



Benjamin Lyons
New Orleans, Louisiana

Date: June 5, 2019
Location: Loyola University New Orleans, New Orleans, LA
Interviewer: Justin Nystrom
Length: Two hours and four minutes
Project: Career Servers

[*START OF INTERVIEW*]

[00:00:01.09]

Justin N.: Yeah, we're recording here. We're recording one and two. The University of Mississippi wants me to record a noise print so that—we're not transcribing this part—so, I'm gonna give them thirty seconds of a noise print. I lied, I'm giving them twenty seconds of a noise print.

[00:00:40.22]

Benjamin L.: That should do it.

[00:00:40.22]

Justin N.: Yeah. If they can't get a noise print in twenty seconds, that's all—so today is June 5, 2019. My name is Justin Nystrom. I am here with Benjamin Lyons as part of the Southern Foodways Alliance Longtime Servers Oral History Project. We're recording this interview at Loyola University New Orleans. It is overcast and drizzling. So, Benjamin, thank you very much.

[00:01:09.10]

Benjamin L.: It's my pleasure.

[00:01:09.10]

Justin N.: Now, a little bit about Benjamin before we start. He's worked as a professional waiter since 1984.

[00:01:15.16]

Benjamin L.: Well, actually, since probably about 1980, but in New Orleans since 1984.

[00:01:19.01]

Justin N.: In New Orleans since 1984, and he is also the owner of a record company called Valid Records with the great tagline, "Valid Where Prohibited." Again, thank you for joining us.

[00:01:33.06]

Benjamin L.: Oh, welcome.

[00:01:34.00]

Justin N.: Well, when I do interviews, I tend to begin at the beginning. So, I'd like to know a little bit more about you as a person. Could you tell me a little bit where you were born and where you grew up, your family?

[00:01:45.04]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. I was born in . . . Lower Marion Township, just outside of Philadelphia. My father was at Haverford University, and then shortly thereafter, he moved to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where he was on the faculty of Franklin & Marshall College. And I grew up in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

[00:02:07.21]

Justin N.: Okay. And so growing up in a little town like that, what were the sort of things you did as a kid?

[00:02:13.11]

Benjamin L.: Well, a lot of our social life was—being a small liberal arts college was built around other faculty brats. Those were most of my friends, though also I played a lot of sports. I played soccer and tennis, and I was always very interested in music, as well.

[00:02:30.27]

Justin N.: Um-hm, yeah. Music that obviously became a little bit more of a . . .

[00:02:34.01]

Benjamin L.: Yeah.

[00:02:34.01]

Justin N.: A passion later on, huh?

[00:02:36.10]

Benjamin L.: Um-hm.

[00:02:36.10]

Justin N.: And so, then you went off to college?

[00:02:38.14]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. I went to Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, and after that I sort of floated around and ended up in New Orleans.

[00:02:47.12]

Justin N.: So, what was your major?

[00:02:49.13]

Benjamin L.: American Studies. A minor or concentration in film. Also worked in—did research on, monograph on rock and roll music, as well.

[00:03:01.25]

Justin N.: Great, great. Interestingly enough, food and music brought you to New Orleans, I'm guessing?

[00:03:06.03]

Benjamin L.: Well, more music than food. [Laughter]

[00:03:08.13]

Justin N.: Tell me a little about—anyone who lives here who wasn't born here has a coming to New Orleans story.

[00:03:13.02]

Benjamin L.: Well, I think I first came here in 1981. I had just traveled around the country by Greyhound bus, and I didn't really know that much about New Orleans. I wasn't here very long; didn't really discover much about it. I think . . . and then I sort of bounced around, a little bit aimlessly, for a year or two, doing this and that. And my brother and I, think we saw a Les Blank documentary about—probably "Always for Pleasure," I think it was called, and that really perked our interest in New Orleans. And also, I had heard about the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, so we made it here in 1983 to that. After a bit of deliberation, I decided to move here in 1984 in the spring. So, Jazz Fest, interestingly enough, had a really big influence on me moving here. Since then, I've become quite critical of Jazz Fest.

[00:04:10.19]

Justin N.: Interesting. Well, we'll circle back to that.

[00:04:13.05]

Benjamin L.: Yeah.

[00:04:13.05]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah, 'cause Jazz Fest is an important thing in the service industry.

[00:04:15.12]

Benjamin L.: Yes. Yes, it is.

[00:04:17.04]

Justin N.: Great. So, you came here, were you planning on staying?

[00:04:22.01]

Benjamin L.: No. I don't think I—I don't think I've ever really had any real life plan, and it just .

. . my first job here was, actually, I was here briefly in the fall of 1983, and I worked on Bourbon Street. Place called, I think it's the 711 Club or 719 Club Bourbon Street, and it was a courtyard restaurant. All you could eat shrimp, \$7.95. Total tourist clip joint. In the front, during Al Broussard, this very old, African American, barrelhouse piano player played. Al knew about one or two songs, and he would get drunk and play them all night long. There was also an upstairs bar where this guy, Randy Hebert, sort of a one-man band guitar player, would play as well. That was my introduction to a lot of things in New Orleans and the weird subculture of Bourbon Street, which kind of exists on and on—especially back then, because the tourist business was really concentrated on Bourbon Street. It really was like a whole mainstream tourist industry was just concentrated on Bourbon Street and everything else outside, even in the French Quarter, Decatur Street was a street for locals back then.

[00:05:33.23]

Justin N.: Yeah.

[00:05:33.23]

Benjamin L.: So, it was an eye-opening experience. Not particularly pleasant. [Laughter]

[00:05:40.11]

Justin N.: What stands out in your mind as . . .

[00:05:44.09]

Benjamin L.: Several things stand out in mind. We had one employee who grew up in the French Quarter—Quarter rat, as people, he would call himself. When business was slow, he would go out on the street with a stack of menus, and he'd pull people in off the street. And he'd fill up the the restaurant, the courtyard, in no time at all. These people were like sheep. A lot of people were there, had already eaten lunch, but they don't even know why they were brought—they just sort of followed directions, and there they were. The other thing that stuck in my mind was how many people would just come up with sob stories about how they lost their wallet, or other times I would go into the kitchen and I would come back out, and the table would be gone. I ask where they went, and someone says, "Oh, they climbed over the back wall of the courtyard." It was . . . you know, it's kind of lowest common denominator of Bourbon Street. [Laughter] That was thirty-five years ago. It's gotten a lot worse then, I think, in a lot of ways.

[00:06:33.13]

Justin N.: Oh, wow. Wow, yeah. That's—that had to be an eye-opener, especially coming from Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

[00:06:38.02]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. I worked—my first restaurant job was a summer job in Lancaster, where I guess is now a genre of a corner tavern that had been re-imagined as a bistro. You know? That was kind of a new thing back in the late [19]70s, and that was my introduction to the restaurant business.

[00:06:57.19]

Justin N.: So, you get here in the 1984—

[00:06:58.19]

Benjamin L.: Primarily, yeah.

[00:07:01.11]

Justin N.: There's a lot going on in New Orleans.

[00:07:02.20]

Benjamin L.: Just at the beginning, World's Fair was about to open. I remember I got a job in Mr. B's Bistro. I was a back waiter for a month and then they promoted me to waiter, and I remember the World's Fair was starting and they said, "Oh, you're gonna have to wear roller skates, it's gonna be so busy." Didn't really turn out that well, but the World's Fair was great for locals or anybody who lived here, 'cause you could buy—after it turned out it wasn't going to be a great success, they made a year . . . pass for the whole length of the festival for, I think, a hundred dollars. Just come and go as you want. That's where I

really got introduced to a lot of—I knew about New Orleans music, but I really got introduced to a lot of great musicians there, because everybody played there. It was really wonderful.

[00:07:47.28]

Justin N.: A lot of locals have that similar story about the World's Fair.

[00:07:48.22]

Benjamin L.: Yeah, I mean, as a World's Fair it probably sucked. [Laughter] You know. As a New Orleans experience, it was really nice.

[00:07:56.08]

Justin N.: Yeah. Its initial mission had kinda run its course, probably thirty years earlier.

[00:08:00.05]

Benjamin L.: Yeah, but that's very New Orleans, isn't it? [Laughter]

[00:08:03.21]

Justin N.: True.

[00:08:05.03]

Benjamin L.: So, Mr. B's was, of course, a Brennan's restaurant at the time.

[00:08:08.11]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. Still is.

[00:08:08.17]

Justin N.: The structure of Brennan's was a little bit different in 1984 than it is—who was it owned by?

[00:08:15.18]

Benjamin L.: It was owned by, well, certainly the part of the family that owned Commander's Palace, and I don't know the total ownership, but it was run by brothers Ralph and Cindy Brennan. Cindy still runs it, and Ralph has gone on to form his own restaurant group. I think the whole older generation were really part of the ownership group, including Ella Brennan, who of course is famous for Commander's Palace. Ralph's father who was John, who made his money in the . . . French fry, frozen French fry potato business, oddly enough. Ralph had been in a—didn't really want to be part of the restaurant business, and he became an accountant. He was in New York City, and what happened with Mr. B's is—as I understand it—they opened in the late [19]70s as a response to . . . essentially, Houlihan's was opened up on Bourbon Street. That was a time when . . . casual . . . restaurants were just becoming a thing. You know, you had either fine dining or you had ethnic or neighborhood restaurants. This sort of new middle ground was opening up, and I think that Brennan's didn't want to be left behind. They really modeled Mr. B's, at first, on that. They didn't have white tablecloths; it was a little more casual. They had this kind of a bar scene going on there. I believe Paul Prudhomme was the chef, I believe, when

they opened, who's at Commander's as well. They were very successful for a little while, and then, as the fad passed or, I think, people came to expect from the Brennans a higher level of service—so, when I came to Mr. B's, they had transformed into more like it is now, with white tablecloths, sort of higher service standards. When I started, we had a very good maître d', or general manager, Evan, who really emphasized professionalism. I really remember that about him. I learned an awful lot there, and also from Viva, who was the manager, who had a long career working in restaurants. She was one of the first female . . . females to work at Commander's Palace. She had worked in Vegas in the lounge where Elvis—she knew Elvis. [Laughter] She worked in the lounge where Elvis worked when she was out in Vegas. She was a good New Orleans French Quarter girl, and . . .

[00:10:36.11]

Justin N.: So, the 1980s in the Quarter, Mr. B's—very different from it is now, right?

[00:10:41.12]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. I mean, I really haven't been back. I've been in there once since 1992—when I was fired, which we can talk about, for interesting reasons. And it's—back then, it was sort of in its ascendancy. The Brennans were very good at getting press. Our business was going up year after year. We were always in one of the top ten restaurants in New Orleans. We had a great chef, Gerard Maras, who's trained so many of the chefs who now operate in New Orleans or did at least in the [19]90s. Back then, it was sort of cutting edge. The Brennans are very smart about how to transform from cutting edge,

how to get all the publicity. They don't see that as an end in itself. They want to make something that's sustainable, and it sort of reached its niche and fits in its place, and just makin' money out of it, I assume.

[00:11:36.24]

Justin N.: So, what kind of customers were you getting at Mr. B's?

[00:11:37.29]

Benjamin L.: Mr. B's, we had local businessmen . . . mostly at lunch, but the Brennans were very, very good at recognizing and encouraging them and coddling them coming in for dinner, because we wanted to get more dinner lists. And then it was convention business. And that's when, in the [19]80s, the convention business was really taking off in New Orleans. Like anybody in the French Quarter, a lot of our business was based around conventions and knowing what convention was in town and how much business it was. But solid lunch business with the New Orleans business establishment.

[00:12:13.06]

Justin N.: So here you are, a young man from Pennsylvania . . . kind of an ambassador to New Orleans food at a . . . institution.

[00:12:21.07]

Benjamin L.: Yes, institution. And it was at a time that the New Orleans food was not really known as the New Orleans food. It was the Cajun food craze. So, on the one hand, we

were operating as a New American bistro . . . what was it, the New American Cafe in New York on the Brooklyn side? I forgot the chef's name. He was sort of a model for what they were doing. And our wine list was all American, or all Californian, which was really . . . for a higher-end restaurant, that was unique at the time. But on the other hand, a lot of our customers would come in expecting Cajun food, and then you'd have to decide sort of whether to be pedantic—which I think I was more pedantic back in those days, at least—I may be more pedantic now, but my presentation is less so to the customer. I would start explaining the differences between Creole and Cajun and this and that. I remember one instance this very . . . L.A., Los Angeles matron came in and just said, "Tell me, young man, what is a good Cajun drink?" And I couldn't resist. I said, "Well, every good Cajun I know drinks Miller Lite." But she was expecting some kind of—like there'd be some kind of spicy. Everything had to be spicy or blackened because Paul Prudhomme had just achieved such great fame at his restaurant.

[00:13:32.27]

Justin N.: Yeah.

[00:13:34.02]

Benjamin L.: Probably around [19]82 or [19]83, he was really hit big. That was the model.

[00:13:38.01]

Justin N.: Yeah, you weren't so far away from K-Paul's.

[00:13:40.04]

Benjamin L.: No, about four blocks. Four or five blocks, yeah.

[00:13:43.17]

Justin N.: Interesting. So, you worked there a fairly long time.

[00:13:46.23]

Benjamin L.: Yeah, I worked there from 1984 to 1992. It was . . . it was diverse clientele, a little more cosmopolitan. Waited on a lot of movie stars, T.V. stars, sports stars, politicians. New Orleans uptown gentry, occasionally; certainly at lunchtime in their business mode. And the occasional French Quarter character and mobster. You know, New Orleans was more colorful back then. At least, it certainly seemed that way to me. Yeah.

[00:14:18.13]

Justin N.: So, this is a period of time when, of course, the oil business is really startin' to drain out the bottom of the tub.

[00:14:24.20]

Benjamin L.: Right. It really drained . . . I think between, I guess, 1983 it might have been maybe when it really started the—but certainly [19]84, [19]85 was probably a very dark time for New Orleans. I think we lost thirty-five, forty thousand white collar jobs in the oil industry, which is tremendous. But the convention business was taking off, and we were very successful.

