

LEAH CHASE
Dooky Chase's Restaurant – New Orleans, LA

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Interviewer: April Grayson, Friend of the SFA
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Also used for Gumbo Trail

[Begin Leah Chase Interview]

0:00:00.0

April Grayson: Okay, so there we go. I was wondering if you could explain how you became involved in SFA [Southern Foodways Alliance].

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Leah Chase: Well, you know, I had—I guess my restaurant for a long time when they organized this thing, the Southern Foodways Alliance, and I guess my name was submitted by somebody, so I agreed to come aboard because food is my business, and I just like talking about food. I like—food is about everything, you know. You can do everything—music and food, people and food. That's the most important thing about food: It brings you with people. And I think that's the only reason why I stayed in it that long. So I like what Southern Foodways are doing. I think this is so important to put this in the University to teach people, particularly now days, I mean because we have to get people back to food, back to the dinner table. That's gone; fast foods came along and you have nobody at the dinner table. We have to get people back there. So I think that's important.

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AG: That's great. So you were—someone had recommended that you—?

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LC: Yes, yes, uh-huh. And John Egerton called me up, and I agreed to be a part of that and glad I did.

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AG: And you were the first President, is that correct?

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LC: No, I wasn't the—was I the first President? I haven't—I was a President at one time but I don't know that I was the first President. *[Laughs]*

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AG: *[Laughs]* Well can you tell me what that like, your experience as President?

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LC: Well, for me it was good because I was in my kitchen all the time, and John Egerton and John T. really helped out there, because I couldn't attend all the meetings and I couldn't—so they

helped me in picking up the slack where I couldn't come. And I'm glad they did because, you know, that's another thing we have to learn. See, I belong to a lot of things; sometimes I can't be the leader there, but I can support you. I can do what I can do, so it's not all the time being the leader. You let the man who can lead, lead, and then you be sure you're there to back him up. And those are the kinds of things I like to do. I like what these men have done in this organization. John T. has done wonderful here—all the people here. I think it's a great thing that we do because in the South that is important. Food is important to us in the South. I know no other living. I hear people talking about living in New York or living here; I know only the South. Good or bad, that is my life, you know. So and you can find good things about New York, and I can find a lot of bad things, too, living there. I wouldn't want to live there, but that's not here or there. But you can find good things about the South—many good things about the South: the warmth of the South, the—the people in the South. Everything about it I like, I personally like. So if that's my life, I'm going to make it work. I'm going to make it work for me; I'm going to try to make it work for those who surround me, and that's what I'm all about.

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AG: So you are from New Orleans?

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LC: Yes.

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AG: And I know New Orleans has its own kind of culture in a way.

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LC: Strange. *[Laughs]*

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AG: But do you—do you still consider yourself a Southerner as well as someone from New Orleans?

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LC: Well, geographically we have to consider ourselves a Southerner. *[Laughs]* That—we're as far as South as you're going to go without dumping off in the Gulf. But our culture is so different than, for instance, Mississippi, Alabama, and those things. It's a little different. So I tell people coming from the East or the North, when you come down, you get two different cultures. You stop off in Mississippi, you stop off in Alabama, you get true Southern culture; you come as far as Baton Rouge in Louisiana, you're getting Southern culture. But when you get below Baton Rouge, then you get another whole thing to deal with. Kind of weird but it's another whole thing. I think it's because our mixture of cultures there: the French, the Spanish, the Africans. Look at

this big mixture, you see; so you get a little—and I guess it came through the food. The Africans brought what they knew, the Spanish brought what they knew, the French brought what they knew; so it's just a mixture of things there. And I guess that's where the creoles came in, you know, with all this mixture and the—and the mixture of food is unbelievable and—and made us quite different than—than anybody else. *[Laughs]*

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AG: So do you mind telling me the date and place of your birth?

