



**Mickey Bakst**  
**Charleston Grill**  
**Charleston, South Carolina**  
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Date: August 8, 2019  
Location: Charleston Place Hotel, Charleston, SC  
Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson  
Length: One hour and sixteen minutes  
Project: Career Servers

**Annemarie A.:** All right. Today—I'm gonna slate the tape for us real quick. Today is August 8, 2019. I'm in Charleston, South Carolina, at the Charleston Grill—actually, we're in the Charleston Place Hotel—and I'm with Mr. Mickey Bakst. Would you introduce yourself and tell us who you are and what you do?

[00:00:22.11]

**Mickey B.:** Hello, everybody. I am Mickey Bakst. I'm supposed to tell you who I am. I don't know. I'm still struggling with identity after all these years. In all honesty, I am a forty-five-year veteran of high-end fine dining in America. I am a committed F&B person. I am a sober person for thirty-six years. I am a person who loves making people dance. And I am a non-Southerner who believes that hospitality is international and runs every gambit of the corner. So, I guess I'm here to talk because I've been doin' this stuff a long time.

[00:01:09.22]

**Annemarie A.:** That's true. Okay. Let's start off and talk a little bit about your early life, if you don't mind. Can you tell me your birth date first, for the record?

[00:01:16.03]

**Mickey B.:** 6-1—June 1, 1952.

[00:01:19.26]

**Annemarie A.:** Perfect.

[00:01:21.20]

**Mickey B.:** Pardon.

[00:01:22.13]

**Annemarie A.:** Tell me where you were born. A little bit about your early life.

[00:01:26.01]

**Mickey B.:** I was born in Cleveland, Ohio. At six months of age—I was a developed child—I looked at my folks and I said, "Either you get outta Cleveland, or I'm leaving." And I had bags packed and I was going to hitchhike, and they were concerned. They said, "Okay, we'll move." So, they got me back. They moved to Detroit. So, I ended up being raised in Detroit—Detroit, Michigan—and went to school there. Grew up there, got in trouble there, left there, and now I'm here.

[00:02:01.22]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, that's good. Tell me a little bit about your relationship with food growing up.

[00:02:09.09]

**Mickey B.:** You know, it's going to be interesting, because my relationship with food is not nearly as complex as many try to make food. I am a real simple guy. My relationship with food was really plain and simple: that I love it. I love to eat. I love the act of sharing

food with people. I love the magic that comes when a meal is shared amongst other people. For me, it was never about where the food comes from. I couldn't give a rat's butt if it's grown around the corner or grown across the country, as long as the food is good. I learned at an early age that I loved great flavors of all kinds. You couldn't pin me to what is my quote-unquote favorite food, but I learned that I just love to eat, and eating was an essential part of my home. And my childhood. I come from a Jewish family. Dinners were a very big deal. We sat around the table; we talked about current events. Kids were forced to read news magazines and tell stories, but we did it all around food.

[00:03:30.26]

**Annemarie A.:** Describe some of those things that your mother or grandmother or father, whoever, would put on the table.

[00:03:36.28]

**Mickey B.:** Chicken. Lots of chicken. Lots of fresh vegetables. Back then, when I was a kid—which was an unusual thing, you know—a lot of fresh vegetables. Like I said, a lot of chicken. We ate . . . nothing complex. My grandmother was Hungarian, so she would make stews and goulashes. But that's it, you know? It was a simple life.

[00:04:04.21]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great.

[00:04:05.19]

**Mickey B.:** Um-hm.

[00:04:05.19]

**Annemarie A.:** Is there anything else you want to talk about from your childhood?

[00:04:09.24]

**Mickey B.:** From my childhood?

[00:04:09.24]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah, that you find interesting or important?

[00:04:13.26]

**Mickey B.:** No. Listen, I was raised in a family that believed in caring for others, that believed in education. I went astray as an early kid. I had my own issues. I was always in need of attention; there wasn't Daddy enough there. And I resolved all those issues throughout the years. But I had, really, when I look back at it, an incredibly warm childhood. There were four kids, and my parents, we lived very comfortably. We didn't really need anything or crave—I didn't struggle to grow up. As I said earlier, education was a major focus in the house, as was charitable deeds. We, as young kids, were taken to organizations to work at different charity events, when I was a young kid. It was an important thing. I lived a great childhood; I had great parents who I adored until their deaths. There was no abstract, horrible thing. It was all good. I just perceived it when I was younger in a way that didn't always jive with what reality was, so I became a drug addict.

[00:05:35.21]

**Annemarie A.:** What were your parents' names—we'll get to that.

[00:05:37.17]

**Mickey B.:** That's true! My parents' names were Myron and Celia Bakst.

[00:05:47.01]

**Annemarie A.:** That's nice. Those are nice names.

[00:05:48.17]

**Mickey B.:** Yeah, and they were great people. I'm proud to say they both died my best friends.

My dad and I became incredibly close after a period where we weren't, and my mother was always a rock.

[00:06:03.11]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. So, I want to get into some of the more difficult things and into your food and beverage experiences. Can you tell me a little bit about—you were talking about, in high school, tell me a little bit about getting your first food and beverage job.

[00:06:24.19]

**Mickey B.:** My first food and beverage job was not a—I am not your typical, let me just tell you. I bought the first restaurant that I worked at, plain and simple. [Laughter] That was it. I

had made a lot of money illegally doing things that I could, today, be held accountable for. One day, I was not working, and I was very young, and I was living on the beach in Newport Beach, California, and there was a bar on the foot of the Balboa Pier, and it was a restaurant dinner house. And I became very good friends with the owner because we got high together. One day he said, "I need a partner. I need to get some money because I want to expand." And I didn't think anything of it. A couple of weeks later, his doorman didn't show up, and he asked me, would I check IDs? Can I swear on this thing?

[00:07:27.03]

**Annemarie A.:** If you want it on record. [Laughter]

[00:07:30.07]

**Mickey B.:** And I said, "I'll check IDs for you." And I had the most fucking unbelievable time in my life. It was magical. And it changed my life, because that night, I realized that what I wanted to do was spend my life making people smile. That's what I did that night. I had a ball. We laughed; people came out of the restaurant and said, "It was great, but the best part was you." We had a ball. People stayed after they finished dinner just to hang out, to watch me laughing, dancing, playing. It was magic to me. Immediately after, I went to the guy who owned the restaurant. And I said, "How much money do you need?" He told me, and I became his partner. I knew nothing about restaurants. I had no aspiration to be in restaurants. I had no idea of what I wanted to do, and I, in one night, fell in love with being in the restaurant industry. It has not left me, that love, for forty-five-plus years.

[00:08:43.03]

**Annemarie A.:** What year was that, when you bought that restaurant?

[00:08:44.09]

**Mickey B.:** I think it was 1974.

[00:08:47.14]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay. And what was it called?