[00:14:53.08]

Justin N.: So, you didn't feel that so much at Mr. B's?

[00:14:53.08]

Benjamin L.: No, no. We stayed busy. We were even busy in the summer, you know? I

remember my boss, one of my managers, walkin' around checkin' things out. Like, "Man, we're doing two hundred people and there's seven people in Arnaud's." Or something like that.

[00:15:04.03]

Justin N.: Wow, that's tremendous.

[00:15:06.18]

Benjamin L.: Yeah.

[00:15:06.18]

Justin N.: 'Cause there was a time, once upon a time in New Orleans, where you came in August and everything was empty.

[00:15:09.07]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. I mean, certainly, it slowed down but we would fill up with summertime conventions—which weren't always the best, because they were lower-rent, teachers . . .

[Laughter]

[00:15:21.19]

Justin N.: No offense taken.

[00:15:21.19]

Benjamin L.: Academic conventions are usually in the interim between Christmas and the New Year, but . . .

[00:15:27.22]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah.

[00:15:29.16]

Benjamin L.: I won't talk about academics as customers. [Laughter]

[00:15:32.09]

Justin N.: I've stayed at some pretty seedy hotels as part of academic conferences, so you're not offending me. You said you came to part ways in 1992 with Mr. B's.

[00:15:43.27]

Benjamin L.: Um-hm.

[00:15:43.27]

Justin N.: Do you want to tell me a little bit . . . ?

[00:15:43.27]

Benjamin L.: Sure. Ralph Brennan instituted a drug testing policy, and everyone who worked there was very adamant and offended by this—as I am, not so much a drug user, which I'm not, but someone who advocates for worker's rights. And I thought at the time, it was 'cause Ralph had just become the president of the National Restaurant Association . . . and I since found out that's not the case. It had more to do with the fact that someone—we had health insurance, and someone that had worked there, was hired, waited exactly six months till he went on the health insurance plan, and it was a good plan, and he checked himself into some rehab center or something and it was very expensive. The Brennans's insurance was self-insured up to, I don't know, a million dollars or something like that, so they paid for it out of pocket. Ralph was incensed by this. [Laughter]

Anyway, so we had a number of meetings and this and that. It was a very—in a sense—very Ralph Brennan-like, progressive or business-oriented plan. It wasn't just "you're tested, and you're out." If you tested positive, you'd have to go through some counseling program. And I remember someone at a meeting said, "Well, what is the nature of this counseling?" Let's say you go to your high school reunion and smoke a joint and then get caught in the urine test, it's very different than if you're a cocaine addict. They didn't want to hear anything about that. Anyway, I was just offended by the whole structure of the thing. The plan was that they would drug test new hires, which I believe a lot of Brennan

restaurants still do, and then they would also . . . test five people a month randomly. So, the first month, my name randomly came up, and I thought that was a little curious. I told Randy, the manager—Randy Stein, who's still there—that I wasn't gonna take the drug test. He sort of stuttered, and, "Well, buh buh buh," and he didn't know what to do. Ralph was out of town. I told him, "Randy, be a man, do what you have to do. I'm not takin' your test." Eventually, they said I was fired, and that was that.

[00:18:08.02]

Justin N.: Were . . . this was, of course, late [19]80s, early [19]90s. Were drugs pretty rampant in that restaurant?

[00:18:17.14]

Benjamin L.: I don't think it was, no. It wasn't any more rampant there; in fact, probably less rampant than . . . well, I'm not gonna name any names, but . . . there's certain restaurants that are prominent where cocaine was pretty much the currency and the reason for . . . peoples' jobs, essentially. Those are pretty well-known stories, I think, on the inside, but we'll leave that be. No . . . but certainly, drugs and alcohol are always big in the restaurant business. But I don't think it was . . . and also very big, marijuana use has always been very big in the African American community in New Orleans, and Mr. B's did have a very big African American—it does—workforce. Some of the people who got caught up in the drug test, I remember one guy—I'd heard the story afterwards—this kid who'd been hired as a back waiter and then became a barback, and he was trained and became a bartender . . . to give the Brennans credit, they really helped people move up

who didn't have, maybe, originally come with the life experiences that immediately made them able to be a strong waiter or bartender, they would invest time and effort and education in people. You know, it was a good, solid job to have. So, this guy, he smoked a joint or something and he got busted in their drug test, and he had to go to rehab, and then at the Christmas party—which, they'd have a Christmas party—the manager saw him drinking a beer, which was a violation of his . . . treatment protocol, and had him fired. The bar manager went ballistic, saying, "This is a guy I invested a lot of time, and I like this guy, he was good, and you're drinkin' a beer! This is ridiculous!" And now they don't, eventually canceled the whole program. They might, I don't think—I don't know if Mr. B's, 'cause Cindy Brennan now runs it—I don't know if they drug test, but they don't drug test their current employees anymore.

[00:20:22.26]

Justin N.: And actually having health insurance now at a restaurant was fairly uncommon at the time—

[00:20:27.08]

Benjamin L.: No, I don't think so.

[00:20:29.02]

Justin N.: No?

[00:20:29.02]

Benjamin L.: It's probably more uncommon now.

[00:20:31.03]

Justin N.: Oh, really?

[00:20:31.05]

Benjamin L.: Because of Obamacare, especially for smaller restaurants. I'm sure the Brennans have healthcare. I had healthcare at Crêpe Nanou until Obamacare came in.

[00:20:41.12]

Justin N.: Interesting, interesting. Well, that is an interesting segue.

[00:20:44.22]

Benjamin L.: Yeah.

[00:20:44.22]

Justin N.: So, you moved to a . . . restaurant, A subtle shade of red, in uptown.

[00:20:53.06]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. I did some catering. I didn't want to work in a restaurant for a while, and then I did some catering gigs and worked here and there. I worked at the opening of Bacco, which is now where **Mondo** is on Harrison. And I worked a little bit—Gabrielle, which was then on Mystery Street. And . . . I just sort of did this and that. I did some

catering, and catering was another interesting experience, 'cause I worked both in some very uptown situations and Mardi Gras balls, and then I also worked for Food Art, which did have big corporate clients. Very ill-paid, very exploitative gig, because basically if you were a competent and conscientious person, you ended up doing all the work, but you certainly weren't paid any more than the bodies they would find just to fill up the rest of the space. So, I realized I needed to get back into the restaurant business, and I used to play soccer with this guy Nanou, and one day he called me up, said, "What are you doing tonight?" I said, "Nothing." He said, "Well, why don't you come to work?" So, I went to work at Crêpe Nanou and I was there for twenty-one years.

[00:21:58.23]

Justin N.: You're the second person I've talked about playing with soccer with Nanou.

[00:22:00.23]

Benjamin L.: Oh, really? Who was the other guy? [Laughter]

[00:22:01.18]

Justin N.: Yeah, a fellow at Mediterranean Tile over here. Yeah, he used to play soccer with him. So, you got this job at Crêpe Nanou. Could you describe Crêpe Nanou, at least at the time you got there?

[00:22:13.13]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. Crêpe Nanou is a neighborhood institution now. It was founded in 1983, like a number of restaurants uptown, like where I work, at Gautreau's and the Upperline, I believe, and it's just curious that all these restaurants started at around the same time. But it's a sort of cobbled together bistro, classic sort of—basically, sort of classic French recipes. I didn't realize how much so until I went to Paris and, like, "Ah! There we go. That's why we do the salads the way we do." Nothing fancy, meat and potatoes and mussels, essentially, and fish. You know? The business depends on having good French fries. It's a very nice, intimate environment. Great date night. For better or worse, I would say that I'm responsible for the social replication of uptown New Orleans for a number of people who met and bred from their getting together at Crêpe Nanou. [Laughter]

[00:23:12.04]

Justin N.: As a customer, for me, it was a place where if you had a long day at work, you ditched your dinner plans and you went out to Crêpe Nanou, had a bottle of wine—

[00:23:21.16]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. We didn't take reservations.

[00:23:23.13]

Justin N.: Yeah.

[00:23:24.25]

Benjamin L.: The interesting thing is seeing the same customers, because it's so integral to the uptown community. Seeing so many of the same customers at Crêpe Nanou, this very casual kind of place, as I do at a much more formal restaurant, Gautreau's, where I work now and seeing them in a totally different context . . . And having seen some of the same people at Crêpe Nanou, I mean, Mr. B's Bistro in the [19]80s, I've waited on some people for the whole thirty-five years that I've been in New Orleans.

[00:23:55.12]

Justin N.: Well, we've talked about how small New Orleans can be.

[00:23:59.15]

Benjamin L.: Yes.

[00:24:00.26]

Justin N.: So, you get to Crêpe Nanou and you learn this very sort of French canon, bistro-type menu. You talk about some of your customers. I want to talk a little bit about—so, what kind of relationship did you have with Nanou?

[00:24:19.01]

Benjamin L.: Ah . . . [Laughter] I knew him, like many restaurant owners, as an eccentric person. Somewhat fiery at times. He wasn't there very much. He . . . like any restaurant owner, the way restaurant owners express their ownership is to stand in the way of the people who are working there, and he fulfilled that role. He was also responsible for the

general design. He's kind of a design genius, and execution . . . execution, I think he learned the sort of immigrant's rule: it's better to beg forgiveness than ask permission. You know? A lot of things were done in very weird ways, and when later, the growth of the restaurant became that they had to become more routinized—I'm talking about the physical plant—that led to some severe problems as far as codes and things like that. But that was part of the charm. You can see Nanou created Cafe Degas, which was Crêpe Nanou II. I'll give him a lot of credit, who else could take this very irregular, triangular, small-shaped plot and build a restaurant with a tree growing up through the middle of it? Certain design genius.

[00:25:32.29]

Justin N.: Which is fabulous to do that.

[00:25:34.15]

Benjamin L.: Yeah, yeah.

[00:25:34.26]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:25:37.01]

Benjamin L.: The secret to success at Crêpe Nanou back then was this Vietnamese crew that he had in the kitchen who are incredibly hardworking. The best kitchen crew I've ever seen, as far as their work ethic. It was just incredible. I think that gave a kind of a model for

anybody who worked there, really, because you see these guys totally busting ass and they wouldn't accept anybody else slacking off, either.

[00:25:58.05]

Justin N.: Now, have you read any of these chef memoirs like Gabrielle Hamilton's or Tony Bourdain?

[00:26:04.16]

Benjamin L.: No. I mean, I've seen Bourdain's show, but I've never read his book.

[00:26:06.05]

Justin N.: So, the chefs in the back of the house have really stolen a march on the front of the house in terms of getting media out there.

[00:26:15.02]

Benjamin L.: Totally, totally. I like to say that, even when I started, you knew a restaurant for its maître d'. And of course, in the old school New Orleans world, Antoine's— especially Galatoire's, the waiter was the person that you went to. The press is totally moved totally to the back of the house, and the back of the house—kind of like where I work now at Gautreau's, I feel like the back of the house, sometimes we work from the back of the house to the front, which is obviously the opposite way that I think it should work.

[00:26:50.16]

Justin N.: So, tell me a little bit about that. Tell me the front of the house perspective of what's going on in the back of the house.

[00:26:57.05]

Benjamin L.: Well, I mean, the reality of the restaurant business—which is, everybody, the restauranters try to obscure it and a lot of waiters don't understand it—is that basically, it's a sales position. We're paid two dollars an hour, maybe at hotels or a few restaurants—I mean, I've been doing this for forty years. I've never gotten a raise. The only time I've ever gotten a raise in my dollarly rate is when the tipped minimum wage goes up, which has probably been twenty-five years since that happened. And I'm sure it won't ever happen again. So . . . we're not really paid by the restaurateur, we're paid by the customer on a commission, non-negotiable commission. They totally decide the commission. Custom sets it around twenty percent. So, we're . . . the obligation that the restaurateur has to the waiter is extreme. They have to provide a product for us to sell and environment for us to sell it, and customers for us to sell to. They really don't like this when you point this out to them, because they don't want—they want to feel like they're in a traditional employee relationship to you. So, the back of the house—my view of the back of the house—is they're someone contracted by the owner of the restaurant to provide me with a product to sell. They see themselves, and especially the chefs like to see themselves, as the sole reason for the restaurant. I think—I know—that restaurants are really much more about the social dynamic than they are about the food. Food is what gets written about; food is your calling card; food is what the . . . we don't call them restaurant critics, for the most part, we call them food critics. They can write a whole

article in the newspaper and all their rankings are all based on their perception of the creativity of the food, and they really miss the whole essence of the restaurant, which is what's going to create the experience for the customer or why the customer might come back. So, that's my take on the—food has to fit in within the context of the whole zeitgeist, the *mis en scene* of the experience, and it's not the *raison d'etre*. It's not the . . . people, certain . . . few select members of the customer base maybe, but in the end, no. That's not why people come back.

[00:29:07.21]

Justin N.: That's interesting, because it's almost become like cultish.

[00:29:12.06]

Benjamin L.: Oh, yeah. I mean, there are foodies. I think that it's beginning to—the foodie trend is beginning to diminish a little bit. I think, in my experience, it just . . . the number of people taking photographs of their food as soon as they're served, thank goodness, is beginning to diminish.

[00:29:29.00]

Justin N.: I was gonna ask you about that.

[00:29:29.04]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. I remember a few years ago, some guy came in—and they were not . . . not to the manor born, they were just fine, middle-class people from out of town. Some

reason, I had a hunch I could get away with this, 'cause the guy said to me, "Suppose I were to tell you, as soon as I left the restaurant, I'm gonna write a Yelp! review. What do you suggest?" I just looked at him. I waited a beat. And I gestured to the door, and I said, "I suggest you leave right now." And I smiled and he laughed, and that was all cool. But I think he got the point.