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LC: I was born in New Orleans, January 6th, 1923. I—my mother was from New Orleans. My father was from a small town across the lake from New Orleans in Madisonville, and that's where I came up until I went to high school. Then there was no high school in this small town. There was segregation; so there wasn't no high school for blacks other than a public high school. I don't think they had much of that. So we were staunch Catholics, you know, and people are in that area, so my daddy insisted that we go to Catholic schools and we were—I was educated by the Sisters of the Holy Family and they—they taught me in Madisonville, and then they taught me in high school when I came to New Orleans. And that was as far as I could get was high school, and I was only 16 years old when I graduated from high school. So they had a problem there, you know. In those days you couldn't get a job unless you were 18—19 years old; so I had to do housework. And all these things these people talk about today about being a maid, if you

will, or a house worker or a cook, I did all of that. I was fortunate enough to work for people that were kind to me, you know. I think because it was a small town—it was a very small town—and everybody knew one another. The blacks and whites did not mingle, but at least they knew one another. The richest people in town were here, and we were the poorest people, I guess, and we were here, so we knew one another. So that made life, I think, easier. But I enjoyed my work; I learned.

I look at life, honey, and everything you do should be a learning experience. I learned a lot of things working for this lady in her—in a little boarding house from cleaning up a house. You learn about people and there's nothing—no product more important than human beings. I don't care who they are; there's nothing in the world more important than human beings. And you learn about those people. You take some things that you can use, and then things you think you can't use or your mother wouldn't allow you to use, you don't take. And that's how you grow and that's how things *should* be with people's lives. That's what I'm trying to tell young people today. They're moving and they're moving good, and I'm proud of those who can move. But are you stopping to help somebody else? Are you stopping to see how you can make another person feel his worth?

Now, you see, people I came in contact with—I was, I guess, fortunate. Even now at 82 years old I run into people that make me feel like I'm worth something. And I don't care who they are; I like people to make you feel that way and you can work on. This is crazy. You don't know how—you're starting to think that you don't make somebody else feel good; they're not going to do anything. So you want people to move; you want to build your country; you want to build your city—make everybody move; make them feel good, and they'll keep you going. So those are the things I learned a lot in life and to look at people and take what you can from them.

Nobody becomes—people will say *well Leah who was your role model?* And I had parents that were good parents; they were poor. I'm educated. My father had on only about a third or fourth grade and my mother had only seventh grade, but they were good parents and they taught you how to take one step more, you know. You have to be—go a little bit higher. Then when you got that way and you got children they were still telling you *now you have to make your children go a little higher. You have to build.* And they had enough common sense to know that. They had enough common sense to tell you how to get along with other people. Our motto in living—my daddy always told us—he always said *don't worry* and he used to fuss at my mother because, you know, women worry. *Don't worry; it doesn't do you any good.* He said *you get up in the morning and you pray and you work and you do for others; that's all.* That's the three rules we lived by at my house. We had to do that. We were so poor. But we had to do something for others, and those are the things that get you along in life. So it really got me along, and I'm still doing it. So it—it must work.

And the simplest things in life you can do. Now you have to teach children how to be educated and they have to do that and—because even if you're going to be a cook, a chef or whatever—a cook, you have to be certified today to advance and to grow. So you go to school and you learn those things and you learn how to do it. You learn from everybody; you take a little bit from everybody and that way—and that's what I have done. So nobody becomes—no one person becomes my role model. I may look at these people across the street from me and I look at them and I said *you know look at that; that's pretty smart what they're doing. I can do that. I can learn to do that.* And then everybody becomes your role model because you take what's good from everybody. You take whatever good they have, you take it and you—you move on it, and that becomes your role model. And I think people should do that—pay more attention

to other people. You might think a person has nothing to offer, the way he looks. He might look—but if you talk to him long enough, you will find that he can offer you something.