[00:08:48.06]

**Mickey B.:** The Studio Cafe.

[00:08:50.10]

**Annemarie A.:** Studio Cafe.

[00:08:50.10]

**Mickey B.:** Yes. Newport Beach, California.

[00:08:52.28]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. So, tell me a little bit about that experience. You talk about your interests and your desire to kind of be with people, but what was it like learning how to own a restaurant?

[00:09:08.03]

**Mickey B.:** It was hard work. There was no question about it. You know, I, at one point, worked every position in the restaurant. That's what I had to do. I had to learn to be behind the grill, which I hated. I had to learn how to be behind the bar. I had to learn how to wait tables. I had to learn how to put the salad station together. I had to learn it all. I had to learn the books, I had to learn all of it. And it was a great education, and it led to a great career. But there was nothing—I'm worried, because I don't think there was anything extraordinary. It was just working. It was hard work, learning how to do everything. But once I got it, I felt pretty comfortable.

[00:09:57.09]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit about some people who taught you how to do those more technical skills?

[00:10:03.24]

**Mickey B.:** I don't have a lot of technical skills. I think, you know—I just want you to know that I think my skills are based not—I am not good in the kitchen. I'm not good in the kitchen. I don't cook at home. I couldn't give a shit. My skills are people-related, and they come inherently from within. Nobody teaches, in the service world—you can teach somebody how to set a fork and a knife properly, but you can't teach them the love of the thing. I was born with the love, and buying into this restaurant showed me where my love and my passion was. I've been asked this throughout my career, "Who were your mentors?" I

don't really have a lot. I just did what I do, and it seemed to work, apparently. You're here. So.

[00:11:07.05]

**Annemarie A.:** That's true.

[00:11:09.02]

**Mickey B.:** I'm sort of bumming you out. I don't have the right answers.

[00:11:11.17]

**Annemarie A.:** No! No. All answers are the right answers.

[00:11:14.27]

**Mickey B.:** Ooh.

[00:11:16.13]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, tell me a little bit about—so, how long did you own the Studio Cafe?

[00:11:17.16]

**Mickey B.:** I lost Studio Cafe about seven years later, eight years later, to my alcoholism. In 1982, I died on an emergency room table from an alcohol and drug overdose. My partner at the time looked at me and said, "I can't live like this." Bought me out, and that was it. The beginning of my time at this cafe was magic. The last two years was hell, because I

was in the throes of addiction. I was an alcoholic, I was a cocaine addict, and I did every drug that was available to me, and I couldn't stop. So, those years were horribly dark, horribly painful, and . . . it took all magic out of my life, you know?

[00:12:09.20]

**Annemarie A.:** Definitely. That sounds like it would be really difficult.

[00:12:12.01]

**Mickey B.:** It was dark.

[00:12:14.02]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, what made you decide to change?

[00:12:18.07]

**Mickey B.:** I don't think that—I think what happens is, you get to a point where, a) either you know you're gonna die and you don't wanna die, or adversely, you get to a point where you're too afraid to die and you know you're gonna live in that pain and you don't wanna live in that pain anymore. I lost the restaurant. I was thirty years old. I was not in Newport Beach, California, on the beach, the bigshot who owned the successful nightclub. I was now a thirty-year-old living in Mommy and Daddy's house, struggling to even spell my name, my head was so boggled. Struggling to tie my shoes. So, you get to a point where you have to make a decision, you know? Is this what I want? And something in me—I knew that I couldn't die. I knew I was going to die, but that didn't

frighten me at all. It didn't really matter. The life I was living was dead. But what frightened me was the damage it would do to others, because we had already lost one of my siblings. I couldn't imagine doing what I was doing to my folks. And I knew that I wasn't afraid to die, like I said, but I also knew that if I didn't change, I was gonna go crazy. That scared the shit out of me. I woke up once in a straitjacket in a nuthouse, in a room with a guy who was out of his mind. I was petrified that I was gonna become that person, and that was the impetus that made me say, "I can't do this. I need help."

[00:14:17.06]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Could you tell me a little bit—so, this is skipping way ahead, but I know that you are very much involved in Ben's Friends.

[00:14:24.18]

**Mickey B.:** I'm a co-founder, yes.

[00:14:26.20]

**Annemarie A.:** Yes. Would you tell us—would you describe to the recorder what Ben's Friends is and tell us about—

[00:14:31.23]

**Mickey B.:** Yeah. Ben's, here in Charleston, a number of—about three years ago—on the weekend of our Food and Wine Festival, three young restaurant people died from alcohol or drug overdoses between a Friday night and a Sunday morning. And my partner, Steve

Palmer, who owns a group of restaurants called the Indigo Road Group, he and I just kept talking about, we can't stand watching these kids destroying their lives. And we needed to do something. A couple of weeks later, one of Steve's employees named Ben Murray took his own life. Steve came to me the next day and was devastated—or a couple days later—and I said, "Enough of this shit. Let's do something." So, we decided to create a group called Ben's Friends whose sole mission is to help people in the food and beverage industry struggling with alcohol and drug addiction. We're a support group of like-minded people who share not just our alcoholism and our drug addiction, but our love for the food and beverage industry. And it's working phenomenally. We're in eight cities now with plans to grow into a nationwide organization.

[00:15:55.03]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great.

[00:15:57.14]

**Mickey B.:** Thank you.

[00:15:57.14]

**Annemarie A.:** What's your role within the organization? I mean, you're co-founder, but what does that mean?

[00:16:00.19]

**Mickey B.:** [Laughter] There's not a phone call I won't turn down. There's not an e-mail I won't respond to. I will help anybody anywhere who reaches out to me. My role is developing new cities. We're constantly looking for new cities. I interview people to lead the groups in different cities. We bring the people here to talk about what our vision is, what our goal is, how do we do it, and then we go to each city to launch the first meeting. I keep in touch with every leader, and I also keep in touch with anybody—I mean, I get mothers who call me that my son or daughter is struggling from Seattle, Washington. I'm in Charleston, but if somebody calls, I will help.

[00:16:55.14]

**Annemarie A.:** Definitely. That's great. And I'll get back to, to—so, after you . . . kind of had the overdose, how did you get back into the food and beverage industry? What was that process like?