[00:30:00.11]

Justin N.: Yeah, I wanted to ask you a little bit about the Yelp! review. You've read, certainly, Yelp! reviews, right?

[00:30:05.20]

Benjamin L.: A few, yes. My classic is someone who goes to a Vietnamese restaurant and writes, "My girlfriend dragged me here and I hate Vietnamese food, so it sucked." I was like, okay, why do you feel the need to write a review? [Laughter] You know? I mean, who are you to write this review?

[00:30:21.17]

Justin N.: Yeah. Publish a book and read your Amazon reviews some time. So . . .

[00:30:25.21]

Benjamin L.: My brother's are mostly written by his cousin, I think. [Laughter]

[00:30:30.10]

Justin N.: Do you feel that there is a place, though, for Yelp!, a Yelp!er?

[00:30:37.23]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. I mean, I admit that if I'm trying to search out some place in a town, I've looked at reviews. You have to know how to read a review.

[00:30:50.22]

Justin N.: Right. It's critical evidence.

[00:30:52.18]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. You have to—is this person someone you can relate to? Or is he talking, going on tangents that have no bearing on experience? But in my family, we always have the narrative of . . . I always took this as sort of a very Jewish kind of way to look at the world, or their friends, "This restaurant's going downhill. We went there and it wasn't good." It's like, you can't really—how do you know what direction it's moving in? You went once, it was great. Once, something bad happened, it wasn't as good. That doesn't . . . that doesn't . . . that's not enough evidence for a trend line.

[00:31:29.05]

Justin N.: Is it like the old joke that Antoine's has been going downhill for seventy years?

[00:31:32.25]

Benjamin L.: Yeah, yeah. I mean, that's the way I feel about a lot of restaurant owners that I've worked for, is that some of their business practices are really peculiar and you might not think they're the greatest, but on the other hand, it's a very hard business. And if they're still open after x number of years, they must be doin' something right.

[00:31:49.20]

Justin N.: I guess one thing I was thinking about the Yelp! reviews is that often, when I read them, I see reflections on service. And I wondered if this gave an opportunity for diners to articulate what they thought was important when you're talking about the dining experience.

[00:32:05.15]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. I've just read a TripAdvisor review where I work. It didn't mention if it was a waiter or waitress, I'm the only male on the floor where I work. It didn't—so I didn't know if it was me or it could have been someone else, but it said that the service was more professional than friendly, and I might have preferred more friendly. That's an interesting data point. Everybody has different expectations, and it's always important—for me as a waiter—it's always been very important to know who I'm waiting on . . . my whole service style and my relationship to that depends on who I think they are, if I have the time to make those deliberations.

[00:32:48.07]

Justin N.: Yeah. You talked a little bit about—when we talked earlier—about how you have . . .
I don't want to say like a cadre of customers that are sort of long-term customers that you know—

[00:33:00.24]

Benjamin L.: Yeah.

[00:33:00.29]

Justin N.: Where do you draw the boundaries around your relationship with your customers?

[00:33:08.04]

Benjamin L.: I draw it at the door. [Laughter] For almost all of them. If I see them at the grocery store or something, I have to go into that mode of, "Hello, Mrs. So-and-so, blah blah blah," and I'm sort of forced into that relationship: polite, professional small talk. Just like any other tradesperson or professional person has with a client. But, you know, my real concern with them ends when they leave the door, essentially. I mean, you hope they come back, of course. But you can't be totally—I'm not involved in their lives. I think that's part of the longevity of it is that you should be able to draw boundaries. You know? When someone makes—not to respond to them in a personal way, if they're a very needy person or if they're a very demanding person or if they're an angry person or whatever. It's not to be involved with it personally. I think where a lot of waiters get in trouble with the job is that they take it all, they take the customer as a full person. I contain the customer to the role of a customer, for the most part. I'm not dealing with

their full person. I mean, I have to deal with their full person to know who they are so I can wait on them well, but I can't be totally concerned with the full dimensions of their life. [Laughter]

[00:34:31.24]

Justin N.: This hearkens to an older view of what it means to be a professional server.

[00:34:36.21]

Benjamin L.: Oh, certainly. I'm not . . . I'm sort of a bridge between the old school. I mean, I've worked—my partner, as I've referred to before, Jeffery Lafleur at Mr. B's, hearkened back to the late [19]50s, early [19]60s when a lot of Cajuns came from the . . . from southwest Louisiana and came to the big city when I-10 opened up and they were like, "Ah! Freedom." Those cousins and people are still workin' at Antoine's and Arnaud's and Galatoire's. And . . . that's the real old school. But I absorbed enough of that kind of attitude, and it's why I'm amused when I see want ads on Craigslist: "Must be passionate about food and service!" And I thought, "You know, I thought the whole goal was to be dispassionate, if you're . . ." Have a certain distance, let the customer dictate what the experience is gonna be. Certainly, I think that's in line with what my boss wants where I work now. We're not . . . we don't impose. We more sort of take our cue from the customer. That's the way I think it should be.

[00:35:42.25]

Justin N.: And that's very different from—of course, Leah Chase just died a few days ago, and she would always say, "It's always so hard to find great—people who really know how to serve."

[00:35:57.24]

Benjamin L.: Yeah.

[00:35:57.24]

Justin N.: Do you feel what you do is a dying form?

[00:36:01.16]

Benjamin L.: Well, I think it's very hard for . . . now that I'm an older person, we're always going to complain about the younger generation. I think it's hard for people to pay attention and to be aware, and I think, certainly, the digital age and the advent of the cell phone has made it even worse, just because people are totally drawn to their cell phones. They cannot not check in every twenty or thirty minutes, and their mind is not where it needs to be. But I think awareness is a rare thing, a certain kind of awareness. I see that in problems that customers have; they have lack of spatial awareness. We're trying to help you out, and they move everything towards the center of the table, when really, the space is to be found on the outside of the table. Just completely opposite. In a restaurant like Crêpe Nanou where we have a lot of people waiting inside, people are always standing in the way. And they'd always be completely apologetic. "Oh, I don't know where to be." It's like, "Yes, obviously you don't know where to be." [Laughter] "You know? You're a

klutz." But of course you're not gonna say that, it just—you know. And the secret to being a good waiter is really being aware. Polished, some people are more polished than others. Best waiter I knew in New Orleans was this woman, Judy, who worked at Mona's on Frenchman Street. She was just incredible. I mean, she—you wouldn't really put her in a fine dining situation, 'cause she didn't have that kind of smoothness to it, but she was herself and she always knew what you wanted. She had great awareness, she had great antennas as they say in the business. 'Cause she was there. She was paying attention. The first manager I had at—I mentioned Viva at Mr. B's. She said it, "You cannot wait on tables unless you are near your table." Whether you're near in proximity or making eye contact. And a lot of people, when they don't have anything immediate to do, just run and hide. That's . . . that's not gonna make it. [Laughter]

[00:38:01.10]

Justin N.: Turn up the radio. The music.

[00:38:04.04]

Benjamin L.: Yeah, it's just, they think in terms of task: "I did this. I did that." And really, at a restaurant like Crêpe Nanou, I learned—well, I always knew this, but I really learned it there—where nine tables, sometimes all at once, I had constant involvement. I just had to . . . it wasn't like doing one task or another, it was just that you had this field that you had to keep moving in and doing as many things as possible at once. I could never think in terms of, "I have to go from Point A to Point B." You have to look at the whole forcefield. And . . .

[00:38:35.14]

Justin N.: So, what is serving like when it's at its best?

[00:38:36.22]

Benjamin L.: It's there when it's needed and not visible, and invisible, when it's not needed.

[00:38:45.19]

Justin N.: Now, that's from the customer's perspective.

[00:38:46.07]

Benjamin L.: Yeah, yeah.

[00:38:47.15]

Justin N.: How about from the server's perspective? What's a satisfying shift?

[00:38:55.15]

Benjamin L.: Oh. Well, a satisfying shift is when you manage to have a good rhythm. I think, for me, rhythm is important. It's different at a restaurant where I work now, which is totally based on reservations, and we can be very dead and then just too many people all at once or something like that. And the kitchen can only produce so much food at one time. Crêpe Nanou—I hope I'm not giving away secrets, but a lot of the food was microwaved. It was almost instant. So, the timing was very much on the waiter. I could

control my timing. So, what was good was when I could just—I'm in a rhythm: boom, I have one table. Do what I have to do there. Turn around, I'm right at the next table, do that, and just keep this flow going where I could just organize the flow and do everything I gotta do. Just keep this constant pace, and not get drawn out of a—get drawn out of this one speed that had to go into hyper mode. Sometimes you just gotta do what you gotta do, and that's another old school kind of attitude that's been a little lost. "Do you really know how to hump when the chips are down? Can you really just go balls out?" And that's—when I worked at Mr. B's, it was a little more macho place, so we could . . . we'd have to bus a ten-top all at once, we just did it, you know? And that's sort of a lost kind of value these days. But anyway, to get back to the question, I'll say, when a really good rhythm, you can feel like you're in the groove. That you got it goin' on; you have enough time to do this, but not too much time.

[00:40:36.17]

Justin N.: Is serving a performance?

[00:40:42.10]

Benjamin L.: Well, I think a restaurant is a theater. But the performance, it's really the bourgeoisie performing for themselves in a restaurant. The waiter is just sort of—we're maybe the stage manager or something like that, more than anything; the stage hand. We bring the courses in and out, bring the—when things are also going well, you ask from a service perspective, is also when you can be the stage manager; when you can control the dynamic without the people knowing they're being controlled. And I think that's sort of

the meta level of service. As I once said to someone, "Really, what we're doing, once you get beyond mechanics—" And a lot of people, mechanics are not easy. It's hard to make it look effortless, and sometimes it doesn't look . . . even someone who's really good at it, there can be visible effort involved. There's more work than can possibly be done in a totally smooth manner. But the real, the higher-end game, is . . . basically manipulating conversation is what we're doing in a lotta ways. Getting people to move at the pace at the pace we need them to move at without them really . . . being aware of it. And it's kind of sometimes depending on the personalities of the people that you're waiting on and what their power relationships there are. But I know this is a problem for a lot of younger women is that they always feel they're being ignored. That they can't get the attention of their customers. And that's not a problem for me; I can't really relate to that as an older male. I have a certain kind of authority just from standing there, but I do that. I stand there. If I'm not getting the attention that I—you know, I let people move along at their own pace, but at certain times, we need the table to move, we need to get an order in because there's a pocket of opportunity. Because, as I said, we work in a very small kitchen. We can't put out thirty dishes at one time. So, you need to know—there are opportune times to get your orders in. So, if I need to get this order in now, I will stand there and I will just stand there until I get their attention. I've just learned how to do that without being threatening about it, but usually you find one person who picks up on that kind of nervousness. Or they get a little nervous about it, and then they convey to everybody else, "Oh, let's listen to the . . ." And that's also a sign of a good host. You know, being a restaurant patron is also an art, too, in a way, especially in a larger group.

Some people are really good hosts, and some people are terrible, and most people are somewhere in the middle. [Laughter]

[00:43:22.25]

Justin N.: Yeah, my other is question is, was dining a performance? And you kind of—

[00:43:27.20]

Benjamin L.: Oh, well, you know, I think about this is a lot, is that restaurants are a performance in that—to get back what I was saying about, you asked about the food and the relationship, how do I see the back of the house and the front of the house? Is that, really, restaurants are really about a theater space—I guess always from the beginning, really, for the bourgeoisie to express their selves as . . . back in the time when they were coming up, as opposed to the aristocracy and this was a new social space, the commercial restaurant space. Think of cafes of Paris or something like that. Still exists in sort of the same way. When you go to a restaurant like Galatoires or Gautreau’s or whatever, the higher-end restaurant, you are entering into a specific kind of social space. Some people are aware of that, and some people are blissfully unaware of that, but it really will . . . a lot of what you decide and what kind of restaurant you want to go to has to do with your social aspirations, I think.

[00:44:35.04]

Justin N.: How has the education level—how educated about dining are your diners? And have you seen that changed over . . . those are two different things.

[00:44:45.22]

Benjamin L.: Yeah.

[00:44:45.22]

Justin N.: There's education about . . .

[00:44:48.15]

Benjamin L.: Okay—

[00:44:49.02]

Justin N.: . . . about dining, but also about food, 'cause I see these as two different things.

[00:44:52.08]

Benjamin L.: Yes, yes, right. Well, where I work now as a very staid, older clientele. Our predominant group are established uptown families. Long tradition of dining, very important to them. We also get people from all over the country who . . . but generally, skew older, and more towards the gentry, shall I say. We do get sophisticated urban diners. Some people are very, very concentrated on the food. Younger people, especially from the coast or if their backgrounds are more in business and tech, they're really mystified by the menu that has—well, the idea of an appetizer, a salad course, and a main course is a mystery to them. That kind of classic progression through a meal is no longer taken for granted. Now, most restaurants opening up—even in New Orleans—are, "Small

plates, large plates, we'll just order some food, and then if we're still hungry, we'll order some more food." That does not work where I work, because the food takes so long to prepare. We need to know in advance what you're having. So, a lot of people come in, "Oh, we're just gonna get some appy's, appetizers, for the table." [Groans.] I'm like, "Ah . . ." And I'm thinking, "How do I politely say, 'I really need to get your whole order in at a time?'" This is just not the way we're structured. But this is always negotiable and a compromise is reached, of course, but yeah. It's not that . . . the definition, I wouldn't say that they need to be educated about dining. The definition of what a proper meal has changed. And . . . I'm definitely involved. Where I'm working now is very much in the old school tradition, which, how many white tablecloth restaurants have opened up in the last ten years in New Orleans? None. [Laughter] As far as I can think.

[00:46:43.16]

Justin N.: Of that style, yeah.

[00:46:44.10]

Benjamin L.: Yeah, I mean, maybe I think rebooted Tony Angelo's or something in Lakeview or something like that.