I—we tore our house down—a tree out of the lot we have on Orleans Avenue; we had to take this pecan tree out. I was saddened by that because the neighbors used to come and pick up the pecans and sit under the tree and all of that kind of thing. But it was in the way, and I think it was becoming bad and it was leaning on another house, so we had to take it down. The kids in the neighborhood—these are little children, they say *Miss Dooky, well why you taking that tree down? Why you cutting that tree?* I said *well I have to cut the tree. Well don't you know birds live in that tree? Yes; I know birds—. But they're baby birds; what are they going to do?* I said *well you know their mother will find somewhere to put them. They will find somewhere to go but we have to do that because it's going to hurt this person, and it's going to fall on somebody and that will be bad. Oh, okay.*

Then they decide to tell you what you can do with the lot. Now these are little children in a very poor neighborhood who you think don't know anything. *Well you know what you could do with that lot? Maybe you could put some basketball goals there, and we could come and play.* I said *no; I can't do that because then I would take out—have to take out all kinds of insurance and right now, I said I don't have all that money because you know suppose you get hurt on the lot? Okay; they understood that. Then they said well you know what you really could do with this house—this lot? You could build a house on it. You stay on one side and you could rent the other side. [Laughs]* Now these are little children. *You could rent the other side Miss Dooky, and you could make money. Okay, I said I'll think about that. I'll think about that. [Laughs]* But to see the knowledge of the common sense these little people had who you're just passing on the street, thinking they know nothing, thinking they're not noticing anything, but they're noticing

everything. They're noticing every move you make. *Miss Dooky why you want to do this?* And you have to be able to tell them why you want to do that, you know. And—and those are the things we have to do—uplift people. I think that's our big problem today. Everybody is in a hurry; everybody is busy and you don't have time for people. That's important.

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AG: Well so you have an influential restaurant in the area. Can you tell me the history—sort of the history of that restaurant and how you think you have made an impact on your community there?

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LC: You know that restaurant started as a little shop across the street. My mother-in-law—my father-in-law was sick and he had ulcers for any number of years until he died really, and he could not really go out to work, so my mother-in-law stayed there and you see—they sold what you call lottery, but it's a different ballgame than what the lottery is today. So—and she was able to sit there and sell her lottery, and he could sit there and sell it. And then she would sell sandwiches, you know. And my mother-in-law was an interesting woman—stubborn as a blue-nosed mule, but really a hard-working woman, and she was a good money manager. I wish I could be that way like she was. She was a good money manager, and she could really do things, you know. So she started that little sandwich shop; she was a good cook. She could cook and make sandwiches and it just grew. So when it grew she moved across the street. She lived—it

was what we called a double house in New Orleans. You know, we had the double shotgun. She lived on one side, and then the little restaurant and bar was on this side. And they were—my father-in-law—very popular, you know. He was out a lot, and he was popular. Everybody loved him. Everybody loved my mother-in-law because she was a community person. I could see her now; Thanksgiving and Christmas, she would sit in what we'd call the Neutral Ground with her sacks of apples and she would get—the children would come. Well you can't do that today because traffic is so heavy, and you just can't do that. But I thought that was so nice; she did that every time. She would sit there and she would give out apples and oranges to the neighbors and she would do—befriend the neighbors wherever she could. So that's how that started.

So when I came in—in [nineteen]'46 I came from working in the French Quarter, so I knew what restaurants were all about. Where in the black community it was segregation, so they did not know in the black community really what real restaurants were about. They had never been in one; they couldn't go. It was only the people like me who worked in them who knew this is what you do; this is how you set this table, and this is how you do. And black people did not even want to eat in restaurants at first because they couldn't go into them. And it was too funny—how your parents shield you without telling you, you know, these—these people are white and they don't like you, or these people are white and they don't want you there. They never told you that; they didn't ever say that to you.