[00:17:15.11]

**Mickey B.:** Well, I took a little time off, because I didn't think I could go work in a restaurant again. It's tough when your ego has been shattered. Here I was, the owner of the hottest place in Newport Beach, California, making more money than I had ever dreamt, and all of a sudden, I'm living with Mommy and Daddy and I got shit left, you know? And I'm becoming a waiter again. I had never been a waiter professionally. I went from not being in restaurants to owning a restaurant, right? And so, it was an emotionally difficult time. Then I had to realize that I couldn't do what I was doing, but I realized I loved what I did. So, I made a conscious decision to go into fine dining. I worked at it really hard. I read

books on wine. All my friends were reading the AA Big Book, I'm reading wine books. I travelled to the restaurants all over the country. This was in the day of Chez Panisse and Stars and long before, you know, the Kellers and the Bouluds and the great chefs of that generation were even around. I started teaching myself what dining was, fine dining was. Then I found a restaurant in Northern Michigan called Tapawingo. It was an oasis. This guy who had never worked in a restaurant opened a restaurant because he loved cooking, and he turned out to be brilliant. He bought eight acres of property, eight acres of property in Northern Michigan in an old home on a private lake. He created a destination restaurant. The story goes was, I went to eat there. I walked in his kitchen the next morning with a car packed, ready to leave the area, and I said, "You don't know me, but I had one of the greatest meals of my life last night, and your service sucks. And I can help you." Thirty years later, we're still dear friends. I'm actually going up to Michigan to do a tribute dinner for him in a couple of months, and I became part of Tapawingo and eventually a partner in Tapawingo. We opened this restaurant that, in 1986, we were doing super high-end tastings, we were doing unbelievable quality dinners. People started flying from all over America to come to this restaurant. [19]86 *Bon Appetit* featured us, six pages, and we were in a town of dairy farmers, four hundred people in the middle of nowhere, you know? People flew in to come to dinner from Chicago, from New York. Johnny Apple [R.W. Apple, Jr.], whose name you might know—Johnny wrote it was one of the greatest dining experiences he had had. He went on T.V. and said in an interview with Regis Philbin, that Tapawingo is one of the most magical dining experiences. We started competing with The Inn At Little Washington later on as the best rural restaurant in America. We created dining experiences. There, I created great dinners—in the middle

of nowhere. Four hundred people lived in this town of Ellsworth, Michigan. And I decided one day we were gonna get the great chefs in America to come to this place. In 1988, I did the first Chef's Dinner that was done for profit with a young kid named Emeril Lagasse who had not even opened his restaurant. Another young kid named Charlie Trotter who had just opened—have you heard that name?

[00:21:44.13]

**Annemarie A.:** I think so, yeah.

[00:21:46.17]

**Mickey B.:** He was—and another kid, Brad Ogden. We had every great chef in America end up flying to this little village of four hundred people to do dinners. It was magical. It was every night, the swans went around the lake. The sun would set. The room would get quiet as everybody was in awe at the beauty. We had a magnificent, magnificent run. During that time, I was getting sober and staying sober, and I focused on my sobriety being tied to what I think is the most important word in the language: we. And it was the we of us sharing experiences.

[00:22:33.01]

**Annemarie A.:** Definitely. You're talking about when other folks were with their AA handbooks, you had wine lists.

[00:22:33.29]

**Mickey B.:** Um-hm.

[00:22:42.17]

**Annemarie A.:** I know that, sometimes, the industry can be hostile or hard for people who are sober or trying to get to that point. What was that experience like for you?

[00:22:53.05]

**Mickey B.:** Well, here's the reality, and I sort of get upset—there's been a wave these days about how difficult our industry is. You know? You miss this, you don't do this, it's so stressful. You know what? I've loved this industry every day. I don't understand why people think it's so hard. Yes, it's hard, but if you love it and you're passionate about it, there's nothing to it. You know? You do it. Yes, you work long hours. Yes, you miss some birthdays. But the joy that I got—I can only speak for me—outweighed any of that. So, as the current narrative is how difficult our industry is, screw that. This industry's the greatest gift I've ever been given. Honestly! Actually, I'm now going to start saying that. It's now my wife, my sleep machine, my sobriety, and my industry. I'm gonna start saying that, and I mean that. Alcohol is everywhere. I can't go to the store without seeing it, I can't go to the gas station without seeing it. I can't go anywhere—alcohol is everywhere. So, yes, it's hard getting sober in any field. Any field! I don't care if you're a lawyer, I don't care if you're a contractor, I don't care where you are. You're a journalist. It's hard when you want to get sober and you're an addict, to get sober. But the reality is, alcohol's everywhere. It's not going anywhere. And you have to learn how to deal with it. So, I remember the first time I was serving when I was sober, and my hands were shaking. I

was a mess. But then I saw this woman—I'll never forget this as long as I live. An old woman, wrinkly skin, this was still the days you could smoke at your dinner table. She's smoking a cigarette. The ash is long. She's got two drinks because she had to have her backup drink ready. And the ash falls in the salad—I'm not exaggerating, this is a true story—and she picks up the drink, drinks it, and eats the salad and pays no attention. I knew that minute that I could do this, because I didn't want to be that woman.

[00:25:23.00]

**Annemarie A.:** That makes perfect sense.

[00:25:23.00]

**Mickey B.:** Um-hm.

[00:25:25.06]

**Annemarie A.:** So, how long were you at Tapawingo?

[00:25:26.08]

**Mickey B.:** Tapawingo was eight years.

[00:25:29.29]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay. What year did you start?

[00:25:32.19]

**Mickey B.:** Oh, it's not eight years. I guess it's six years. 1986 to 1993.

[00:25:40.23]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay. During that time, you built the service, the front of the house there.

[00:25:45.16]

**Mickey B.:** Absolutely.

[00:25:46.20]

**Annemarie A.:** And what was the name of the man who was the chef there?

[00:25:51.02]

**Mickey B.:** Harlan "Pete" Peterson.

[00:25:52.12]

**Annemarie A.:** That's such a nice name.

[00:25:53.22]

**Mickey B.:** Yeah. And he's such a great guy.

[00:25:56.08]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Could you talk about building—and I want to talk about this, too, with the Charleston Grill—building a team of front of the house. So—

[00:26:05.17]

**Mickey B.:** Starts from the top.

[00:26:07.09]

**Annemarie A.:** Exactly.

[00:26:07.09]