[00:46:52.04]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Are you finding, though—one other thing about it is, when you first started and you had to sort of politely explain what the difference between Cajun and Creole is to diners—there's been so much growth in food media in that time. Are you

finding—and this may be more at Nanou, it's hard 'cause Nanou and Gautreau's are definitely a more—

[00:47:14.13]

Benjamin L.: Local, yes. Yeah.

[00:47:16.04]

Justin N.: —local crowd, but the people who aren't local, are you finding them a little more prepared and needing less explanation on the menu?

[00:47:24.06]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. Oh, yeah. I mean, it really has to depend on their educational background and their sophistication and social class and things like that. But yes, I would—certainly there's people who are far more knowledgeable about every ingredient on our menu than I am. The questions are usually predictable, though. You know, there's certain food items that they may not be familiar with. And America's a very diverse place. People of—even who have the same income—can have very different social backgrounds and experiences, and I think that's . . . and as I was saying earlier, I try and read everybody. I try and read every customer that I have, and . . . customers fit into certain social types, and then they also have certain personality types, and then they have their individual quirks. But somewhere between picking out their personality type and their social type, you have a pretty good picture of who they are and how to explain things, and what their comfort level is with things.

[00:48:28.27]

Justin N.: What was the most frustrating time you've ever been stiffed?

[00:48:32.25]

Benjamin L.: Oh, boy. [Laughter] Nah, I think any waiter will tell you, the frustrating is the verbal tip. I guess, the most frustrating is if some really big, expensive table that you put an awful lot of time and effort into, but that doesn't happen—it really happens so infrequently. But the typical, and it almost never totally stiffed, but we call it the verbal tip. We have some nice couple who they're smiling the whole time and they're telling you how wonderful everything was, and they're telling you how wonderful you were, and then they give a substandard tip. We call that the verbal tip. That's a very common experience. Usually couples, middle aged, from out of town, never coming back. They may write Yelp! review saying how horrible everything was too; that also happens occasionally. It's sort of the . . . [Laughter] They're just lyin' through their teeth. But other people really wholesomely believe that giving you fulsome thanks is what . . . a compromise. You know, it's a proper tip. Other frustrations on the tipping things have to do—and this happens very infrequently where I work now, but some casual restaurant like Crêpe Nanou, the part-cash, part-tip conundrum. "Oh, we're gonna split the check. I'm gonna pay, the bill's three hundred dollars, I'll pay a hundred and fifty in cash." And the other person pays a hundred and fifty on the credit card. Person who pays the hundred and fifty on the credit card leaves twenty percent tip on the . . . hundred and fifty part, leaves thirty dollars. The other person who pays a hundred and fifty tipped nothing at all.

He's ripped me off, he's ripped off his friend. [Laughter] But you can't explain this, you just sort of take it in. But on the whole, tipping's not a problem. I think if tipping—if your tips are a problem, either you're in the wrong restaurant or you should look at yourself.

You know? Over the course of a year or a month or something.

[00:50:27.28]

Justin N.: There are always bad days.

[00:50:27.28]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. But there's always some really good days, you know.

[00:50:30.06]

Justin N.: What was the best tip you've ever received?

[00:50:32.27]

Benjamin L.: I've made—well, these are on private parties, where there will be a gratuity built into the check. And on four occasions, I've gotten a thousand dollars on top of that. But that doesn't go directly to me; that gets totally split up into a pool. So, it might make a good night or okay night or great night, but it's not like I'm puttin' a thousand dollars in my pocket.

[00:50:51.11]

Justin N.: Any great restaurants around, there's a team making it—

[00:50:58.08]

Benjamin L.: Yeah, and part of what I talked about earlier, about my view of the responsibility of the restaurant owner to the waiter, to the salesperson . . . all these team schemes, all these pooling schemes are ways for them to regain, to take back control, to diminish the autonomy of the waiter.

[00:51:21.20]

Justin N.: And so you're less of a fan.

[00:51:24.11]

Benjamin L.: Well, I'm certainly less of a fan. That's the situation where I work in now, it'd really be awkward not to, but as someone who has the knowledge of the customer base going back thirty-five years, and New Orleans traditional people feel very comfortable with people they know. A lot of them feel very uncomfortable with people they don't know. So, even if I were a terrible waiter, they'd be more comfortable with me.

[Laughter] And I know them all. And be that I'm actually very good at this job, and I've always made very good tips, and I'm also extremely hardworking. I don't drink on the job, I don't get drunk, I don't come in high, I don't come in hungover, I don't look at my cell phone for the whole duration of the shift . . . and also, my boss often looks at me as someone I need to wait on certain people or another. Then I'm sharing all this money with . . . and I don't mind sharing money with people who are less experienced, who haven't developed the skills yet, if they're putting in an honest effort. But, you know, like

everything, you're working with people. You have to make compromises. You have to negotiate. You have to accept certain situations that might be less than ideal. But . . . in an ideal world, I'd be able to leverage my experience and my abilities to a higher level of payment and slightly better situation for myself. [Laughter]

[00:52:43.12]

Justin N.: An experiment that I think has—every now and then surfaces is the idea of the salaried server . . .

[00:52:52.23]

Benjamin L.: Oh, yeah. Owners want to get their hands on our tip pool, tip stream, for sure. And also, disturbingly to someone who sees themselves on the left, a lot of times, I've read—well, liberals are not of the left, so let's just deal with that right off the bat—but liberals or progressives who find tipping offensive. Let's face it, any kind of employment situation is exploitative, that's the whole point. If you're going into business and you're hiring someone, if you're not going to make money off of their labor, why would you hire their labor? So it's *a priori*, it's exploitative. That's the whole point of the thing. I'd rather be employed by the customer. They say, "Well, it's not fair that you make x amount of money—" To get back to the kitchen and you were talking about the shifting of emphases. I say, "We make all the money. They get all the credit." Yeah. The truth of the matter is that no restaurateur would pay me what I make per hour. I feel he's getting a tremendous bargain for getting me for two dollars an hour, but he's providing an opportunity for me to make far more than that. The . . . challenge of making it more

equitable, raise the damn pay of the cooks. These are rich people. They have money; they can afford it. They can afford an extra buck per dinner, per item, you know? Two dollars or whatever. I mean, the margins are very slim in the restaurant business, so it can't be done unilaterally. It has to be raising the minimum wage. If you raise the minimum wage to fifteen dollars, they'd have to start paying cooks twenty or twenty-five dollars an hour, and . . . they should. [Laughter]

[00:54:42.01]

Justin N.: And they would retain them longer.

[00:54:44.29]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. You know.

[00:54:49.00]

Justin N.: So, tipping is a pact between the customer and the server.

[00:54:51.02]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. And it's a social custom. No one wants to be seen as cheap—not no one, some people are proud to—but fortunately, that's very rare. You know, it's interesting. I have a friend from Chicago, a very working-class person in Chicago I know from the music world. And in Chicago, it's not like New Orleans, which you say is a very small town, Chicago's a very large town. People don't really know people from different social strata the way we do here in New Orleans. He doesn't know, 'cause he has a very old

school idea, I imagine of which, he can't—"Do rich people, are they really cheap? Do they not tip you?" I'm like, "No." [Laughter] "They got the money, they tip." I mean, you could make some kind of case that self-made people tip better than traditionally self-made businessmen or salespeople or traditional salesperson, gonna be a better tipper than a professional person, 'cause professional people . . . see that their worth totally on their knowledge, their knowledge base, and they consider you as somewhat inferior to them 'cause you don't have that specific knowledge that gives them whatever social power they have. So, traditionally, they've not been as good tippers. But doctors, traditionally, were always considered bad tippers, but that doesn't seem to be the case anymore. I don't notice any kind of thing like that.

[00:56:11.20]

Justin N.: Are New Orleans diners better diners?

[00:56:17.00]

Benjamin L.: They sure think they are. [Laughter] But there's not one New Orleans diner.

[00:56:26.01]

Justin N.: Um-hm. That's very true, yes.

[00:56:30.24]

Benjamin L.: There's not one . . . you can't make any blanket statement about any group like that. You have to look at great class and educational distinctions within that group. They

dine in different ways. The people who dine at a restaurant like Gautreau's or Galatoire's are different from someone who dines at Tony Angelo's. Or Mosca's. There might be some overlap, but they're gonna act differently wherever they are, too, also. 'Cause I wait on the same people at Crêpe Nanou as I wait on at Gautreau's. At Crepe Nanou they're very casual, they're in a family environment. They act—even though I've known them forever, they act totally differently at Gautreau's. A lot of people that I didn't realize how wealthy they were until I waited on them at Gautreau's, they're the same people, but they stayed within kind of normal, middle-class family, kids in the high school, goin' off to college kinda mode when they were at Crêpe Nanou, and they were more expansive in playing to the social theater that I talked about when they're at Gautreau's.

[00:57:36.16]

Justin N.: So, an important part of that social theater is . . . and this is something that's kind of, particularly after Katrina, I want to talk . . . I want to talk about New Orleans in that time, I want to talk about the pre- and the post- and some of these changes. But I want to talk about dress codes. Now, Gautreau's is a place for me, I would go and wear a jacket even on a night when it gets, like, ninety degrees now.

[00:58:01.03]

Benjamin L.: Yeah.

[00:58:01.25]

Justin N.: I would wear a jacket.

[00:58:04.26]

Benjamin L.: But I guess our official wording now would be business casual, which I don't really know what this 'cause I'm not involved in a corporate environment. And what that can mean to—but we often say, "Most gentlemen prefer to wear jackets." Our . . . core clientele almost always wear jackets. [Laughter] Except for those who don't. But when I think of the archetypal that wear not only a jacket—maybe a sport coat, not a suit, but nice pocket square, too, you know. I always think of a restaurant like Cochon, that's the place where the guys in the khaki pants and the work team polo shirts. Occasionally we get those kind of people; we get some corporate business and some convention business. But that's Cochon, that's Red Fish Grill or something like that. But that's business casual to them. So . . . our core clientele will dress for dinner, up to a point, yeah.

[00:59:07.24]

Justin N.: Hmm. Do you—

[00:59:08.07]

Benjamin L.: You know, sometimes you don't prevent someone showing up in flip flops and shorts not gonna get a good reception.

[00:59:16.15]

Justin N.: Yeah. Now, the “Katrina casual,” do you think it's changed the sort of reception of people dressing . . . ?

[00:59:27.27]

Benjamin L.: No.

[00:59:29.19]

Justin N.: Not where you are, I guess.

[00:59:29.19]

Benjamin L.: No, I don't think so. No. I mean, most people . . . most people will come in in at least a long-sleeved shirt, male, men do, and that's fine. No, I don't . . .

[00:59:43.20]

Justin N.: No Knicks jerseys, or . . .

[00:59:44.28]

Benjamin L.: No. [Laughter] We're not, where I work now, we have almost no walk-in trade. No one is just walking down the street like, "Boy, I'm hungry." This is why I feel, no matter how high the check gets, I don't feel any qualms about putting down the check because I think a) we have value and it's an expensive restaurant, but I can see where the value goes into the food and costs and the labor in the food, and b) no one just hands—we do get people who really don't belong there, but that's their own mistake, you know? You have to search us out. We're not an obvious place to go. We're not really on anybody's bucket list, "Oh, we gotta go to this restaurant," thank goodness. We don't have

to go to this restaurant—I had someone like that the other night, last night. A woman and her daughter and they ordered two appetizers and a salad and they didn't drink and . . . it's kind of a wasted table for our perspective, you know? We have a finite number of tables. It was a busy night. Hopefully you would have sold that table to somebody who wanted to dine, but they felt, "Oh, we heard about your duck confit, we had to have it." That's a very rare— but like, hey, how often does this happen, you know? Once a month, once a year? What's the big deal? [Laughter] But . . . we don't really have a lot of problems 'cause we don't get people just walking in off the street. You know, when you work in the French Quarter, while I worked at Mr. B's, I remember a New Orleans family or older, typical conservative New Orleans family or couple, and they were just outraged that the people next to them were in t-shirts. Now, in the French Quarter, now I can't believe anybody . . . the old conservative people in suits probably don't go there 'cause they know it's gonna be not their scene. But I haven't really been involved in the French Quarter for so long, I don't really know.

[01:01:44.21]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah. So you haven't really had a front seat to that change 'cause of where you've been.

[01:01:46.28]

Benjamin L.: Yeah, no.

[01:01:49.12]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[01:01:51.16]

Benjamin L.: I think the more changes, as I've said, the more casual approach to dining that younger people and people who come from out of town, they're like, "Oh, we hear the food is really good, blah blah blah," but they're used to more of the newer sort of chef-driven, casual, small plates, share, we'll order some food, if that's not enough we'll order some more food, kind of environment. Some of them are smart enough to pick up that it's a slightly more structured environment, and some of them are not. [Laughter]

[01:02:15.18]

Justin N.: So, it's more of the process of dining itself that is alien.

[01:02:18.24]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. I think so, yeah. I mean, dining in that way. Doing like I've described is certainly a valid way of dining. It's also a much more popular way of dining for younger people.

[01:02:31.23]

Justin N.: So let's talk a little bit about Katrina. I feel . . . feel a little worn out by asking peoples' Katrina stories, but in the service industry, this was a key thing. A lot of people pegged the recovery of this city to the return of people working in the service industry. Now, I understand you were Crêpe Nanou over that time period.

[01:02:54.04]

Benjamin L.: Right, right, right.

[01:02:54.06]

Justin N.: So, they reopened pretty quickly.

[01:02:56.05]

Benjamin L.: We opened . . . so the storm hit the 29, right, of August? We reopened somewhere around October 19.

[01:03:07.09]

Justin N.: But, I mean, that's a big gap for somebody whose pay is his last table. Did they take care of their servers?

[01:03:12.06]

Benjamin L.: Oh, no. No, no, no. They didn't have any money. I don't want to go into some nasty details, but it was Rich . . . Nanou's ex-stepson, whose mother was the co-owner of the restaurant, Rich, and Jeff Rhodes, who was a chef—[A1] Copeland's private chef—who was married into Nanou, to Rich's sister. They actually just fronted some cash to come up with the money to reopen the restaurant, because there were some management ownership fights and disputes over how they should proceed. But it was only six weeks, and you have to realize that there was a lot of aid coming to people in New Orleans.

