: Do you get any inspiration from the South? I mean, you've been here now for, you know, quite a few years. You grew up here, so do you get any inspiration from the traditional foods of the South?

[00:44:05]

FL: Yeah, I'd say so. I mean, um—influence is everywhere. You just have to look.

[00:44:16]

GA: Describe to me—or what are some of your favorite Southern dishes? Like, for instance, you talked about bourbon earlier. Do you like barbecue?

[00:44:23]

GA: I like barbecue. Um, yeah, it's good. I like fried chicken. Um, yeah I like the mashed potatoes. The cornbread. Yeah, it's—I like it.

[00:44:38]

GA: Do you think you've turned into—would you consider yourself a Southerner?

[00:44:43]

FL: I don't—I don't think so. I mean, I've been here for a while, but—I don't know. My heart's still in Chicago, I guess. That's where I grew up at, you know? That's where we're from. Chicago and Mexico.

[00:45:03]

GA: Do you ever have any plans on moving anywhere else? Or do you want to stay in Louisville as long as you can?

[00:45:08]

FL: No, I don't think, um, I don't think—I'm more in tune to moving away or staying here. It's just whatever I'm doing at the time. We'll, we'll see what happens. I mean, if, if uh—if this restaurant, The Ville, if it takes me somewhere else, some other cities, then we'll go with the flow.

[00:45:31]

GA: Where did you think up of the idea—the name for The Ville?

[00:45:35]

FL: Well, I wanted it to be something that everyone here in Louisville could relate to. And, you know, know the university, what they call the, the team is the Ville. I mean, Louisville Cardinals—well, it's, it's what they call Louisville, the Ville. And I said, “That's what I'm going to call it: The Ville.”

[00:45:59]

GA: Do you find yourself rooting for the U of L teams like, you know—have you picked up any of those Southern customs? Rooting for basketball, football, all that stuff?

[00:46:12]

FL: Well, I mean, here we don't have a professional team in football or basketball or baseball, so college is all you've got. And I think that's a big reason why college is so popular here. But no, yeah, I'm all for U of L.

[00:46:28]

GA: Uh—just a couple of more questions, and then we're done. Do you—how can I put this—what are some of your favorite restaurants in Louisville? Like, obviously besides your family's restaurants. Where are some restaurants that you like to go to? Or do you think are doing good things?

[00:46:46]

FL: Um—I like sushi. Other restaurants here that I go to is—Oishi Sushi. They're, they're really good. Let me see what else. I like Vietnamese food. I like pho. You know, *las sopas* [the soups]. Specially when you've been partying—you're a *crudo* [hung over] you've gotta, you've gotta, you know, eat some *sopa*.

[00:47:11]

GA: It's like a combination of menudo and *fideo* [vermicelli soup].

[00:47:14]

FL: (*Laughs*) Yeah! Yeah, it's good.

[00:47:19]

GA: What—how do you think life for Mexicans have changed here since you were a teenager?

[00:47:25]

FL: We're more accepted. You know, it's, it's really changed throughout the years. You know, you see more and more *hispanos*. And, and they can't do anything. They have to accept you, or turn their back on you, and I don't think that they can turn their backs on us anymore. You know, it's accept us and

embrace us and, and—live amongst us.

[00:47:48]

GA: Do you think in the earlier days, native Kentuckians tried to turn their backs on *mexicanos*?

[00:47:53]

FL: Oh, yeah. I mean, we're in the South, so racism, you know, has always been here. Um—yeah, and when we first came here, I know that, uh, they used to turn their backs on us or, you know—specifically, not, not going to say specific things, but yeah: racism is, was definitely alive.

[00:48:21]

GA: You don't remember any stories involving you in high school, or during junior high, of kids being racist towards you? Or anything like that?

[00:48:31]

FL: Oh, yeah. I mean—kids will be kids. I don't remember specifically things that they would say to me, but yeah: it was there.

[00:48:41]

GA: But all the girls liked you.

[00:48:43]

FL: That was part of the main reason, I think. All the girls liked me. I guess it was the skin—I don't know.

[00:48:50]

GA: What do you think is the future of Latinos here in Louisville?

[00:48:54]

FL: I think it's just like any other big city. You know, the history will keep repeating itself. The population will keep growing, and we'll—you know, just keep getting bigger and bigger.

[00:49:11]

GA: Why do you think Americans like Mexican food so much? And, especially, why do you think

Southerners like Mexican food so much?

[00:49:18]

FL: The flavors, I think They're—I think it's something they can relate to. More, I'd say, than eating sushi or , or eating Vietnamese food. Um, we're not too far from United States; we're right across, you know, the border, so um—I don't know. I think that a lot of the flavors that, that we use are—how can I say it? They're accepted. They're known. And we have Taco Bell (*laughs*), so—

[00:50:02]

Do you find any similarities between Mexican culture and Southern culture?

[00:50:09]

FL: You know what? As far as Kentucky goes, and where my parents are from—Jalisco--there's a lot of, uh, a lot of similarities. Jalisco has tequila; Kentucky has bourbon. Um, Kentucky, I mean, they love—we have Kentucky Derby. Horses. Same thing in Jalisco—they, they have, they love horses. So there's a lot of similarities, yeah.

[00:50:35]

GA: Then here, you have bluegrass music, and then in Jalisco, you have mariachi.

[00:50:38]

FL: Oh, yeah.

[00:50:41]

GA: Do you have any final thoughts or comments you want to add for this interview?

[00:50:44]

FL: No, just thanks to everybody and—you know, to you. I think it's a good thing, what you're doing. You know, showing or educating everyone about the movement of, of food.

[00:51:04]

GA: Awesome. *Gracias* for your time.

[00:51:06]

FL: Thank you.