**Mickey B.:** Plain and simple. I built a team at Tapawingo of dairy farmers. Literally. Nobody, nobody in the dining room had any professional experience whatsoever. I mean, nobody. Gail was a dairy farmer. Randy was an elementary school teacher. Liz grew corn. I mean, these kids who are still very dear to my heart, they had no experience. And what it was, it's about, number one, painting the picture of your vision. What is it that you want to see, and how do you make them see it? You have to paint the picture. You can't go in and say, "You gotta do this. You gotta do this." You gotta show them why they're doing it. What is the end goal? And ultimately, when I teach young kids about service, I always say, "Who goes to church?" And I teach minority kids. Inevitably, everybody raised their hand. I said to them, "What is a **t-school**—the church teach you about others?" And it's the old adage, "Do unto others as you want yourself." I try to teach them the experience of doing for others what they dreamt they would like have done for themselves. Then, you set and you establish rules. What are the techniques that you're gonna use to do that? You know? I have always fought with this, a style of service—in the industry, there are very high-end places. As you know. And they technically get everything right; your water

glass is never empty, your napkin's always folded, your table's always crumbed, the silverware's there when it's supposed to—your wine glass is where it's supposed to be. Everything's technically always perfect. But they don't do it with heart, and they don't do it with warmth. I was one who believed that with the right heart, you could create the right experience with a little bit of guidance. That's how I do it here, and that's how I did it at Tapawingo. I always say, "I couldn't give a shit if the fork's on the left or the right." I do really care, but it's not the most important thing. The most important thing is, it's put down with love. It's put down with heart. The most important thing is that the guest knows that you really give a shit if their experience is good or not. You know? We make too much for me, in my world, there's been too much swing, the farm-to-table movement. Every restaurant, and my kid, you use the best ingredients you could, wherever it came from. You tried to use what was local, but in the middle of December, you're not eating tomatoes from John's Island here in Charleston. You're not gonna do it. But you're gonna find the best. So, for me, it's always been about—it's always been about the heart. That's what I am. I'm a maître d' at heart. There's not many of me left, and I know that. People tell me that from around the country. There's general managers, but a maître d' is someone who connects the experience with the joy.

[00:30:05.01]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great.

[00:30:07.09]

**Mickey B.:** It's true.

[00:30:08.28]

**Annemarie A.:** So, after you left Tapawingo—

[00:30:12.07]

**Mickey B.:** I was hired by a billionaire.

[00:30:12.16]

**Annemarie A.:** You were hired by a billionaire?

[00:30:14.11]

**Mickey B.:** Yeah. I was hired by an extraordinarily wealthy man to create a restaurant in Detroit called Tribute. And Tribute was a mecca to fine dining. He was an auto—he built automobile assembly lines and he wanted to build a restaurant that every major auto player would come to from around the world. He kept makin' me offers to leave Tapawingo until, finally, he made me an offer I couldn't refuse. It was sweet, really. [Laughter] Really sweet. Literally, I had sixty thousand dollars' worth of Armani and Canali suits bought before we opened the door. It was insanity. It was insanity. But I went on with a great chef, a James Beard Award-winner named Takahashi Yagihashi, to become a restaurant that became a mecca for fine dining. Again, every great—Éric Ripert, Tom Colicchio, Daniel Boulud. Everybody came to Tribute. People did dinners with us. People did events with us. It was a stunning, French-Asian food, and in an

environment that was magnificent. It was really—we spared no expense in doing it. I look up to see if I can still see a picture of it, but go on.

[00:31:47.29]

**Annemarie A.:** What year did Tribute open?

[00:31:50.01]

**Mickey B.:** Tribute opened in 1996, and I left in 2003.

[00:31:57.20]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay. What was the reason you left?

[00:32:02.07]

**Mickey B.:** Honestly, the owner was alcoholic and couldn't get—and unfortunately has passed away since—and I couldn't deal with it anymore. And as much as it broke my heart to do it, to leave—because it was my baby, I was given carte blanche to create it, to find the chef, to do anything—I couldn't. I couldn't stay because it was just too heartbreaking for me.

[00:32:32.10]

**Annemarie A.:** That makes sense.

[00:32:34.15]

**Mickey B.:** That's a fact.

[00:32:36.23]

**Annemarie A.:** Could you talk a little bit about the process of, like, creating this restaurant from scratch?

[00:32:41.20]

**Mickey B.:** You know something? I'm a cheater. I am. In creating Tribute, I travelled all over to find things that I loved in other places. I have to tell you, it started—the seed for me was the great Jeremiah Tower, who I don't know if you've heard of. But Jeremiah had a restaurant in San Francisco called Stars. And everything about Stars was about the show. The grand show. It was like a Broadway play. Today, restaurants are concrete floors, hard tables, paper napkins, nobody gives a shit, you know? Duct tape the ducting, air vents on the ceiling. It's not a show. That's a room to go eat in. Those restaurants were restaurants that were grand, and I'm so sorry your generation isn't seeing them, 'cause you're not. Nobody builds them anymore. Jeremiah was a showman, and his room was like a stage. I loved that. Éric Ripert's La Bernardin had a style of service that was so classy, I just wanted to make it more fun. You know? Daniel Boulud had his restaurant that—there was just magic when you walked in. It was theater, it was art, it was for the whole senses. I wanted to create a place that, when you walked in, took your breath away. From the moment you stepped in the door, you were transported to what you knew was a magical experience. You walk through wine cellars that were drawers on each side with windows

looking at the wine, and above you were all these old bottles of wine into a grand, high ceiling with beautiful colors and sparkling—it was magnificent.

[00:34:51.14]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great.

[00:34:51.29]

**Mickey B.:** I'm still trying to find you a picture.

[00:34:53.08]

**Annemarie A.:** Sounds like it. Is it still open?

[00:34:55.15]

**Mickey B.:** No. After I leave, restaurants tend to fall apart. [Laughter] Unfortunately, there's some truth to that.

[00:35:04.04]

**Annemarie A.:** So, tell me a little bit about leaving Detroit and where did you go afterwards?

[00:35:12.16]

**Mickey B.:** Ah . . . [Searching for a picture of Tribute on his phone]

[00:35:15.26]

**Annemarie A.:** I'll let you—

[00:35:19.26]

**Mickey B.:** Yeah, no. When I left Tribute, I took some time off because I wanted to spend time with my wife. Oh, here. Look at this picture. Oh, it's so hard to see. But look on the right, that was—can you see?

[00:35:37.20]

**Annemarie A.:** Oh, wow. That's beautiful.

[00:35:37.29]

**Mickey B.:** It was—we went to New York, I found a jewelry maker who made beautiful, beautiful napkin rings. They sparkled. People stole them. [Laughter] We had to create a pole on the wall where we put 'em when we took 'em off, and I decided to put lights on it so it shimmered throughout the room. The back pieces, the chandeliers, oh, I wish you could see this.