[01:03:58.11]

Justin N.: So that helped bridge the gap. So you weren't out of—

[01:03:59.28]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. I mean—what's that? No, I was . . . [inaudible 01:04:04], I go to Chicago every year for the Chicago Jazz Festival. Had a train ticket booked on Monday. Saturday or Friday, the detail cop said, "Ah, the storm's comin' this way." I'm like, "No, it's not." They said, "Yeah, it is." So, I went home, looked at the T.V., saw this massive storm, said, "Oh, shit," and then my boss called me on Saturday saying, "We're not opening," so I called Amtrak to see if I can move my train ticket to Sunday, they said, "No, we've canceled the train on Sunday." I said, "Oh, can I get a refund for Monday?" "No, we haven't canceled, it'll cost you 20%." Eventually, of course, I got my money back, so I just packed up my car and drove to Chicago, where I was going anyhow, and stayed there for three weeks. Then, by the end of three weeks, I put a clearer picture of what was going in New Orleans . . . visited my family for a week, spent two weeks in New York City and then drove back to New Orleans once, I guess my neighborhood—I live in Bywater—was not officially open, but I knew, I had spies on the ground, I knew that my house was fine that I had gas and water and electricity. Then, a week later, we were open at Nanou and we were workin' five days a week. We sort of pulled staff from wherever we could find it, you know? A woman who later—Eve Troeh, the waiter—went on to become public radio, I think she works for N.P.R. She was workin' there. People who had never worked in restaurants before, some people who had worked at other restaurants that

weren't open . . . all kinds of people were workin' there, we just sort of did what we had to do. It was all cash. We didn't have a phone for six weeks—six months we didn't have an operative phone, so we couldn't do any credit card checks. Everything was cash. We had a curfew, which was good, because you could tell people. . . "You gotta go! Closin' up!" Though I do remember, the second day I was open, two younger uptown girls in party dresses came in. "We want Grey Goose martinis!" "I'm sorry, I don't have Grey Goose, just Ketel One." And they gave that total little uptown, party girl pout. [Laughter] And this other guy, still see him every now, a German guy was complaining, "Your potatoes are—these French fry potatoes are soggy! The potatoes aren't stored properly." [Laughter] I said, "Look, man, don't you think we're lucky to have any potatoes at all?" He's like, "I don't mean to complain." I said, "Good. Don't." You know, you could get away with a little more pushback, back then. You could just . . . you know. So, you know, to people who opened, we made a lot of money. I was workin' five, six nights a week, total cash, nowhere to spend the money. So, it was just pilin' up, on top of the F.E.M.A. payments and Red Cross payments and everything else. It wasn't like, personally, it wasn't hardship. A lot of our customers—another core group besides the sort of uptown gentry and Mardi Gras elite, Crêpe Nanou was also a lot of professional people who live uptown. And a surprising number of them—and I thought it a bit cowardly to split—they eventually moved back, but a lot of doctors, "Oh, there's not—"—like a pediatrician—"—there's not gonna be enough children . . . to sustain my practice, I'm outta here." That kinda attitude, I'm not in their financial situation so I don't know, but that kinda attitude did not sit particularly well with me. I thought it was . . . a bit cowardly. But a lot of people with school-age children had decisions to—there weren't schools. We had a lotta

customers who were commuting in, come in on weekends. Took 'em two or three years, four years, to move back.

[01:07:43.11]

Justin N.: What's the worst time of year to be waiting tables in New Orleans?

[01:07:46.20]

Benjamin L.: September.

[01:07:48.19]

Justin N.: Yeah. The deadest.

[01:07:49.29]

Benjamin L.: It's absolute deadest. I mean, things have changed a little bit as far as scheduling, but combination of hurricane season, long summer, and it's still very hot. People spend all their money sending their kids back to school, to college. It's low money time. And you're ready for summer to be over, and it's not really over till the middle of October.

[01:08:14.12]

Justin N.: I just wrote my first tuition check, so I can relate.

[01:08:17.01]

Benjamin L.: Yeah, yeah.

[01:08:18.22]

Justin N.: Yeah. For little kids.

[01:08:19.26]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. You're not thinkin' about going out to fine dining dinner right now? No, certainly, for some of our customers, that's of no concern. I mean, they might pay lip service to it, but . . . my feeling on that is . . . also what happens is that, at a certain point . . . at Crêpe Nanou, we'd start seeing the—school year starts, we're gonna buckle down, we're gonna have dinner at home, kids are gonna do their homework. This sort of new regime lasts for only so long, and they're like, "Ah, we're goin' out to dinner." [Laughter]

[01:08:52.15]

Justin N.: Call the sitter.

[01:08:54.24]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. Or take the kids. In fact, people would take their kids there.

[01:08:59.10]

Justin N.: Do you find you get many kids at Gautreau's?

[01:09:00.15]

Benjamin L.: No, no. It's not a—we don't have any items for kids. It's not . . . it's not . . . I mean, certainly, certain children, it all depends on . . . I remember waiting on this French family, these kids were impeccable table manners. They were upper middle-class French people, as you can imagine, very well-brought up. Knew which knife and fork to use and were totally conversant in restaurant. But in general, no, we don't . . . we have one high chair that my boss brought in from when he had kids, and it's not encouraged. [Laughter]

[01:09:42.09]

Justin N.: What's Mardi Gras time like?

[01:09:43.29]

Benjamin L.: Mardi Gras's a struggle. You know, uptown, people can't . . . a lot of our customers are . . . well, we get a lot of business from Mardi Gras. We have, oh, there's so many of these interlope—these cruisers, and these groups overlap to an amazing extent. If you're not really aware of it, [inaudible 01:10:06], Comus, Monus, Rex Proteus, **Mystick** Krewe of This, **Mystick** Krewe of That, they're all the same people.

[01:10:15.13]

Justin N.: The Krewe of **Mystick**?

[01:10:15.29]

Benjamin L.: And they have this endless area of dinners, captain's dinners, lieutenant's, dinners, this, that, and the other. That's basically why Antoine's stays in business, really.

[Laughter] For their Mardi Gras, but we get a little bit of it. Getting more and more of it, in smaller groups. We're tight with Proteus. We do the Proteus Captain's Dinner every Friday before Mardi Gras.

[01:10:40.09]

Justin N.: How many tables is Gautreau's?

[01:10:43.26]

Benjamin L.: Downstairs, sixteen. Holds about sixty people.

[01:10:47.00]

Justin N.: Yeah, so much smaller.

[01:10:48.11]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. About the same size as Crêpe Nanou, but Crêpe Nanou, we would turn the restaurant over three or four times a night.

[01:10:53.10]

Justin N.: How many times do you turn over Gautreau's?

[01:10:55.19]

Benjamin L.: Oh . . . two, total two. Very rarely will I have—on one table, you know, I might have three tables on a really busy night, three turns. But that's very rare. We could

probably do a better job of stretching our timing, but we're pretty lax for our regular customers. Pretty much get to come in when they want, which might be right in the middle, that means you don't get any turn at all. You know, if you call up a restaurant like Commander's Palace, if you're not anybody and you say you want a reservation, they say, "Great. Six or nine?" 'Cause they're lookin' to do two turns. If you say, "Eight," it means they gotta get someone in right at six, otherwise they're not gonna get you in. We have the same problem, too. It's the same at any restaurant. And, of course, people come in late for their reservations, they don't honor their reservations, they don't honor the number, they don't understand how—especially a small restaurant, with a tightly plotted scheme—we can't just accommodate two more people or showing up with two fewer people. It really upsets the apple cart. They're just not aware of that. I mean, some people obviously just don't care. Most people would care if they knew, but it never crosses their mind.

[01:12:09.24]

Justin N.: So, Jazz Fest.

[01:12:12.24]

Benjamin L.: Jazz Fest, another time when . . . Jazz Fest has changed so much. When I first came to Jazz Fest, the typical out-of-town Jazz Fester was sort of a . . . cultural explorer, shall we say. I think, "Wow, I go to these obscure places, and there'd be people—musicologists hangin' out there." Now, it's people who want to see the same thing, they either want to see either the classic New Orleans acts do the same thing over and over again, or they want to see the Rolling Stones or whatever over the hill group do their—

they gotta play the hits. It's a very mainstream kind of mindset. It's much more high end than it used to be, so high end restaurants do really well. Well, up to a point. We get a lot of reservations, not always honored. Lotta restaurants, we try and take—some restaurants will just take credit cards on everybody. I think my boss's response, which is to most busy times, he tries to fill up the restaurant with as many local people as he possibly can. [Laughter] 'Cause he wants to insulate himself. Also, that's who he wants to wait on, but also to insulate himself from . . . well, we do Jazz Fest business, but . . .

[01:13:24.18]

Justin N.: Where are the best out-of-towners from, from the waiter's standpoint?

[01:13:29.00]

Benjamin L.: Hmm. Maybe Chicago. Philadelphia, I don't know. Someplace like that. New Yorkers, of course, always think they know everything. New Yorkers just double the tax. Californians almost always tell you they're from California and feel like that's enough. People on the West Coast don't tip so well because—well, I guess waiters are paid much better. I think prevailing wage might be fifteen dollars an hour or something like that.

[01:13:55.03]

Justin N.: Oh, okay.

[01:13:57.04]

Benjamin L.: Yeah, and I'd say . . . of course, New Orleans people are really good to wait on, I think. For the most part.

[01:14:03.08]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[01:14:03.08]

Benjamin L.: But Chicago's got that sort of . . . working class money kind of attitude. No one flashes the cash like they used to. Even in situations where we really should be given a cash-side tip, almost no one does anymore, 'cause rich people don't carry cash and we're not the kind of restaurant that gets people—unfortunately, we're not the kind of restaurant where we get people are involved in nefarious cash businesses. [Laughter] Those are the best customers, mobsters, people who got a lot of cash. But that's old school, yeah.

[01:14:35.03]

Justin N.: There's nothin' better than a cash side hustle.

[01:14:37.25]

Benjamin L.: Oh, yeah. And this really nice old lady gave me a hundred dollars a little while ago. She was in the horse business, which, proper out-of-town lady—I think Louisville—just appreciated what I did for her. That was really sweet. And some lady the other day gave me five dollars, and that was really sweet, too. [Laughter] Five dollars isn't gonna mean anything, but it's nice to get that little—

[01:14:58.03]

Justin N.: In addition to the credit card slip.

[01:15:01.15]

Benjamin L.: Yeah.

[01:15:02.24]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[01:15:05.01]

Benjamin L.: But that's really sort of—but a lot of people who really should be doing that don't, like a lot of people who've been bringing in their own wine, and that usually costs us—it's a lot of work. Sometimes they want to have wine tastings, they bring in many different bottles.

[01:15:17.18]

Justin N.: So, that's allowed at Gautreau's.

[01:15:17.23]

Benjamin L.: It is. We charge 'em a pretty high corking fee, but every now and then, you feel like, "Hmm, maybe we should double this corking fee till they stop doing this." 'Cause it's—I feel better about if they're bringing in something rare. And old. Though that can

cause its own problems, because they might hand us this bottle—"Oh, decant this," and the cork disintegrates, you're got to—anything that takes time away from what your normal duties are really causes problems for a waiter, 'cause it means not only are you not able to take care of, you're taking time away from these people, you're taking time away from all your other tables. Someone's monopolizing your time when they ask you to do something that takes you out of your rhythm. So, yeah. It's become quite a bit of a problem. And the people who bring in their own wine, have subsets of that. There's the successful stock broker or doctor who wants to bring in his super-saturated, super-rare California wine that I've never heard of and wants you to praise them to the high end about how great this is. It's the kind of wine I can't stand. [Laughter] Or someone brings in some really old Burgundy or Bordeaux or something like that. If they have class, they would give you a taste. [Laughter] 'Cause, you know, who else are you gonna get to taste these wines?

[01:16:38.05]

Justin N.: Oh, yeah. They're not on any menu.

[01:16:42.06]

Benjamin L.: Not on—well . . . I don't know . . .

[01:16:43.13]

Justin N.: Some.

[01:16:43.13]

Benjamin L.: I don't know. Brennan's is supposed to have a huge wine list, you know. But if it's on the menu, it's going to be five thousand dollars or something like that, you know? 'Cause it's gotta be—it's expensive to hold wine. Why is the markup so high? Well, 'cause it—everything, restaurants are a low-margin business. Most of them, unless they're big corporate restaurants, are run on a very thin margin, also with a cash flow problem. That's why restaurants go out of business in June or July. They think they're doin' fine, and all of a sudden they can't make their payroll. A lot of these are sole proprietorships; they don't have any real cushion. So, if you got a lot of the inventory tied up on the . . . you spent all your money on wine that week, and then everybody brings in their own wine, that's a problem.

[01:17:30.14]

Justin N.: Yeah. 'Cause you are warehousing it, essentially.

[01:17:31.27]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. We don't warehouse very much where I work, 'cause we don't have any space to do it, but yeah. Everybody wants to move their inventory, otherwise . . . why's the markup at a grocery store so low? Because they move that stuff constantly. But if stuff sits there, that's a cost.

[01:17:51.07]

Justin N.: And they might not have eighty labels.

[01:17:52.07]

Benjamin L.: Right, yeah.

[01:17:54.10]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah.

[01:17:55.04]

Benjamin L.: People like to see a breadth of stuff and they're gonna order the same old thing.

[Laughter] Sort of like the food. They like to see a variety of food. I just spoke to earlier—the creativity of the food is kind of the calling card for the restaurant. That's what gets written about. People want to know that, but then they come back and order the—every restaurant has something that hasn't changed forever, because that's what the people come back to order.