You would be passing and maybe they would say—you would say *oh, I'm thirsty or I want this*. Oh, they'd say *no, you—don't do that; wait until you get home because you see everybody drinks out of that. You don't want to drink out of that. [Laughs] It's not clean*. So you got that mentality—hey, everything in the restaurant is not clean; I don't want to go there. So that I had to work that out of the system too, you know, because *oh no, they're not going to do that*. If

you got to the movies and you saw the people downstairs, you know, and you couldn't go down there, you wanted to know why you couldn't go in that pretty seat. *Oh no, don't you see better up here is why—you can see better up here.* And we—you know in my day we just believed all that junk; we didn't even ask any questions. But you know—and my mother-in-law started there and that was some doings because she started doing just—because you see black people ate and cooked in their homes. As I said, you know they would never eat out; they cooked in their homes. So when they would come to her, it would be to get a—to get a sandwich and a beer or something. Mostly a beer, you know. They would come for a beer, so to accompany their beer, they would eat. So that's how it went you know; they would buy a sandwich, and then she'd start frying chicken and that kind of thing. So—and it grew. So when I came in there, I said *we have to change* because by that time the black people were becoming attorneys and things, and you had a few that would work and had lunchtime, so the first thing I did was put on a lunch, you know. And it was too funny because here I'm going to come in here to this building where my mother-in-law was making money—she was making money. In [nineteen]'45 everybody was making money, you know, so she could say *this little crazy girl coming in here and she's going to tell me what to do; I'm sitting here making money, you know.* **[Laughs]** But I knew I wanted to change; I thought in the black community we should have everything that the whites had and I saw—and I still see no reason why we can't have it. We just have to be working on it and just—you know just work at that, just be yourself and work at that.

And in my case I think it's proven to be good. I—I hope so anyway. But that's how we started there and I started putting things on. It was too funny because—this is so stupid and how you can be so young and naïve—I came from the white restaurant I told you, and one thing they used to serve was Lobster Thermadore. So [I figured] that's what I'm going to change, too. I'm

going to put that out, and I'm going to serve Lobster Thermadore, and I did. I said *there's no difference in people besides—they're just different—their color of their skin; that's all. They eat the same; they—*. That was so stupid and naive. You have different tastes. You have different cultures. You have a different background. And what's wrong with that? Nothing. You know, you just do that. So that, too, taught me you are you; you are you, you know. It's just—we're just different in our cultures and our upbringing and that's—that's good, I think. **[Laughs]** So I learned that—well, the people say *what in the world is this? She's going to ruin everything Emily and Dooky built*. Yeah, that's what they said about me, you know. *She's coming in there and she's just going to ruin everything they've built. They have worked hard and they've built it and she's coming in to ruin it.* **[Laughs]** So I had to work.

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AG: Did the restaurant have the same name at that time? What was it called then?

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LC: Uh-hmm, it's the same name: Dooky's.

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AG: Okay.

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LC: It's the same name. See, my father-in-law was such a public figure and—and he was popular so the name worked. And then when my husband came along he had a big band, so that worked. So that put the name further out, you see. He was on the road with a big band, with the Dooky Chase Band, so everything gelled together there. So you don't get rid of what works for you, even though my mother-in-law was the worker. And she was Emily [*Laughs*]. It should have been Emily, but Emily wasn't the name that they would remember. They would remember Dooky, who they saw. He loved to parade. It was strange with him. He was a kind of easy-going man, but he loved to parade. He loved to parade, and he belonged to an organization called the Square Deal. And they would put on these beautiful shirts; he would have them made and where this banner and this dove on their shoulder and carry their umbrella and parade. [*Laughs*] He loved that; so he was a pretty popular guy out there. And my mother-in-law just worked. She loved him to death and no matter what he did, poor thing—he liked to gamble and couldn't gamble, and she would acquire this money and the first thing you know, he would lose it. She wouldn't get—I was just amazed. She would never get angry at him for doing that. She would just start working again. [*Laughs*] But that's how they started there, and I knew we had to grow—we had to grow. And when we remodeled, she moved out of her side and—and we had that for a dining room. And that was much better than—then we had people coming and coming in until 1984, when we bought the whole block up and stretched out there. We were pretty tight in—in that little area and I couldn't—I hate people waiting in line for food. I hate it. I don't like it. I don't like people waiting in line for food. I like to seat them. So they would wait on the bar,

and then I'd have to go in there with a bottle of wine and try to give everybody a glass of wine because you waited for this food, you know.