[00:36:04.14]

**Annemarie A.:** I can see what you mean about kind of making it fun, but there's also a little element of showman—

[00:36:09.19]

**Mickey B.:** Can you see it a little? [Showing AA a picture of Tribute interior]

[00:36:10.22]

**Annemarie A.:** I do.

[00:36:11.27]

**Mickey B.:** It was magnificent.

[00:36:14.00]

**Annemarie A.:** The chandeliers are beautiful.

[00:36:14.00]

**Mickey B.:** It was magnif—everything hand-crafted. Everything. We spent stupid money on it, but it was great fun. Great fun. So, after Tribute, after Tribute . . . after Tribute, I took some time off because I needed to learn how to be with my wife, and that was fabulous. Then I had been—I finally got bored and I also needed money. I was too young. So, I put word out in the industry that I was ready to go back to work, and I didn't want to move to New York. Even though part of me wanted to go against some of the greats in New York. And I didn't want to go to San Francisco. I got an offer at the Wynn Hotel in Las Vegas, and they hadn't opened yet, but I was talking to them about becoming the maître d' to the high rollers, for the top three restaurants. As we were flying back, my wife looked at me—and I'm gonna clean this up—and she said, "Let's get it straight. You're a drug addict, a drunk, a gambler, and a womanizer. We're going to Vegas why?" And she was right. The chef at the Charleston Grill at the time called up, like, two days later and said,

"I heard that you're thinkin' of Vegas. Come to Charleston." We had been here, and I realized that, for me, all I had to do to make this room better was smile. It was gonna be a lot less work.

[00:38:03.28]

**Annemarie A.:** That's nice.

[00:38:03.28]

**Mickey B.:** That's how I got here.

[00:38:06.26]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, tell me about your first impressions of Charleston. What did you think about it?

[00:38:10.11]

**Mickey B.:** I can tell you real quickly. As I was in Detroit Airport, getting a cup of coffee, flying here to come down and see this place, and I went to this counter and I encountered a woman who was a total bitch. Getting coffee. She was miserable. I ended up without a cup of coffee. I got off the plane here in Charleston and I walked up to the coffee counter and this woman was so incredibly nice. I used that as sort of a foreshadowing of what was going to become. You know . . . the reality is, I hear this term, "Southern hospitality." I think it's bullshit, to be quite honest with you. I think hospitality in Michigan, if you go to the right places, every bit as good and every bit as nice, the

hospitality in Nevada is every bit as good, every bit as nice. I think what it is, is that if you find the right people and you surround yourself with people and you attach yourself to positive people, you find great hospitality anywhere. I came to this Belmond, Charleston Place hotel, and honestly, I found people who were just wonderful. I still work with people that have been here since I've been here, fifteen years. They're fabulous. So, I was instantly taken with Charleston because I took this position on. I made it my passion to change this restaurant. My wife was not as quickly engaged. She didn't like it the first year or so. But for me, you make your own bed. I found—I went out on the streets, I shook hands, I handed out business cards, I literally walked up and down the street goin', "Hi, I'm Mickey Bakst. I'm going to be running the Charleston Grill. Come see me." Literally! Every day. And I met people. And the city embraced me. The people I met embraced me. It was a great experience, and it's been great ever since.

[00:40:35.15]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Could you tell me about how the restaurant has evolved and changed since you've been here?

[00:40:43.03]

**Mickey B.:** Well, there were five restaurants, maybe, fifteen years ago. [Laughter] The restaurants have absolutely—the proliferation of restaurants is not unique to Charleston. It's everywhere. I don't know that I think it's a great thing. I think far too many people are opening restaurants that don't have the skills they need to survive, and so, you see more restaurants close. I think that the positive thing is that there has been a . . . emergence of

all different kinds of food, culturally. From all over. When I came here, there wasn't an Asian thing of any kind. There was nothin' Spanish, there was nothin' Cuban. There was nothin', except the basic fine dining, quote unquote, Southern. I think that we've seen a broad, a broad impact from other cultures coming into Charleston, which has enriched the food community. You can only eat so many grits and so many hoppin' johns. You can—it's only so much, you know? I sound like the anti-S.F.A. message, I really am, in a way. Sorry, John. But it's true. We have too many restaurants in this community, in my opinion. Too many mediocre restaurants. Too many restauranteurs who don't know how to train their people. I think it's happening all over America. Everywhere I go, I talk to great restauranteurs. It's the same thing. And I guess that's it.

[00:42:27.26]

**Annemarie A.:** How has Charleston Grill changed under your leadership?

[00:42:33.10]

**Mickey B.:** It's more fun! [Laughter] It's more fun, plain and simple. You know, Charleston Grill was always a good restaurant. It was very formal, very stuffy. I used to call looking into it like looking into a black hole. There was no warmth, no heart. Now, with Michelle Weaver, our chef, and myself, there's a dance. People feel it; the energy's good. When the room is alive and it's full, it's magical. So, I didn't—you know, we changed the physical looks to make it lighter, more fresh, within the confines of dark wood walls. But it's all about feel. You see, here's me: okay? It's the old adage. You can have the greatest chefs in the world cooking for you—the greatest—but if you're not served in a warm, friendly

environment, you couldn't give a shit about going back. You can have the mediocre restaurant, good food, good food, but service that they love you. You know, I hate to sound corny, but the T.V. show *Cheers*. You like to go to a place where everybody knows your name. You like to feel welcome. So, for me, all of this talk these last ten, fifteen years about food, food, food, the country has lost the talk about hospitality. We've so focused on these chefs' mental masturbation tricks, you know, I gotta do pork belly, I gotta do this, I gotta do this, everybody's gotta do kale Caesar. You know, kale was a vegetable that was used in shrimp cocktails as decorations. You know why we're usin' it? 'Cause it's cheaper. Or it was cheaper. All of a sudden, organizations get behind, kale's the greatest new thing. Kale's not the greatest new thing, it's been around for ages. So, we focus so much on the chef, the chef, what does the chef want? Who the fuck cares what the chef wants? I'm not interested in how he wants me or she wants me to eat the dish. I just want to eat the dish. Is it good? Is it great? Does it make me smile? Ask yourself this: when was the last time you had a dish that every bite made me go, "That's so damn good." You don't remember 'cause it doesn't happen that often. But when was the last time you went into a place where they made you feel good? You'll remember that a lot more.

[00:45:29.14]

**Annemarie A.:** That's very true.

[00:45:31.03]

**Mickey B.:** It's—absolutely. But we got lost as a country. The magazines did it. Organizations grew to be powerful organizations, pushing a lima bean or a black bean. Who cares? Do we care? Great chefs whose names will not be mentioned who went on to become the new, hottest thing, their food sucked. Sucked! Yet the press wrote about 'em because organizations pushed them. And P.R. pushed them. What we lost in that was the magic of what it was to dine with friends and share. I went to a restaurant that won a James Beard Award recently. I went with two nationally-known chefs. We walked out of the restaurant and we were spitting shit out of our mouths. Seeds. I'm with two of the top chefs in the country, they couldn't even tell me what the food was. They couldn't tell me! But a young reporter at *Food & Wine*, or *Bon Appetit*—*Bon Appetit*, thinks it's the hottest new thing on his list. Then the James Beard makes it the number one restaurant and the winner, and you go in there, they treat you like shit, they couldn't care if you're there. You eat food that's, at best, mediocre. I'm tired of it.