[01:18:21.16]

Justin N.: So, what was the most memorable day in the dining room for you? Most

memorable—doesn't have to be a single most, but give me a—

[01:18:29.04]

Benjamin L.: Well, this is a memory that I have. As I said, I worked with this old—well,

younger than I am now, but seemed old to me when I was in my twenties—Jefferey

Lafleur from Ville Platte, Louisiana, last of the Red Hot Papas. Very colorful character.

Worked in New Orleans in the late [19]50s, Galatoire's, Arnaud's. Knew all the old school characters. This guy came in, Carlos Gambino Marcello [Carlos Marcello Gambino] —teardrop tattoos for prison murders. He was related to the Gambino and Marcello families in New Orleans. Don't know what he'd—he'd just gotten out of jail, and he was in for dinner with his niece, who lived in Washington, D.C., who was a straight-arrow Brooks Brothers buttoned down shirt, Georgetown lawyer. And this guy was trying to explain the family business to this sweet girl and her husband, and meanwhile, Jeff—who knew his whole family is just milking him for money left and right—and the guy's, "Ah," he's peelin' off the hundred-dollar bill for Jeff, hundred-dollar for me, then Jeff drags over the busboy. "Oh, don't forget the busboy!" You know. Really old school mobster behavior. Guy comes back three days later, we hear him shout across the dining room, "Hey, Jeff! Look at my new bride." He met a stripper on Bourbon Street and gotten married, gave the busboy a hundred dollars to run down the street and buy him some flowers. That really stuck with me, 'cause it was just a such a surreal kind of environment. It's almost a romantic vision of what you want to happen in New Orleans. Which doesn't really happen that much.

[01:20:12.18]

Justin N.: And kind of a New Orleans past that doesn't really—

[01:20:13.02]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. I got to wait on [James] Garrison, with Oliver Stone, when they were making *J.F.K.* Then I got, through a connection at the restaurant, I got cast in *J.F.K.* And

I got to wait on—so I waited on Oliver Stone and . . . Sissy Spacek, Gene Hackman. Then I was in the movie—and Kevin Costner, I waited on him. I acted in—I was the room service waiter, typecasting, but I was very fortunate, paid as a day player. I still get twelve bucks a year as royalties. Then these . . . these secretaries would come into the restaurant 'cause they'd read that Costner had eaten there. They were like, "Oh, where did Costner seat? What did he order? Did you wait on him?" And then I'd drop the bomb. "Yeah, I waited on him. And I acted in a scene in the movie with them." Then I had them in the palm of my hand from that. [Laughter] That was kind of the cool thing about being in the French Quarter, is that we got whole array of personalities. Smothers Brothers, I waited on the Smothers Brothers, they were tellin' me dirty jokes. Waited on Paloma Picasso. Totally, Sherry Belafonte, Harry Belafonte's daughter, people like that. And the Brennans were tied into old school . . . actors, just from the Brennans's connections from way back. Raymond Burr, Carol Burnett, people like that.

[01:21:43.19]

Justin N.: Yeah, back in the Owen [Brennan], Owen days.

[01:21:45.18]

Benjamin L.: Yeah, and they still would be comin' to Brennan restaurants. It was pretty cool.

I'm surprised where I work now, we don't get more celebrities. Because it's . . . they're not gonna be besieged by anyone. There's no tourists to bug them. We're very discreet. I would think it'd be a perfect place to—but we don't have any kind of, really, the name recognition right now.

[01:22:07.10]

Justin N.: Yeah. For a while, Sue Zemanick was chef, and she was getting quite a lot of—

[01:22:09.09]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. She was media-savvy. She got a Beard Award. She was on commercials.

Now, she just opened her own restaurant, but it just was reviewed by Ian McNulty. Ian or Brett Anderson—since Baruch (Rabasa) has been there for two years, he hasn't reviewed us. We're not in Top 10 or even Top 100 lists, which is . . . inconceivable to me that we're not in the top one hundred restaurants in New Orleans. Just incredible. [Laughter] I mean, it's not that we're excluded, we just don't exist at all. Which, in a way, is nice. When you are known, you get a lot of people who are sort of rubbernecking on their bucket list, who don't really belong—or not really . . . really not the most ideal customers. So, if you can fill the restaurant with people who are more your ideal customer, all the better that you're not having to deal with people who just . . . "Oh, I've heard of it, it's famous."

[01:23:04.25]

Justin N.: I mean, Guy Fieri could come.

[01:23:08.24]

Benjamin L.: [Laughter] Yeah. With "Restaurant Rescue" or something like that. I think someone floated my boss, Patrick, about doing a—they wanted to do some kind of reality thing involving Gautreau's, and fortunately, everybody who talked to us said, "Don't do

it! Don't do it!" We were like, "No, none of us are gonna sign a waiver allowing us to do that."

[01:23:33.13]

Justin N.: Yeah. So, we're bumping up on ninety minutes. Is there any kinda like, last observations you'd like to make as part of this interview?

[01:23:42.17]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. I want to talk about—we haven't really talked about the structure of the industry that much.

[01:23:46.27]

Justin N.: Yeah. No, no, let's do that.

[01:23:48.05]

Benjamin L.: But a change that I noticed—I think I mentioned that, when I started at Mr. B's, we had a . . . we really emphasized the notion of professionalism. And I've sort of taken that to heart. I mean, I feel that I'm—and my boss will tell me, even when he's really mad at me and we're arguin' about something—"Well, no," he backs down, "I think you're very professional." Which I am. What I take that to mean is that I've sort of absorbed the traditions and the values of what I see to be the . . . I think profession's too high a word. Craft. Trade. You know. And . . . even at the time, through the [19]80s that I was at Mr. B's, I could see sort of a shift in emphasis. And I can understand why, because after that

manager who emphasized our professionalism came and left, they got a manager from Steak & Ale . . . some reason, the Brennan's—Ella Brennan in particular—likes jocks. Ex-jocks, big, dumb guys, and this guy fit the bill. Also turned out he was a thief and set up one of my friends who was a manager to look like he was doing the stealing and fired him, never apologized, and then they found out he was the guy stealing. Also pretty typical. But anyway . . . and his goal, his role, was to write a training manual to rationalize everything we did within our team structure. And basically, to create the perfect manual that they could pass on and create waitrons. Because no employer wants to be dependent on his employees. Especially if you have a larger restaurant or you have the ambitions that Ralph Brennan—which we now see had the ambitions to open a lot of different restaurants—so, how do you hit the ground running when you're in a service-oriented business? Which the Brennans certainly were known for their service. So, how do you get to an acceptable level of service out of a new group of people? Instead of taking years to find them and acclimate them to really good service. So, they came up with this service manual, and they pass it out. So now you get the absurdity at a restaurant, where one menu of the team takes the drink order and one person takes the food order. And the guy says, "Oh, I want to order a drink." Oh, they gotta bring over the other guy. This is stupidity, but it makes a somewhat acceptable system. So anyway, the emphasis went from professionalism to training, which I saw as a very big . . . some people don't understand that or see that as a big deal, but to me, it's like, "Oh." Instead of the knowledge is contained within the employee, the knowledge is contained within the corporation in terms of this manual that you're supposed to follow.

[01:26:37.15]

Justin N.: Um-hm. Process.

[01:26:38.23]

Benjamin L.: The process. And the process internalized. And one manager asked me to write—he wanted help writing his part of the training manual, and I wrote this whole thing about how, "This is impossible, because it's a chaotic situation, and any order of priority you have will change at a moment's notice, based on my experience and knowledge." You cannot reduce my experience and knowledge to something that you can put in a training manual. But anyway, so, that's a big change, and part of this is the whole team scheme that I talked about, and . . . and sort of the dumbing down or de-skilling of the industry. You notice I use the word "waiter."

[01:27:18.02]

Justin N.: Um-hm.

[01:27:18.02]

Benjamin L.: "Server" started to be used as the term. I think some people said, "Well, this is a more acceptable term, in terms of gender." But if you look at it grammatically, "waiter" and "server" are no more gendered in any grammatical sense. To me, it sort of—

[01:27:39.07]

Justin N.: It's an interesting distinction.

[01:27:40.21]

Benjamin L.: I'm a waiter. [Laughter] It's what I do. That's not such a high-fallutin' position society, but it's better than bein' a server.

[01:27:51.06]

Justin N.: Interesting.

[01:27:53.28]

Benjamin L.: That's how I see it. It's part-and-parcel with the movement towards integrating servers into this pooled tip situation. These are legal issues that are disputed. I mean, the Department of Labor under the Obama administration issued a . . . I don't know, a finding statement? I don't know the exact word for it, but you can find it on their website, that talks about how tips cannot be . . . how traditionally, non-tipped employees cannot be paid with tipped income. And basically, the tip belongs to the person receiving the tip. And there's all kinds of ways that—agreements . . . whatever quasi-legal standing, but of custom of tipping schemes where the front door host might get percentage-wise or something like that. But I think one of the distinctions is that part of their income has to be based on that floating rate of the tipped income; in other words, they can't say, "Oh, yeah, this person's paid fifteen dollars an hour, the boss is taking ten percent of that money," and he just sort of pays that person the fifteen dollars out of that money or something like that. That's not legal. Certainly, plenty of places do that, and it's all contested. And there's court cases and this, that, and the other. The workers don't really

know that—waiters are very hard to organize, waiters. And I find that most of the people I work with, whenever you express anything in terms of labor rights, they have a very fatalistic—"Oh, the boss is the boss." And that probably has to do with class differences, myself and . . . coming from, essentially, a middle-class background or upper, perhaps, in educational terms, not economic and upper middle-class background, I'm more assertive of my rights—or try to be—than a lot of people who come from more working-class backgrounds. Just in this country, we've lost any tradition of working-class activism, and they don't even want to—it never occurred to them to think about in terms of what rights they could have or how they could assert those rights.

[01:30:02.17]

Justin N.: Well, one of the things, getting back to sort of the process that you spoke of—now, Brennan's, even when you came there in 1984—

[01:30:11.26]

Benjamin L.: Mr. B's—

[01:30:12.18]

Justin N.: Mr. B, well, the Brennan—

[01:30:14.28]

Benjamin L.: Family.

[01:30:14.28]

Justin N.: —sort of way, if you will, were ahead of most other New Orleans restaurants.

[01:30:20.15]

Benjamin L.: Yes, oh, yes.

[01:30:21.12]

Justin N.: In terms of process. Were they using a point of sale system when you came in 1984?

[01:30:25.29]

Benjamin L.: No. Ah . . . we had a sort of an old, old-fashioned . . . it was a cash register system that was a point of sale system, but we didn't use it. We used it to ring up checks.

[01:30:38.06]

Justin N.: But not to send orders to the kitchen?

[01:30:39.01]

Benjamin L.: No, we used to hand ticket for about two or three years. It was a traditional three-copy ticket. The tickets were controlled. You got x number of tickets, the numbers were controlled. If you didn't give them back the unused ones, you were supposedly charged a hundred dollars for any missing, though that was—again—disputed. They had no legal right to do that, but they tried. Then we moved over to a—typical Ralph Brennan, a real I.B.M.-based point of sale system, all based on P.L.U. numbers. I would just memorize

all the P.L.U. numbers, it was all in my fingers, you would just be like a calculator all day long. I had carpal tunnel syndrome from it. It was very different from the modern—

[01:31:24.17]

Justin N.: Touch screen.

[01:31:26.05]

Benjamin L.: —that everybody has now, yeah.

[01:31:25.11]

Justin N.: So they were innovators in that.

[01:31:29.16]

Benjamin L.: Oh, yeah. Yeah. In a lot of ways the Brennan company was progressive, certainly within terms of New Orleans, in hiring women. Traditionally, African Americans only worked in banquet situations up through I don't know when. They were very good about integrating the . . . at least in New Orleans terms . . .

[01:31:53.25]

Justin N.: The front of the house.

[01:31:54.08]

Benjamin L.: The front of the house, yes.

[01:31:52.17]

Justin N.: When was the first time you worked with a black waiter?

[01:31:59.21]

Benjamin L.: Was when I worked at Mr. B's in 1984.

[01:32:02.20]

Justin N.: And that was pretty unusual.

[01:32:06.23]

Benjamin L.: Yeah, I would think it was. I mean, Galatoire's, no, probably they still don't have—I mean, they have women, but that was a big deal. Yeah.

[01:32:20.08]

Justin N.: Not if you were at the Boston Club, because if you were at the Boston Club—

[01:32:21.27]

Benjamin L.: They're all black.

[01:32:22.10]

Justin N.: They're all black, yeah.

[01:32:22.25]

Benjamin L.: And it's funny how the people who go to the Boston Club at the Boston Club would be shocked to see a white person there. But when they go to Galatoire's, they'd be shocked and horrified to see a black person waiting on them there.

[01:32:38.21]

Justin N.: Yeah.

[01:32:40.03]

Benjamin L.: I worked some catering parties where I'd be hired for uptown houses and I was supposed to be bartender, and I got there and found out they had also—even though the caterer had hired me to bartend, that they had hired their Boston Club, or I didn't get jobs 'cause I was told the hostess would like Boston Club-type waiters. Code word. Very interesting phenomenon of what essentially racist—I don't think I'm . . .

[01:33:04.24]

Justin N.: I don't think that's too strong.

[01:33:04.27]

Benjamin L.: Of a word, of a lot of my clientele is, and the way that gets expressed in these kinds of relationships; in what context they will only want a black person to serve them, and another context where they would never want a black person to serve them.

[01:33:20.16]

Justin N.: Yeah. That is, actually, really interesting. I don't know if I've, kind of, actually consciously thought about that until now. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[01:33:29.22]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. I know it's an issue. We have one African American where I work, and I think we're about to get – trying to get —someone knows a friend of a friend, we need more people, and we may actually have another. I'll be curious. This'll be another, this is a woman who works there now, and though there have been black men who worked there before, I'm curious to see what the . . . the dynamic of that is with our clientele. 'Cause you would think, in this day and age, but you'd be wrong. [Laughter] Put it that way.