Well now we have come past that. We can seat 90—94 people in the main dining room—50 in one end and about 30 in another one—but you always have problems. Now you have service problems. The help isn't there like it used to be, and nothing isn't there, so you just keep going. And there's things like this—like I belong to groups like this, like Southern Foodways [Alliance] and all of these things that make me grow. I learn when I come here; I learn from everybody. And unlike some of what these people are talking about—and this woman I'm with her, Carol Allen, she can attest to the things that I'm telling you.

When we stayed—after integration on this corner which is—had moved—one time the neighborhoods were mixed in New Orleans. All mixed, the Italians had a grocery on the corner, and they lived there and some whites lived down the street; it was pretty well mixed. Well I don't know if—if race had anything probably to move them out. I think economy, a better way, finding a better space—maybe the city was growing out and—and they were getting older and the children said *well I can't believe you're here alone, so we're going to take you with us*, and now the space opened. So the thing moves out, and you're all black again. But—and I still—they said *Leah you're going to have to move this restaurant, or you're not going to make work here. It's not going to work here. Even my husband—it's not going to work here. He—nobody will come. The whites certain won't come, nobody will come.* So I said *nope; I don't think so. We don't owe anybody anything, and this is our building, and I am what I am. This is the people I know. I'm black; my community is black. I can't be anybody else, so why should I move my space somewhere else?* My job there—if the community is going down, it's my job to pick it up. I have

the only thing here that's going to pick up this neighborhood. So I better fix up my place and do this. So that's what we did, and in 1984 we made it grow to what we did.

The thing about it, we—I—now I'm a stickler for tablecloths. I love tablecloths. Well at first that wasn't heard of in—in black restaurants. You just didn't hear of that in black restaurants. We lost an old man in the community, Ellis Marsalis, the Marsalis people—their father. I remember years ago he had a little motel, and the little restaurant in his motel in the early '40s and he had white tablecloths. I always told that old man *I copied off of you because I wanted to be like you. I wanted to have what you have.* Well, he was getting older and couldn't make it work, so you know—and his children didn't—were not interested. They—Ellis was into music. His daughter was into teaching or whatever, so it didn't work there for him, but he really gave me an inspiration to—to make mine work and to do what I have to do. So we go with the tablecloths and that's another thing.

Look, when I first started setting up the tables you know they said *nobody—nobody is going to eat this with this fork that's sitting here, and nobody is going to eat that and the—*, you know they used to put the ketchup and the hot stuff out. *No, I don't want any ketchup and hot stuff on this table. Get it off; no.* And then we're going to do what we have to do; so I had to struggle to get it going. So, you know, you get the ups and downs and you keep—you get a new breed now coming in [and they] don't know where you're coming from, don't understand about service. Don't understand a bit about service. And today I could serve people all day and all night and be happy as a lark. To me, you meet people; you get to know them; you get to know what they like; you—you get to serve them and you can see happy faces if you make somebody happy or when you serve them nice and that's—that's all I know about. So service for me will be

important until the day I die. I'm sorry if it looks like a maid or if it looks like this. I am sorry; that's my life.

Now then, Jessica Harris and Carol [Allen] can tell you that people come from all around; they come from all over the country. I've done Japanese television. I've done German television. I've done everything that—and people will come in that community. They will come because I am me and they—they're going to come to see what I have to offer and I'm going to try to just do it the best I can. And people will come if you just invite them, and when they get there you just make them feel good. They will come and they come in that totally black community. Sometimes people say *don't go there because the project is over there, and that's not a good neighborhood*. So people who know say *that's the best neighborhood you can go into*, because you know why—I don't have one security guard, and I don't have one bar or iron rails—nowhere. I don't believe in bars because I don't like putting myself in jail. But my protection is my neighbors. Now they would not let anybody do anything there at all. Not at all. They would say *Miss Dooky you know what I saw? I saw somebody crossing your line. I saw somebody doing this*. No; so that's my security—my neighbors.

