



**Jon Otterstrom**  
**New Orleans, Louisiana**  
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Interviewer: Justin Nystrom  
Length: One hour and eighteen minutes  
Project: Career Servers

[*START INTERVIEW*]

[00:00:03.09]

**Justin N.:** All right, I'm recording in both places. Well, good morning. It's June 12, 2019. I am here at Loyola University, New Orleans, with Jon "Jonny" Otterstrom, and he is presently a waiter at Arnaud's.

[00:00:22.13]

**Jon O.:** Everybody calls me Jonny O.

[00:00:24.05]

**Justin N.:** Jonny O.

[00:00:25.17]

**Jon O.:** Um-hm.

[00:00:25.17]

**Justin N.:** And we're here to do an interview as part of the Southern Foodways Alliance Longtime Servers Project. Right now, I'm gonna do a twenty-second noise print of the room, as instructed. And I only do twenty seconds 'cause I can't handle thirty.

[00:01:08.03]

**Jon O.:** It's your world.

[00:01:09.17]

**Justin N.:** Yeah. [Laughter] I appreciate that. So, Jonny O., would you please—I'm gonna ask you to do a little introduction of yourself . . . now it's getting your microphone. That's okay.

[00:01:26.14]

**Jon O.:** Sorry.

[00:01:28.09]

**Justin N.:** You know, actually, if we clip it the other direction on that side, it'll not . . . yeah.

There we go, perfect. Will not pick up the cloth. So, can you tell me just a little bit about your growing up? You said in the e-mail that you're originally from the Portland area.

[00:01:46.02]

**Jon O.:** Portland, Oregon. Yeah.

[00:01:47.11]

**Justin N.:** Yeah. So, tell me a little bit about growing up and childhood. I like to know my interview subjects a little bit as people. Go ahead.

[00:01:56.04]

**Jon O.:** Grew up and I was born in 1955, you know? So . . . it was interesting growing up in Portland in the late [19]50s, through the [19]60s and [19]70s, for sure. Grew up around a

country club. My dad was an excellent golfer. It was full of adventure, that's for sure. I definitely had the run of the neighborhood from four years old on, and all the way through. But not sure what you want to . . .

[00:02:33.02]

**Justin N.:** Well, was it an urban area?

[00:02:33.02]

**Jon O.:** Yeah. In Portland, definitely upper middle class neighborhood. So, it was comfortable, for sure growing up.

[00:02:46.02]

**Justin N.:** Who were some of your influences as a child? Bigger influences?

[00:02:51.19]

**Jon O.:** Oh . . . honestly, you talking about into music, or . . . ?

[00:02:57.02]

**Justin N.:** Anything.

[00:02:57.13]

**Jon O.:** Oh, I don't really . . . don't know how to identify that, you know? I was always runnin' and full of adventure and didn't necessarily focus in on anything creatively.

[00:03:13.02]

**Justin N.:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Was anyone in music or food that you—

[00:03:17.20]

**Jon O.:** Oh, sure. The Galloping Gourmet was a big influence on early food programming. I don't know if you're familiar with—for sure. And I was drawn to those kind of things on television at an early age.

[00:03:40.28]

**Justin N.:** So, nobody in your family was in food?

[00:03:40.28]

**Jon O.:** No, no. But . . . my mother was an excellent cook, had a big, varied repertoire. We used to put on large, big dinner parties and so forth. You know, growin' up around a country club. There are many other events around upscale food.

[00:04:00.03]

**Justin N.:** So, you were around fine dining as a child?

[00:04:02.12]

**Jon O.:** Not necessarily fine dining. I guess I wouldn't even look at it that way now, compared to what I know as fine dining now. But I was around a lot of dining, for sure.

[00:04:16.25]

**Justin N.:** Interesting, yeah. Great.

[00:04:20.21]

**Jon O.:** But that's not why I fell into waiting tables by any means, because we if we go down this list, this certainly is not fine dining for the most, majority of it.

[00:04:32.26]

**Justin N.:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, when would you say you started in working in restaurants in Portland?