[01:34:01.14]

Justin N.: Whereas the back of the house is almost very heavily African American, many restaurants.

[01:34:06.23]

Benjamin L.: Yeah, not where I work.

[01:34:09.23]

Justin N.: Okay.

[01:34:09.23]

Benjamin L.: Again, uptown is different. Also . . . sort of the ambition of, or the . . . I think you'll find more African Americans in French Quarter restaurants. But again, there's really big class distinctions between people who are sort of lifers and those who are looking to—and hopefully it's changed—and those who are looking to move up the career ladder. You know, some people want to work in name restaurants to pad their resume, and those are people who can, essentially, afford to do that. Other people need to make a buck. I mean, there's some overlap here, of course everybody needs to make a buck. But if you're sort of—your expectation is not to become a chef, but just to survive, it's a different dynamic at work there.

[01:35:03.11]

Justin N.: Right.

[01:35:03.26]

Benjamin L.: Smaller restaurants like where I work, we can't offer—we don't offer—benefits. The pay isn't great. Pay is probably matched, if pay is matched, at a French Quarter restaurant that offers benefits. It's obviously, for someone who's a lifer, that's a very easy decision to make—and they don't really care about their resume, you know. A resume is a kind of . . . middle-class, upper middle-class kind of conception.

[01:35:27.24]

Justin N.: Circling back, you said that now, since Obamacare, a lot of restaurants do not—

[01:35:32.05]

Benjamin L.: I should say, that happened to me at Crêpe Nanou. As a long-term employee who they valued, we had healthcare that was paid half and half, and at a certain point, they decided that they were going to pay my healthcare. That ended when Obamacare came in, that raised their costs. Now, I don't know how—I haven't really studied up on that, how common that was, but at least that was the excuse they gave. [Laughter] Yeah. I don't know.

[01:35:54.08]

Justin N.: But that'd be something I could ask others.

[01:35:55.28]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. But I think, I know another restaurant that is kind of a little bit bigger than where I work now, Lilette, we have a woman who expressed interest—and we were interested in her—working with us, but she doesn't want to give up her healthcare that she has, half and half split, at Lilette. Still a small restaurant, so good for them to offer some help with the healthcare. Because . . . it's important to retain your employees, you know? And it's always a struggle for restaurateurs to understand the value of their employees. I mean, they pay lip service to it, but . . .

[01:36:36.12]

Justin N.: When you talk about healthcare, being a waiter can be physically demanding.

[01:36:41.17]

Benjamin L.: Um-hm. It's also very stressful. People don't realize how stressful it is, I don't think. It's—I work in an environment where a mistake is not an option.

[01:36:51.10]

Justin N.: Right.

[01:36:52.24]

Benjamin L.: When you make a mistake, especially on food, the consequences are huge. You've got to, like, supplicate yourself to a demanding chef, beg forgiveness, and I mean—part of that is just performance, like a soccer goal keeper, when you mistake, you just gotta put it out of your mind and move forward. It's done, it's done, how are you gonna recover from this? So, you're in a situation where errors are not really a possibility. You've got very high expectations of a very wealthy clientele, and sometimes—no matter what kind of restaurant you're in, you always have a situation where, at certain points, there's more work that needs to be done than you can physically do at any one time. So you're always in a very stressful situation, most of the time. Sometimes, you're not. When I talked about a rhythm—when you're in a rhythm, everything is just going at the right pace, and everything is just as cool as can be. But that . . . there's always stress moments. A lot of people respond to that stress by drinking. You know, alcoholism is a real problem in the restaurant business. And other drugs, of course.

[01:38:03.10]

Justin N.: In the late hours as well, right?

[01:38:04.03]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. I mean, plenty of cooks—and also, there's the Anthony Bourdain effect.

And it's funny, because Bourdain seems like a very—was a very smart and sophisticated person, but the way he's been interpreted by a lot of younger chefs is kind of this meathead, we party hardy, we go out and drink, we cook all day and then we go out and drink all night and do it all over again. And put bacon in everything. [Laughter]

[01:38:31.21]

Justin N.: And butter.

[01:38:31.21]

Benjamin L.: And butter. And part of what struck me is Bourdain was just sort of . . . and also, that sort of attitude of mocking anybody who was sort of vegetarian or healthful pretensions or something like that. To him, it's sort of countercultural, sort of innate countercultural reflex or something like that. But as it's gotten translated to the masses, it's a little less . . . reduced to . . . well, its common denominator is, "We work and then we go drink all night, and then we go back and do it all again." But that leads to a lot of burnout, of course, and health problems, too, you know?

[01:39:09.23]

Justin N.: Do you find yourself socializing outside the restaurant with food businesspeople?

[01:39:12.29]

Benjamin L.: God, no. [Laughter]

[01:39:14.04]

Justin N.: 'Cause you have your other world of music.

[01:39:15.20]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. I've never—when I worked at Mr. B's, occasionally we would go out. Go to—there's a few bars, there were, probably still are, waiters' bars in the French Quarter. There actually were, and probably a few locals' bars. Chart Room, there was the King Room, King's Room. And they were segregated. The black waiters would hang out in a place called the King's Room, which was up above Bourbon Street on **Iberville**. And then, of course, I worked with a very large gay contingent in the [19]80s. Not only for African Americans, to have a job at a place like Mr. B's was a very good job, also I . . . imagine that, for the gay community, waiter was a traditional job for gays in New Orleans to occupy. A.I.D.S. took a really tremendous toll, it was really horrifying. I think at least twelve people I worked with died of A.I.D.S.—or A.I.D.S.-related circumstances—within . . . I don't know, three or four years. It was just devastating.

[01:40:18.28]

Justin N.: During the peak of that, was that the epidemic years?

[01:40:20.18]

Benjamin L.: [19]86 through whatever, [19]90 or whatever. Mr. B's was just incredibly sad.

Yeah.

[01:40:30.20]

Justin N.: Hm.

[01:40:32.01]

Benjamin L.: But that's . . .

[01:40:34.15]

Justin N.: You had mentioned a scenario where—and this is tied back, see, yeah, I was gonna wrap up, and now—

[01:40:42.03]

Benjamin L.: That's all right. That's why we do this, I can talk forever.

[01:40:45.20]

Justin N.: —where there was a theft incident. I know a lot of process, a lot of point of sale, was put in. And you talked about numbered checks. So, if you've read Gabrielle Hamilton, I recommend it. She writes about when she was a young waiter at the same time. Was there—did you see a lot of that going on? Or?

[01:41:08.28]

Benjamin L.: I remember one kid stole a check, wrote in an order—a busboy an order for a duck, put in the order, the duck came out on the runners. Big, huge guys looked like they were football players. They probably were in high school, immensely strong, great guys. Carry sixteen plates at a time. So, the food comes out on a tray with a tray cover, and then—anyhow, we found this ticket disappeared, and then we found it thrown away in the trash. The kid had just basically ordered himself a dinner. [Laughter] And he got fired, unfortunately. You know. I mean, there was probably a more clever way he could have gone about it and gotten fine, but—

[01:41:47.02]

Justin N.: So there were no schemes where people were stealing cash, or . . . ?

[01:41:50.21]

Benjamin L.: No, no. I mean, probably—oh, one guy I worked with -- this kid I worked with -- his father, who was a waiter—still a waiter—at Brennan's. Old school guy. And he came in one day, and he said, "Just think. All the thousands we stole out of that place, and the Brennans still made their millions." [Laughter] But he talked about, 'cause I talked about the checks with the numbers. They had some guy who was a printer, and they stole a check, and the guy printed up a whole bunch of counterfeit checks, and they would just introduce one a night. Yep. They said they—Dick Brennan called in the F.B.I., and the F.B.I.'s like, "We know you're stealin'. We're gonna find ya." They didn't. But it's a pretty obvious way to do it. In the era of cash, my old—go back to my old waiter buddy, Jeff,

who gave me so many stories. He was working at Arnaud's upstairs in the banquet room, and he had oilmen. Said they were oilmen from all over. And back then, early [19]60s, the bill was, like, \$230, which was a fair amount of money. First guy stumbles out the door drunk, says, "Ah, Jeff, that was great. Give me the check." Gives him the check, the guy peels off three hundred-dollar bills. "Thanks!" "No problem." Next guy comes up. "Jeff, that was great! Give me the check." He figures, what the hell? He claims to have sold the check three times.

[01:43:06.24]

Justin N.: Oh, my goodness.

[01:43:08.13]

Benjamin L.: 'Cause you only have to turn in the cash for the—

[01:43:10.00]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah.

[01:43:13.10]

Benjamin L.: And certainly in the era before point of sales, especially owners would be doing that, too. They'd be just tearing up the check and putting the money in their pocket, you know?

[01:43:23.06]

Justin N.: Two sets of books.

[01:43:25.17]

Benjamin L.: Yeah, yeah. Had an uncle, a great uncle, who was in the potato chip business. He got sent to jail when his stupid son-in-law showed the I.R.S. the wrong set of books.

[Laughter] Family war there.

[01:43:38.29]

Justin N.: Oh, Lord. Well, I guess . . . any other final observations?

[01:43:44.26]

Benjamin L.: Oh, boy. Well, yeah. I want to go back to something that's sort of been bothering me, 'cause I've talked a little bit about how where I worked hasn't been mentioned in food write-ups. But also, the state of restaurant criticism, again, I think really misses the boat for the most part when they focus on this very narrow notion of food. Or of restaurant food, and also that as the whole focus of the restaurant. 'Cause you'll notice how many restaurants that get opened up will open and they get rave reviews. How many of them are open three years later? [Laughter] So, what was great about this restaurant? If the restaurant would have been great, it should survive three years. And there's so much more to a restaurant than . . . some chef's idea of what, some grade of food, then he knows this food writer's out there and he's made extra special, made sure it was in really good condition when it arrived. It's a very contrived situation, 'cause of course, you know, we all know who the writers are. We know them personally. [Laughter] There's no secrets.

You can be sure, when Brett Anderson or Ian McNulty or whomever is sitting down at the table, the chef knows that this person's there. Everybody does. So, I think they sort of—as I like to talk about the restaurant as being this sort of theater, that's the aspect that they really miss. And think about the restaurants that you like to go to. I used to wait on you at Crêpe Nanou. By no stretch of the imagination is the food great there. It was adequate. Some of it was good. But that's not why you went. You went a lot, right?

[01:45:21.25]

Justin N.: Um-hm.

[01:45:22.18]

Benjamin L.: Or think about that. Think about the restaurants that you liked to—I think about the restaurants I like to go to.

[01:45:26.15]

Justin N.: We were very sad when you left.

[01:45:26.23]

Benjamin L.: Well, thank you. Appreciate it.

[01:45:29.20]

Justin N.: Yeah.

[01:45:31.00]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. Their business has never recovered. [Laughter] That's my revenge.

[01:45:35.10]

Justin N.: Well, they still can't cook vegetables, so.

[01:45:37.08]

Benjamin L.: No, no. On the other hand, when I got into—I didn't defend, when Nanou ran off the Vietnamese guy, so they left after Katrina, we never really got back to Katrina. It really had a real effect where I worked at Crêpe Nanou, because a lot of the Vietnamese guys who ran the whole kitchen never came back to New Orleans. They went to Houston, where they had other relatives, or something like that. Son, who did—who's the head guy—he couldn't really relate to the Americans who were working there who didn't have his work ethic. And it became a real struggle for him. Eventually, he left under circumstances that weren't really clear to me, and we got this new, young guy, who he and I did not see eye-to-eye. But for a while, he was trying to do a better job with the vegetables, and our customers rebelled, because any change is so disturbing to a certain sector—and a very important sector—of New Orleans society. The upper middle-class, or the upper class, or whatever they are, any change at all—better or worse—is just too disturbing to ever think about.

[01:46:40.15]

Justin N.: Yeah.

[01:46:41.11]

Benjamin L.: And there's very interesting social reasons why this is true that I could . . . 'cause their social position has went, there's only one direction from which it could change, and that's in a very negative direction. So, they really opposed to change.

[01:46:56.08]

Justin N.: My other favorite one is the Martinique Bistro could never, ever serve a hot cup of coffee. [Laughter] I never understood why that was.

[01:47:01.26]

Benjamin L.: Oh, man. Where I worked, our coffee cups are so damn—we keep 'em in a plate warmer, they're so damn hot, they burn peoples' lips. Martinique, wow. I used to work for . . . I used to work for Martinique when it was at . . . that was when... what's his name? [Snaps fingers] He had a restaurant called **L'Economie** at the old L'Economie Bar on Girod Street. In the . . . I'd forgotten I worked there for a little bit.

[01:47:26.13]

Justin N.: I liked Martinique.

[01:47:28.07]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. **Hubert.**

[01:47:29.08]

Justin N.: It was cozy.

[01:47:29.08]

Benjamin L.: Chef Hubert [Sandot], yeah. He was a character, like a lot of—a lot of these French guys are. They got a lot of chutzpah. [Laughter]

[01:47:38.06]

Justin N.: How long are you gonna do this?

[01:47:39.18]

Benjamin L.: Oh, boy. That's a good question. Maybe another day. It's always . . . think about retiring a lot. It's hard to find a balance. That was one thing that kept me at Crêpe Nanou for so long, was that event when things weren't going so well or my income was declining a little bit, I was working twenty-three hours a week. My schedule was pretty much set in stone, unless I wanted to make a change. And where I work now, because it's a very uneven business, my schedule changes rapidly, wildly. I end up working far more than I really want to.

[01:48:15.27]

Justin N.: Hm.

[01:48:17.28]

Benjamin L.: And we have staffing issues, so sometimes, it's not always easy to find someone to work for me if I need to do something else. So, the balance in my life has sort of changed. But that has sort of all to do with just the nature of New Orleans post-Katrina and post-gentrification. So I think everybody, people I know are working harder. You asked me if I socialize with people in the restaurant business. No, but once upon a time, everybody I knew—pretty much—either worked in music or bar. But you could survive easily in the [19]90s tending bar one or two nights a week, 'cause you can make a ton of money tending bar. I know a lot of people who are bartenders, but they work part-time. Rest of the time, they live their life. We'd all run into each other at a coffee shop during the day, never knowing—work was much easier to skate by in New Orleans. It was called the Big Easy for a reason, and certainly not that anymore.