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AG: That's great.

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LC: Uh-hmm, I think it's wonderful. I think they're wonderful. They have all kind of problems, and they need all kinds of help; so you help where you can, and they will, in turn, help you. They will help you. They will not mark all over the buildings because they said *No, we can't do that here because people come from all over to Dooky's, and they'll see all this writing on the wall. We don't want that.* So you see, that's good qualities. I don't care how bad you are, you know you have good—good people that you can talk to, and all you have to do is talk to them and make them feel good and that's it.

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AG: So—so tell me about the food.

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LC: Now the food as I said when I started with this—now I can go back to my Lobster Thermadore, you see, because it's integrated, and they have had an opportunity to go in other restaurants. That's why those things are good for learning. So you learn what they eat and you try that and you come back, and now you know how to eat a medium-rare steak. Before you could say *Oh my God, we can't eat this meat.* They would go, you know, and they would come back. And they would go to banquets at the hotel, and they would come back. And I said *Well you just ate. Oh no, we couldn't eat that rare meat they served us over there.* I said *Why didn't you tell them you don't like it rare, you know? Just tell them what you don't like.* **[Laughs]** No. So now we have learned, and that is the good thing about integration—most important thing is not that I

can sit next to you at a movie, but I have learned. I have learned some of your culture. I've learned to appreciate that. And then you learn mine, and that's what the world is all about—learning one another and learning to live with one another. We're going to have to do that not only in our own country; we're going to have to cross those waters and that's how we're going to learn with other people—learn about their cultures, learn that we can't make them be everything we are. We have to learn to let them live the way they can live and help them to live the way they can live. And it sounds easy, but I guess it's pretty hard to do. I know we can't fight wars anymore. I know that—that is not the way to go.

I—I have a picture of a man that I truly loved from day one. [I] never got to meet him in my life. He was General Patton—I loved General Patton. I've got every book on Patton there is. I—he was a go-getter and he would set a goal, and he would beat the world down to reach that goal. Well you can't do that today; you've got to go about it different than that today. You can't go about beating the world down to get what you need or to get what you think ought to be done. You have to talk a little bit, and you have to work it and try to understand people. Maybe you'll never understand them, but at least try to live with them. And those are things that—food is the most important thing. You know, I went to sign books in Paris last year, and my daughter said *Listen; don't say anything political. You're not to speak about politics at all* because then it was thing going on with Saddam and blah-blah-blah. *Don't say anything political, okay.*

The first question out of the crowd, which Carol had a good crowd of people there; it was a nice crowd at that book-signing. The man asked me *If you had to talk to Bush and Chirac, who is the President over—over there in Paris, what—what would you tell them?* [**Laughs**] I said *They just told me don't say anything political, but I will try. I would to say to them, you know, I feel like in my restaurant we really changed the course of America because I've fed civil rights*

workers when they would come in and they would have to plan what the next step they were going to move. They came to the restaurant, and we made this big pot of gumbo. We cooked; they ate; they planned, then they went on. I said I would tell Mr. Bush and Mr. Chirac, Mr. Saddam—come and have a bowl of gumbo. Talk it over a bowl of gumbo. Let's talk. [Laughs] So a lot of things can be done over food. You learn about people with food; it's a pleasing thing. So you're going to have to do that simple thing, you know—learn about their food. You can do it. I can take anybody's food and Creole-ize it and make it mine, you know. And you make people's food yours whether it's Southern food, Creole food, whatever. You can take it, and you can do what you want with it. But most of all you can make people happy with it. That to me is most thing—just make them happy with it.

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AG: Speaking of food and getting back to SFA a little bit, when you first became involved with the organization did you have a vision of what you would like for it and—and if so how has that vision changed?