[00:47:03.07]

**Annemarie A.:** How do you think we can rectify that and bring a balance to service and the cuisine? What do you think is required?

[00:47:13.18]

**Mickey B.:** Ah . . . I'm gonna just talk about the S.F.A. You're the first time I've talked to anybody about hospitality. What's the S.F.A. doing with hospitality? You're starting. What'd you do the last eight years?

[00:47:31.08]

**Annemarie A.:** What did I do?

[00:47:34.05]

**Mickey B.:** No, what did the S.F.A. do about the hospitality portion?

[00:47:38.20]

**Annemarie A.:** This is the first thing.

[00:47:39.06]

**Mickey B.:** This is the first thing. You know, you have organizations that think that a rice, and the history of the rice, is the most important thing in the world. I couldn't give a rat's butt. You know? I really don't. I can eat that rice. You know, you go to a six-dollar buffet—there was just an article in the *Post & Courier* here about these exotic rices, short grains and this and that, and the woman went—and she's a food writer—and she wrote about a place where there's a six-dollar buffet. She uses plain white rice, but it's the way she does it. We have spent so much time focusing on letting chefs go way out to places that people are not that excited about, and we have spent no time talking about hospitality. That's the fault of the media. You know? They took the Food Network started it, making—look at these stupid shows on T.V., you know? They're just, think about what the Food Network—there was a time when the Food Network was a great educational tool. There was a great time. Do I sound like an angry old man?

[00:49:05.13]

**Annemarie A.:** [Laughter] No.

[00:49:02.25]

**Mickey B.:** A little bit. I think. Maybe a little.

[00:49:06.09]

**Annemarie A.:** Maybe a little but that's okay.

[00:49:07.11]

**Mickey B.:** But there was a time when you watched the Food Network and there were intelligent shows on that you learned something that you could take into your own kitchen and recreate. It was great. Now, fucking *Junior Chef*, *Master Baker*? I mean, with eight-year-olds? What the hell is wrong with us? That's my pitch. I gotta keep looking. I gotta—

[00:49:38.23]

**Annemarie A.:** I know that you need to get downstairs.

[00:49:39.12]

**Mickey B.:** Yeah. We can finish this afterwards.

[00:49:41.25]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah? Okay.

[00:49:41.25]

**Mickey B.:** Yeah.

[00:49:42.01]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay. Do you want to stop, end, and finish later?

[00:49:46.29]

**Mickey B.:** Yeah, if you would.

[00:49:47.12]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay.

[00:49:48.19]

**Mickey B.:** 'Cause I got—

*[Pause in recording]*

*[Recording resumes]*

[00:49:49.10]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay. We are back for the second half of the interview with Mickey Bakst.

[00:49:53.25]

**Mickey B.:** Mickey who?

[00:49:54.17]

**Annemarie A.:** Mickey Bakst.

[00:49:56.14]

**Mickey B.:** That's me. [Laughter] Oh, hi, everybody.

[00:50:00.17]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay. So, we were talkin' a little bit before we took a break about the kind of . . . your philosophy and your thoughts about how the industry has changed. I want to kind of get back to a ground level, and I want to ask you, describe for me—tell me a typical day for you, a work day at the Charleston Grill.

[00:50:23.08]

**Mickey B.:** It's not fair to talk about my typical day anymore because I have a very easy life, you know. I've done this a long time, and I don't work the way I used to work. So, typical day today is totally different than a typical day fifteen, twenty years ago, which is when I was in the height of the energy—which is normal. For me, I would get into work by ten o'clock in the morning, always. I'd go through the evenings' reservations, what do I need to know? What's going on? Who's coming? How do I place them, in what proper place? What special details do I need? I'd go through last night's reservations. One thing I've done my entire career is, I always call every day—I call a few customers from the night before. Whether I'm in the restaurant or not. To say, "Hi, this is Mickey Bakst. I'm the

general manager. I'm the owner. I wasn't there last night when you were there and I just want to know, how was your evening? And I want to thank you for coming." You know, that's part of my thing. Then you go through maintenance requirements; what's going on? You do a walk-through of your restaurant every day. Is there a spot on the carpet? Is there a stain on the bar? What's happening here? You also—you do that. Then, for some people, you have to do your daily books, which I don't do at this stage of life. But you do your daily books. And then you start planning the night for your staff, what's going to happen with the staff. Staff comes in, you've got a floor chart ready for them. You know where you want one person—in our case, we have cards printed up to, happy birthdays, happy anniversaries. We plan the floor as to where every guest is going to go. I then plan which servers are going to wait in each section, and then I give it to my staff to make happen. They set the dining room, they get everything ready. They stock the wine coolers, they stock all that they need to produce and function properly that evening. Then, at 4:15 every day, there's a line up. And a line up's done with Chef and myself over what the dishes are tonight, what vegetables have come in, what fish we're using, where's it from, what oysters, where they're from, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. We look at who has allergies, who's celebrating occasions, who do we need to make the kitchen aware of, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. And then, doors open. From that moment, it's, "Welcome back, my friends, to the show that never ends!" It's entertaining. It's greeting with a warm, open hand. It's greeting with a hug. It's leading them to their table with a flourish. It's making them feel like they've arrived. And then, it's business as usual.

[00:53:42.13]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great.

[00:53:43.13]

**Mickey B.:** That's it.

[00:53:44.14]

**Annemarie A.:** What's your favorite part of the job?

[00:53:46.03]

**Mickey B.:** The people. No ands, ifs, or buts. There's nothing greater than watching two people or four people laughing, having fun, interacting, and knowing that you've created an environment in which they're doing it at ease. It's fabulous. I love when there are people that don't get to come here very often, and they come in and they're wary because they don't know what to expect, and they're spending more money than they ever plan on expecting. I love making them go from a little bit wary, a little bit nervous, to totally in love, not with each other—just with each other—but with everything that's happening. That's the greatest.

[00:54:42.06]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. What are some challenges, or what's the biggest challenge that you face in your job?

[00:54:49.07]

**Mickey B.:** Mine? I have none. [Laughter] You're asking me—it really isn't. I think that, overall, from the front of the house, the challenge is always trying to properly read your guests' need. I am a very loud, gregarious, warm, huggy, but everybody doesn't go for that. I love to talk a little bit. Everybody doesn't want that. You have to be able—the challenge is to find the right balance with each table to give them the experience that they need. You know? The last thing you want is a table to say, "How come you spend more attention on that table?" They feel less then. I had a situation recently where I try to touch every customer in my restaurant every night, regardless of how many, and I didn't get to one table. And they walked out and they were truly disappointed, and looked at me and said, "Obviously, we were not important enough for you." I failed miserably, and it broke my heart. I literally drove home, just, "What the hell could I have done different?" So, it's learning in the front of the house what it is that the guests' expectations are for the experience they're about to have, and meeting those expectations. And then, if possible as you always hear, exceeding them.