[01:49:13.27]

Justin N.: It's definitely a pre-Katrina, post-Katrina thing.

[01:49:15.28]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. I mean, it's not just Katrina. This has changed all over the country.

[01:49:19.26]

Justin N.: Right.

[01:49:21.07]

Benjamin L.: And property—Katrina is just a very convenient demarcation point, but without it, we'd probably in the same situation.

[01:49:30.16]

Justin N.: It was an accelerant, I think.

[01:49:30.16]

Benjamin L.: Yes, oh yes. I like to say New Orleans was thirty years behind the times before Katrina, and now it rapidly accelerated to ten years behind the times. [Laughter] You know. My mistake when I moved here is not seeing that it was a process of time. It just seemed like New Orleans, when I first came to New Orleans, it was a place where time had just stood still. Which is not really true. And I could have—people I worked with were buying houses in Marigny for thirty-five thousand dollars when I started at Mr. B's. I thought, "Well, that opportunity will always be there." [Laughter] You know, fortunately, I bought a house for twice that much in the nineties in Bywater, and now, I make a good living—certainly above the New Orleans average. I'm a single person. I could not afford to buy my house in any way, and renting in that neighborhood would be fairly expensive for me. Back when I moved there, everybody I knew lived around there. They were all musicians, bartenders, or whatever; hangers-outers. That's really been the—you know. It's hard to distinguish what is the Katrina, what is the restaurant business, what is growing older. All these things contribute to this sort of . . .

[01:50:41.23]

Justin N.: The re-urbanization of America, too. People are moving back into cities and . . .

[01:50:47.20]

Benjamin L.: Well, middle-class or upper middle-class people. And moving out working class people.

[01:50:52.13]

Justin N.: Correct.

[01:50:52.13]

Benjamin L.: And, I mean, a lot of trends described in racial terms—which is certainly very important—but also, when I moved into Bywater, there were a lot of working class white people. Cab drivers, books, whatever. Waiters. As well as black people. Now, there's white Air B&Bs. [Laughter] You know?

[01:51:16.25]

Justin N.: That is a—do you find amongst your coworkers now that . . . they're looking at moving away?

[01:51:28.10]

Benjamin L.: No. But I will say that, for someone who feels like—because I own my house and I'm at a certain position in life that I feel comfortable—that it's kind of surprising to me that people who make as much as we do . . . and they're single, leave kind of paycheck to

paycheck. And they worry about, "Oh, it's summer, we're not going to make any money." Or this, that, and the other. It's like, "Wow." You know? 'Cause in my New Orleans, making what we make now or even what we made twenty years ago was just fine and dandy and comfortable. You know? So, to be in that situation, it's like, "Wow, you're not makin' it on this amount of money? That's hard. That's tough." And think about what cooks, who are making a third—a half to a third of what we're making, really, or maybe they're working more hours, so it accumulates more. On an hourly wage, they're making half of what we're making on an hourly wage or less.

[01:52:29.08]

Justin N.: And having to commute quite a distance, in some cases.

[01:52:33.11]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. I would suppose so, yeah. And it . . . it's gonna get to the point where—and certainly, the point in San Francisco, restaurants are closing in San Francisco 'cause they can't find staff. And I wonder when it will get to that point in New Orleans. I mean, I don't know how these restaurants are staffed as it is. And also, I'm slightly frustrated that what I see as staffing problems, I can't really figure out a way to translate that into a better situation for myself. [Laughter] Because you'd think that someone with a lot of experience, who likes to think they have a lot of ability, should be able to leverage that into some kind of market advantage, and there doesn't really seem to be any real way to do that.

[01:53:22.00]

Justin N.: Do you find yourself mentoring people?

[01:53:24.05]

Benjamin L.: No, not really. I mean, I was mentored, but I don't find—no.

[01:53:27.26]

Justin N.: There's not opportunity for that?

[01:53:30.01]

Benjamin L.: Well, where we work, we don't have any . . . part of our hiring problem is, we need to hire fully-formed people.

[01:53:37.17]

Justin N.: You don't have room for—

[01:53:38.19]

Benjamin L.: We don't have room for—

[01:53:41.01]

Justin N.: Novices.

[01:53:43.03]

Benjamin L.: No, no. We have one young woman who's a little bit younger than other people.

She's very good in some ways and could use some mentoring in other ways, but also, it's not—people don't . . . there's really not an attitude, that much, of how much there is to learn. In general. I'm not saying where I work now, but in general, when you see this—I see this when I go out to eat or something like that, is that there's no attitude that . . . the minimal level of effort is perfectly appropriate.

[01:54:20.26]

Justin N.: It's on page thirty-one of the manual.

[01:54:18.27]

Benjamin L.: Yeah, no. [Laughter] I've almost never gone to a corporate restaurant with an employee manual, I certainly hope not. But there's just this attitude that this job is beneath me and there's nothing to be learned about it, and . . . though there's other people who are really into, the areas of learning—which certainly I could be better at, is like wine or something like that, which is a huge subject. Sommeliers and this, that, and the other. And have endless knowledge about, there's an awful lot to learn if you want to get into the details of it.

[01:54:53.22]

Justin N.: And that's a big deal in the Brennan universe.

[01:54:55.11]

Benjamin L.: It's a big deal, really, any restaurant in a way, though it's weird because customers . . . most customers are not sophisticated about wine, and then those who are sophisticated at wine are more sophisticated than you're ever going to be. So you're not . . . I just pride myself in being able to listen to people and figure out what they might like. For the . . . and for anybody like that, I have more knowledge than they do, and basically, it's just imparting confidence to them. 'Cause a lot of people lack confidence. A lot of customers lack confidence. I would notice that, especially at La Crêpe Nanou, where the menu—the titles of all the items are listed in French, and underneath with the English. So many times, people would say, "I don't know how to say this, but I'd like the shrimp." I would say, "Well, you said it perfectly." Because whether you say 'les crevettes du jour' or 'the shrimp of the day' absolutely means the same thing to me. One doesn't convey more sophistication or knowledge or anything. It's just communication. But they would feel, because of this—and it was interesting that you had more of a . . . the power relationship was different there, even with the same customers that I'll see at Gautreau's. But at Gautreau's, they're in their pomp. They're performing there. So, they're gonna be the authority or they're gonna be—they're not gonna look to me. I mean, occasionally they do for guidance, but generally, they just, "We want this. We want that." Which is fine with me. I don't need to . . . but it's an interesting phenomenon when there's kind of these little shifts in power relationships.

[01:56:34.22]

Justin N.: And it's different when you have regulars.

[01:56:35.23]

Benjamin L.: Yes. Yeah. Regulars make—especially as I tell people, "If you get someone who really, once they get to know you and are comfortable with someone, might be really persnickety or this, that, or the other, once they get to know, you can screw up in all kinds of ways, and they're like, 'It's fine.'" You know? They're accepting of you, because it's not . . . they just want to know you as a person. And, as I say, New Orleans, especially people of a certain social class in New Orleans, are only comfortable with situations that are comfortable to them. They're not comfortable with new situations. They're not—very different from foodies or people like that, or people who come from—in New Orleans, social power comes from what I guess Marx would call "primitive accumulation," people who got their first, took the land, stole the labor of slaves, stole the oil out of the ground, stole the timber on the land. And they're holding on it. It's a colonization process. And that's what their—and so, their power really comes from who their family is.

[01:57:41.14]

Justin N.: Endogamy, yeah.

[01:57:42.05]

Benjamin L.: And other parts, in the new parts of economy, it comes from your knowledge base. So, your social power comes from knowing more about wine or knowing more about food, or knowing about what the hot restaurants are or something like that. And then, so that, you have a different relationship to those kind of people, than people who—power comes just from who they are. So, they have a different kind of, in some ways

they're more comfortable, but they're not comfortable with change. And people who are based on knowing the newest and latest thing. 'Course, when you're in the game of searching out the newest and latest thing, no restaurant is the newest and latest thing for very long. And that's another reason why I get back to why . . . my argument with the people who write about restaurants, and always looking for novelty, but that's not what . . . you have to play the novelty game, but it's the consistency game that wins the day for a restaurant. 'Cause you only make money when you're in business for a long period of time. You don't make money from being in a business for a short period of time.

[01:58:43.24]

Justin N.: Great.

[01:58:45.07]

Benjamin L.: Yeah.

[01:58:46.11]

Justin N.: Well, we are two hours in.

[01:58:46.11]

Benjamin L.: Yeah.

[01:58:47.22]

Justin N.: That's great. Yeah, that one restaurant that comes to mind is that one that's at—what is that, the corner of Magazine and . . . ?

[01:58:53.05]

Benjamin L.: Square Root, was it?

[01:58:56.09]

Justin N.: Magazine and Napoleon, or Nashville. The one they spent all that money building that—

[01:59:00.20]

Benjamin L.: Oh, the bourbon place.

[01:59:04.08]

Justin N.: Yes.

[01:59:05.19]

Benjamin L.: And now that's where Shaya —

[01:59:06.17]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Put in a bunch of money and then, well, I'll save that for after the recording. But thank you so much.

[01:59:14.19]

Benjamin L.: One little story to add about—she probably won't hear this and I won't mention her name—we had a worker who, young woman who came from that restaurant, I forgot its name already. The whiskey place. When I see resumes from when we're looking to hire, I'm not involved in hiring decisions, but we take a look at the resumes. Her cover letter said that her desire was to curate fine dining experiences. Which, if I were in charge of the hiring process, pfft. Right in the bin. But that'd be pretty much true of every resume I see, because everybody is—"Expediently folded napkins." Well, come on. [Laughter] My resume says I worked at this restaurant for x number of years and this restaurant x number of years and I've written these articles and been in these movies and blah, blah, blah. If you don't know what a waiter does at Mr. B's or Gautreau's, than I don't want to work for you. But that's my attitude. Anyway, and it turns out she couldn't curate her way out of a paper bag. So. [Laughter] But I just thought that—not to hold it against her, that's what people have been taught. And this whole faux bullshit corporate speak just drives me up the wall. But again, I'm . . . in some ways, I'm a traditionalist, which is odd because in terms of music, people think of me as involved in the avant-garde. But I was also thinking about the connection between music and food, and in a lot of ways, there's a lot of similarities in that you have a classical tradition. Which comes out of an aristocratic background, but then becomes adapted by the bourgeoisie as this fine art, whether it's music or the symphony or the opera, and then you've got folk traditions or ethnic food traditions, and folk music traditions, and then you've got sort of this commercialization of those. Then you've got sort of this avant-garde, deracinated kind of space where people don't know—they're just sort of trying to create things out of

thin air. I really see a lot of parallels between how the music world works and how food music works, in that way.

[02:01:18.16]

Justin N.: The two pillars of our cultural economy.

[02:01:20.00]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. And also, both are kind of . . . well, they're manipulated or exploited in very cynical ways, in my eyes. And . . . and also, folk music and ethnic traditions or folk traditions in food, how do you move them out of their own community into a larger commercial space while still retaining something? And that can happen for a while, 'cause a lot of what's, say, power in music is really about communities coming into the commercial environment from a subsistence economy, into a commercial economy. Think in terms of rhythm and blues. One way to listen to James Brown are, like, codes for living. How do you live? A country boy like James Brown, essentially from the ghetto, from a very poor, essentially rural Georgia background, how do you make it in the world? There's songs about "Stay in School" and this, that, and the other. And you can hear this in country music or Norteña music or anything like that, it's like this music of becoming. But once the music's become, where does it go from there? That's kind of true in food. So, like, you've got New Orleans Creole tradition. It makes a lot of sense within the Creole community, but how does it translate once you move out of that community into this wider world? So people use this term, Creole, and this, that, and the other. It just can become some sort of free-floating public relations bullshit. [Laughter]

[02:02:59.27]

Justin N.: But enough about the New Orleans convention visitor.

[02:03:00.06]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. [Laughter] Ralph Brennan was once head of that, too.

[02:03:04.10]

Justin N.: I am a fan of—

[02:03:07.05]

Benjamin L.: But I do, I respect Ralph. He's a very solid guy.

[02:03:10.00]

Justin N.: Yeah, oh, yeah.

[02:03:13.07]

Benjamin L.: He's a very straight up guy and you know where he stands. As my old—I will end with my great Cajun waiter, who I still use . . . because I've found, also, when I worked at Mr. B's, I observed the way people from sort of excluded communities could assert themselves within, my exaggerating the tendencies or stereotypes of that community. So, gay waiters would camp it up. I worked with some black waiters who would sort of Uncle Tom it up, really. And then Hispanic waiters would—and then my Cajun friend

who would crank up the accent and the Cajun jokes and all this and that. But Jeff would used to say about Ralph, he would always bug him all the time, 'cause they want way back. And says, "Ralph, you're just cheap." And Ralph—"I'm not cheap!" Jeff will say, "Well, what would you call yourself? Conservative?" That's pretty much Ralph. He's not cheap. He's conservative.

[02:04:12.18]

Justin N.: Yeah.

[02:04:13.28]

Benjamin L.: He will spend money when—they will invest in their, they do invest in their businesses and in growth, and in their people, too.

[02:04:23.05]

Justin N.: And stability, yeah. Yeah. Well, thank you very much.

[02:04:25.23]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. I hope this is helpful.

[02:04:27.15]

Justin N.: This has been great. As I often do with these, I make a big list of questions, ideas, and I seldom look at them, because we flow, as we should. Again, Benjamin Lyons, and it's been a pleasure.

[02:04:43.03]

Benjamin L.: Yeah. Thank you.

[02:04:44.21]

Justin N.: Thank you.

[End of interview]