0:34:31.6

LC: Yeah, I—I thought it would really—really like advertise the people—the people in the South, you know, because people in the—people from far away—you would think that would be past by now, that people who lived in New York, people who lived in the North, people who lived in the Northeast, they think Southerners are just—just dummies like, you know. Now

they're learning we're not so dumb. We know how to dress. We know how to do things. We have something to offer here in the South and—and that's what this organization has done, really. And more so now, I see people coming from Massachusetts, people coming from all over, and that is good because then—you see, we have a lot to offer in the South. A lot. A lot those people can take with them back home. And I think sometimes they are doing that. Take out something back home with you and apply that to your neighborhood or apply that there, and I think this organization is doing wonderful with that. This year is marvelous. I see older people. One old lady who is here, who we go so far back, she and I were friendly and you might have seen her. I forget her name. She has snow-white hair, and she spoke just a little—asked a question just a little while ago. She was defending her people in saying that which was good. But she—I go way back with her with a man named Jim Dombroski, who did a lot of work at the Highlander School. Do you know the Highlander School? It's not there any more anyway. But I worked with all those people and she was there, too with Virginia Durr and all those people at the Highlander School. So you see, you have people who have done things and who have moved things, and I'm glad to see they're around. I learn from those people. I learned a lot from Jim Dombroski, a lot from those people. And now they've moved on in—how they've studied how to move people. And that's the most important thing is moving people, uplifting people, and that's what they were all about.

I—the more I look at them—at her and at Jim Dombroski. He's not here anymore—but then I realize his work was about uplifting people. It was about moving people up and I—and I loved that and—and I liked this year—this organization. I have seen people from all over here, and that is wonderful. That is truly wonderful. I like that; I think SFA has done really a good

thing about that. I—I—you know what makes me feel good? It's on this campus. It's being on the Ole Miss, if you will, campus. I like that.

Years ago, I fed James Meredith and Constance Baker, his attorney when James was trying to get in Ole Miss. Every day I fed them—every day because they—the court was in New Orleans that they had to go before. The judge in New Orleans. Every day I fed James Meredith and Constance Baker. Every single day. So when I sit here at Ole Miss, I see growth. Now I'm hearing they're going to put a monument [the James Meredith and the integration of Ole Miss] out there. Isn't that wonderful? You see growth. And that is the most important thing; you see people learn about one another and it would not have been had—not the people, but organizations such as Southern Food[ways] Alliance. Through food, you can learn about everybody. You could take this to Mister Bush and sit that there and tell him what he should do or what anybody—Mister Kerry—anybody who is going to run this country. You start where you think—of course you have to know how to do these things; you have to know how to run a country, I know, but you can start with the simplest things by getting the people together, and we have to get our people together in this country. And I think we can start just like this organization. Who would think I would ever come to Ole Miss and see a black girl on the cover of the magazine? I saw that a couple years ago here. You wouldn't have thought that. Now you see that. You see growth here. You see people remembering and moving on.

Now this monument they're going to put up there, they're going to put the two sides up—the man who was against it, the man who was for it [integration]—it took all of that to make it work. Now we sort of hate the man who was against it; we're going to understand where he was—this is the way he was brought up. We've got to build on that; we've got to work on that and to me that's easy to do. Just get you a plate of food and talk about it. **[Laughs]** And get

everybody's—I wished they do that here next year and let everybody bring a dish. We'll have a big party. You bring a dish. You come from this white home, you bring a dish. You come, you bring a dish, and we will see—we will learn to eat everybody's food.

0:39:49.1

AG: That's a great idea.

0:39:50.7

LC: I think it's great; I think this is wonderful.

0:39:51.8

AG: Well, if you were—if you don't mind, I'd like for you to tell us a little bit more about the food in the restaurant. And I'm assuming that if someone came and said *Serve me what you think is the quintessential Creole meal or Southern meal, what—what would it be?*

0:40:08.4

LC: Well, you wouldn't get—I wouldn't serve you a Southern meal because that's not what I'm all about.