[00:56:27.15]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. So, we've talked a little bit about Charleston, the restaurant industry as a whole has changed, but how have you seen—and we've kind of talked a little bit about the Charleston Grill—but how have you seen Charleston Grill change since you've been here?

[00:56:41.09]

**Mickey B.:** Well, there's no question. We started with a chef that's different from today. The room was darker. The room was not as colorful. The music was very drab. The food was very heavy. We had to—and we were losing. When I got here, if we had twelve regulars, it was a big deal. Our clientele was much older. We had to consciously make decisions in every aspect, from the look of the room, changing. We got rid of green marble floors. We got rid of dark furniture. We got rid of black and white pictures. We got rid of dark walls. We got rid of shutters. It was about, how do you bring light to warm up a situation? When I came here, the service staff had been trained to be ultra-formal, moving at the pace of snails. Nobody smiling. No energy. No electricity. I had to literally get rid of most of the staff because they didn't want to adapt. You have to find people that have a passion for making magic. That's hard. It's not everybody. There's tons of servers, but there's people who go to work just to go to work, as with any profession. Then there's people who come to work for the magic of really creating something, and then the money just happens to be the positive benefit of that.

[00:58:15.26]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Can you tell me about, what do you look—I think I probably know the answer to this—but, what do you look for when you are looking to hire somebody to be a server?

[00:58:26.17]

**Mickey B.:** How do they make me feel? Honestly. Do I feel at ease, do I feel comfortable, do I want to hear more of what they have to say? Is their smile sincere? Do they hold my hand

in a proper handshake? There's so much. We make—hospitality is really . . . very simple. It really is. It's the right eye contact. It's the right smile. How many servers have you been served by that they don't even look at you? They just are not—they get the order and they run. It's the right handshake, it's the right smile, like I said. It's looking at you. It's the warmth in their voice. It's the suggestions they make. I hope I answered your question.

[00:59:23.22]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, could you tell me a little bit, too—so, I can tell by, we've been talking about the number of people or number of restaurants that have opened here, but what is it like to work in a place where the restaurant industry is really tied to the tourism industry? How does that affect your job?

[00:59:49.07]

**Mickey B.:** Honestly, it really doesn't. For me . . . for me, all that matters is the people who walk in the room. You know? There are times—well, I guess maybe it does, in a little way. I value repeat guests and I value relationships very much. So, the tourism industry, it's tough with a lot of people, 'cause they come once, they have an experience, "This was better than anything I've done, we loved it," but they can't come back. So, that's a negative. But we still nourish so many locals that that gets filled in, and the tourists are icing on my cake.

[01:00:35.27]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, could you tell me a little bit about some of those regulars?

About—you don't have to mention them by name, but if there's anybody who sticks out that you could talk about?

[01:00:46.08]

**Mickey B.:** Yeah. We've got people who've become part of the family. I mean, that's just what it's all about. They come in, they bring gifts on birthdays, they send cards when people are sick, they're here to celebrate all of their occasions, they stop by just to say hello. I mean, we've got quite a lot of regular people who are literally part of my extended family. It's always been that way in my career. I told you earlier on, I'm going back to Michigan, we're doing a tribute. Well, we were putting a mail list together—now, I left Tribute—I left Tapawingo, I'm sorry, Tapawingo in what, [19]92 or [19]93? Twenty-five years ago? We put a list together of customers from twenty-five years ago I sought out on the phone. I swear to you, I said, "Hello, Marilyn, this is—" And they go, "Oh, my God, Mickey? Tapawingo?" They're coming to this event, and not just one. A dozen of them are coming to this event. We, in this business—the world I live in—create relationships. We use the tools of food. We use the tools of music. We use the tools of ambiance to create the hospitable experience that creates the relationship. But ultimately, we're just creating relationships. And I'm so excited to see some—I have not seen—there was a great, nationally-known artist, a jazz musician. He actually wrote a song about our restaurant, Tapawingo. I haven't seen him in . . . maybe thirty years. And I tracked him down and found him. He's changing his schedule. This guy travels the globe playing

piano. He's accomplished—he's changing his schedule so he can come back for this tribute and reunion. That's what we are supposed to do.

[01:03:08.25]

**Annemarie A.:** That's really nice.

[01:03:10.07]

**Mickey B.:** It really is nice.

[01:03:11.21]

**Annemarie A.:** That's good. Well, tell me a little bit, too, about the way that you—because, I mean, you're a part of this city. So, in what ways has this restaurant, Charleston Grill, and you as a person involved in hospitality in Charleston, how have you become a part of the community and given back?

[01:03:33.16]

**Mickey B.:** Are you asking 'cause you know of things that I've done?

[01:03:37.02]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, I do, because I'm curious, because I think that's a part of hospitality.

[01:03:43.26]

**Mickey B.:** There's no question about it. I have—I told you that, even as a kid, I was taught to do for others. That's just the way my family and . . . you know. I've always believed that your restaurant is part of your community, and that you are stronger as a whole. You know? There are restauranteurs who don't give a shit about going out. I've been opposite. I believe in ingratiating—or integrating is the right word—ourselves with our community. I've done that through a number of ways, with the support of the hotel. The first big thing was, in [20]05, Katrina struck. I'd only been here six months, seven months, but we raised—we put together an event here that raised a half a million dollars. I got fifty restaurants to be part of it. So, I have been very instrumental in creating events that help our community, but also incorporate the whole restaurant community. I believe in that. We had nine firefighters die here. Overnight, we put together an event that raised six hundred thousand dollars. The Emmanuel Nine shooting happened. In eight days, I got fifty-two restaurants, twenty-two beverage producers, two orchestras, two hundred auction items, and fifteen hundred people, and we raised six hundred and seventy thousand dollars to give to the family. None of that is me. I am the guy that pushes the ball and, okay, I take credit for that, but they're all community efforts. I believe wholeheartedly that we are integrated with our community and we need to be part of our community, and for me, that's singularly as important as the relationships with my guests. We created with—I say we—but I created an organization called Feed the Need. You may know of it. A shelter had to close down one day a week, and in two days, I got fifty-two restaurants to agree to do one day a week lunch service in this shelter. Now, it's ten years later. We organized, I think last year it was eighty-six separate servings of four to five hundred people, and we raised, last year, I think seven hundred and fifty thousand

dollars to give to the community. That's my baby, that's what I choose to do, but that's what we as a restaurant community—and I'm fortunate enough to be able to be somebody that can call on the strength of the whole community, and for some reason, they respond to me. It's really great. We're all part of this. You know, I told you at one point, we is the most—I'm not a God guy, I'm a we guy. I can't see God, touch God, feel God, but I can touch you, see you, feel you, and I know that you and me together can do more than I can do on my own. That's my relationship with the community.