0:40:12.8

AG: Right.

0:40:14.2

LC: I could I guess. I tell them all the time, you know, they come [and say] *Well, do you have soul food?* Well, tell me where your soul is. If your soul is in China, I can't help you a bit; if your soul is in Mississippi I can help you. I can put you on a pot of greens and make you some smothered pork chops and cook you some this, that, and the other. But that's not really what I do. We do Creole food. We do Jambalayas and Shrimp Creole and Chicken Creole and all of that—a lot of baked macaroni. That's Southern too, like me. So we kind of blend it in a little bit but we'll—we do those things. We know how to have good breakfasts but we have grits and grillades and maybe a braised quail and some fried catfish. We kind of mix it up and do those kinds of things. So you know—and that's what people maybe sometimes don't understand about New Orleans. They—but they are learning now that this is what we do. We do a lot of stuffings. We stuff eggplants, we—well I think in the South, in Southern cooking, they stuff a lot of things, too, you know. We stuff chicken breast; we stuff everything, including people. **[Laughs]** We do a lot like that. But the food—that's a combination of food. You can do that.

Now I have one day that I—we do a buffet for lunch. I hate buffets. I hate them. Because I like to serve people. But we do that because people can come for lunch and then go off to work without waiting for all the service. So on one day we do what we call Wok-n-Soul. Wok, right—w-o-k, the pot? Okay. I will do peppered steak, shrimp-fried rice and that kind of thing. And

maybe sweet and sour chicken. And then I will serve greens and maybe stewed chicken, you know. So we have what they call the soul and the Chinese there together, too. So that makes it kind of fun, and it's fun to do other things. I've introduced people to other people's food, or you try to prepare other people's food. But we have a big Jewish community, and I have plenty of customers. I have a customer that comes in my restaurant—I haven't seen him in a little while—he comes in, it's Hanukkah, and I have to prepare his thing in foil, so I prepare his fish in the foil, his vegetables in the foil, serve it to him in the foil. And then in a restaurant you always have new things—forks in the plastic. I give him that thing—and so I can feed you too. You're Jewish; I can feed you too. And if you want me too, I can Creole-ize your Jewish food too. So all of that you learn about people and their food. You learn what makes them happy and you try to prepare that.

I can't say *Well you can't come to my restaurant because I can't fix you that, because you can't eat that*. No, you come there. I'm going to try to fix something you can eat. I'm going to fix you food. You tell me what you don't like, and tell me what you like, and I can do that for you and it's fun to do that; then I learn from that. I learn how to do other things. So that's really fun.

0:43:30.4

AG: One last thing. I think it's time for you to go, but [the SFA is] putting together a radio show, and they wanted to have someone say something like *I'm April Grayson. I love sweet potato casserole, and you're listening to Cornbread Nation*.

0:43:50.4

LC: Uh-hm.

0:43:50.9

AG: I was wondering if you could—. [*Interruption*]

0:44:00.1

LC: Okay; we just have—come on; we just have one thing. Come on.

0:44:01.9

AG: So if you could do something like that—that would be great.

0:44:04.8

LC: Now wait, but I'm not going to make sweet potato casserole.

0:44:07.2

AG: No, you say whatever you want to say. So you say *I'm Leah Chase. I love gumbo* or whatever it is—whatever your favorite thing is and *You're listening to Cornbread Nation*.

0:44:17.8

LC: Uh-hm; okay. [*Laughs*] *Cornbread Nation*—yeah; I guess I should use that gumbo, huh?
Yeah, that's the thing and they will know to make sure—I'm *Leah Chase*. *I love gumbo—love cooking gumbo, and you're listening to Cornbread Nation.*

0:44:40.8

AG: Great.

0:44:40.9

LC: Okay.

0:44:41.5

AG: Thank you so much.

0:44:43.9

[End Leah Chase Interview]