[01:07:41.19]

**Annemarie A.:** That's really great. That sometimes takes a lot for a person to understand and realize about themselves.

[01:07:50.26]

**Mickey B.:** Okay. I'll take you for that. [Laughter]

[01:07:54.21]

**Annemarie A.:** No, I think that that's nice. Well, tell me a little bit about . . .

[01:08:01.27]

**Mickey B.:** Who else are you doing in hospitality in this city?

[01:08:04.18]

**Annemarie A.:** I'm workin' on it.

[01:08:06.23]

**Mickey B.:** Who else are you gonna do?

[01:08:06.28]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, I have five people right now.

[01:08:10.23]

**Mickey B.:** Like who?

*[Pause in recording]*

*[Recording resumes]*

[01:08:11.15]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay. Well, okay, so my second—my next question, and this is tape three, but my next question, we've talked about this, what do you think is the difference between service and hospitality? Because I think there's a distinction.

[01:08:27.05]

**Mickey B.:** Oh, there's a real simple. Service is the act of doing it, hospitality is the heart in which you do it with. It's really simple. I can train a monkey to put a fork on the left, a knife on the right, and your wine glass up front. It's— that's easy. That's service. Service is bringing the piece of bread, service is pouring the water. What is hospitality is the emotion in which you do it with, the heart in which you do it with. We've talked about

experiences already. You go to a place where they do all the things right, but there's no warmth. There's no friendliness. There's no heart, you know? That's not hospitality; that's service. You go to the same place and somebody's—it goes back to that old thing, the *Cheers* thing I said, you go in and somebody greets you. You know, I'm terrible. My wife grabs me at times. If I go into a restaurant and somebody doesn't greet me within thirty seconds, I want to leave. And then, if I grab—go into a restaurant and somebody looks up and just sort of, "Ah, what do you want? How can I help you?" Without a smile, without stepping out, without warmth, I want to leave. You go to a retail store and you buy a dress, it's an important dress, you walk into the store, nobody says hello. You're looking on the racks, nobody really helps you. You finally find something, you go to the front desk, the person says, "Did you find everything you need?" You say, "Yes." Okay, "It'll be \$29.95." You go into a store and the door opens up and somebody says, "Hello, welcome to—wherever. What can I help you with today?" "I need a dress." "Oh, my gosh. Look, I've got so many. Wow, wouldn't this look beautiful on you?" You go in the dressing room and they bring something, they say, "Hey, try this with it. I think it'd be great." You go to the counter and they say, "Do you need anything else? Can I get you anything?" Where are you goin' back to? One is service, they rang you up, they bagged it up and said good-bye. The other is hospitality; they gave a shit. That's it.

[01:10:55.11]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. That's great. Let's see . . . I'm not sure. Well, over the forty-five plus years—

[01:11:06.26]

**Mickey B.:** People, she's pointing this thing, it looks like a gun at me. [Laughter] Stop! No!

[01:11:14.01]

**Annemarie A.:** So, over the forty-five years you've worked, what are the biggest lessons you've learned?

[01:11:20.09]

**Mickey B.:** [Laughter] I'm a simple guy. That's a great question. I don't know what the biggest lessons I've learned . . . to be honest, to believe in what you do, to work at taking what you do and making it work for other people. I don't know, you know? I've just lived. There's an old song that says you can live in books and you can live in stories, or you can live and leave the stories behind. I've just lived. I don't know what I've learned. I've learned that I love to make people happy. I've learned that if I treat people well, my world is better. I learned that what goes around comes around, and in most cases, even though you get thrown a hard ball that hits you in the head, I've learned that I love life and I love people.

[01:12:21.21]

**Annemarie A.:** Those are good takeaways.

[01:12:25.08]

**Mickey B.:** Not that bright. I get a lot more credit than I think I deserve. It's all right; I'll take it.

[01:12:33.08]

**Annemarie A.:** So, you were tellin' me—I think it's kinda interesting, and I'm just interested in identity and the way people, especially this entrenched idea of insider and outsider in the South, and identifying as a non-Southerner when if you . . . choose to live here, you're a Southerner, right? Could you tell me a little bit about why you choose to identify that after you've lived here for fifteen years?

[01:13:04.09]

**Mickey B.:** Why I choose to identify what?

[01:13:08.02]

**Annemarie A.:** To say you're a non-Southerner.

[01:13:12.00]

**Mickey B.:** I didn't say I'm a non-Southerner. I happen to live in the South. That's it, you know? If I lived in the North, I live in the North. If I live in the West—to me, it's no big deal either which way. What I said was, in regards to hospitality, what I said was there's this thing they always say about how spectacular Southern hospitality is and I don't buy it. I mean, hospitality is hospitality wherever it is. Go to Japan and learn hospitality. I mean, they wash your feet. [Laughter] You know? So, I have never . . . I remember one kid, one guy, an older guy, a customer, pointing his finger in my nose and telling me, "You listen here, boy, this is how we do it in the South, and you'll never make it here." My

thought was, "Fuck you. I'll be just fine." I've always been fine. I don't identify as a Southerner. I live in the South, that's it. I don't identify, because I come from Detroit, as a Northerner. I happen to live in the North. I lived in California for eight years. So, I don't know that I'd put—I don't have a regional, a regional loyalty, you know? I'm an American. I think my country's fucked up right now, I don't care what perspective you take it from, but I'm still an American and I'm proud to be that. But that's about it.

[01:14:47.03]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. I don't have any more questions for you.

[01:14:49.25]

**Mickey B.:** I don't either.

[01:14:51.07]

**Annemarie A.:** Do you have anything you want to say that we haven't talked about?

[01:14:55.01]

**Mickey B.:** No. I want to say, other than the fact that, for all of these years, I am thrilled to see the S.F.A. finally looking at what truly makes . . . restaurants great, and that's good hospitality. You know? I mean, we give praise and the organization's given praise to countless people that cook okay food in environments that don't really do much for you. And now, they're looking at what creates that special thing, and I'm really proud of that.

I'm thrilled with that. And John T., if you're listening to this, yes, kid, finally! Let's go on the road and look for service! [Laughter]

[01:15:44.16]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, thank you for that.

[01:15:44.27]

**Mickey B.:** I couldn't care if we eat hot dogs together. Let's just look for service.

[01:15:51.27]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, thanks so much for talkin' to me. I really appreciate it.

[01:15:54:00]

**Mickey B.:** [Raises water glass] To you.

[01:15:54:20]

**Annemarie A.:** Thanks.

[*End of interview*]