[00:04:40.15]

**Jon O.:** In [19]77, I had my first restaurant job. It was a place called The Rafters. I wasn't very good at it, I didn't like it. I only went for a little over six months, you know, before I moved off.

[00:04:54.25]

**Justin N.:** Yeah, what kind of place was The Rafters?

[00:04:58.07]

**Jon O.:** Steakhouse type of thing. It was part of a larger thing, I don't even recall the chain. It was . . . it was pretty good for a steakhouse, you know, at that time. But I guess I wasn't drawn to it, and I was really surprised when I went back to it here in New Orleans, too.

[00:05:19.23]

**Justin N.:** What were you doing before you got into the restaurant world?

[00:05:23.21]

**Jon O.:** I've spent a lot of time in sales. Sales and anywhere from running carpet cleaning jobs and upselling there. I was in hotels as a bellman and bell captain for over five years back in the [19]70s, which included courtesy car driving to and from the airport. One of the chains had a double decker London bus, I got to drive around picking up groups and so forth. Just added to the fun.

[00:05:57.09]

**Justin N.:** I'm paranoid when I put my bicycle on top of the car. I can't imagine. [Laughter]  
Double decker bus.

[00:06:03.08]

**Jon O.:** I don't have such paranoia.

[00:06:06.22]

**Justin N.:** Yeah, yeah. That's great.

[00:06:09.11]

**Jon O.:** So, eventually, you found your way to New Orleans. Can you tell me a little bit about how that journey unfolded?

[00:06:17.24]

**Justin N.:** Sure. All the way through the [19]80s, I was running a large sales organization. I was Corporate V.P. We had a hundred and fifty employees. It was a telemarketing firm, and we were leadin' the field. We built it from nothing into twenty-six million a year. We did really good in that industry, but that's also workin' fourteen, sixteen hours a days with, routinely—and by the time we finally failed in our last office—I just didn't have the heart to go back into sales. So, I took a bartending class in Daytona Beach, Florida, and . . .

[Laughter] That put me behind the bars starting there, and then moving from Daytona to Portland, worked around there. When I was movin' from Daytona Beach to here, I stopped into New Orleans 'cause it was on the way, you know? Sixteen hours here from . . .

[Laughter] Bleary-eyed, say, "This is my kinda town." Kept on drivin'. Less than a year later, I came down here, just to work a few months as a bartender.

[00:07:31.09]

**Justin N.:** So that was your first time you'd ever been in New Orleans, on that road trip?

[00:07:33.25]

**Jon O.:** Right.



[00:07:35.26]

**Justin N.:** Wow.

[00:07:37.10]

**Jon O.:** Yeah.

[00:07:37.17]

**Justin N.:** Can you describe the feeling? 'This is your kinda town.'

[00:07:40.26]

**Jon O.:** Well, I'd been married for many years. I was just becoming single again, you know.

This is the first time I'd been into a town that had twenty-four hours bars. I remember climbing out of the bars with the sun up, and we had a great time all night. It was all part of the flavor, you know, of New Orleans, which became—after I got here—became sweet and sour, too. Like most people can testify in the waiting business.

[00:08:15.11]

**Justin N.:** I think in any business, yeah.

[00:08:17.03]

**Jon O.:** Well.

[00:08:17.23]

**Justin N.:** So, some time lapses, and you come back about how long?

[00:08:23.19]

**Jon O.:** Less than a year. Yeah, less than a year. I was bartending up in Portland and saving my dollars to just come down and work a few months.

[00:08:34.05]

**Justin N.:** Yeah, that was your intention.

[00:08:34.05]

**Jon O.:** And that became . . . how many years later.

[00:08:38.22]

**Justin N.:** I think about a lot time . . . New Orleans driven what I call the Gilligan's Island experience, the three-hour tour turns into a much more extended stay.

[00:08:49.05]

**Jon O.:** Mine's a common story as far as that goes. Yeah, I came here for a short time and never left.

[00:08:56.18]

**Justin N.:** So, where was your first gig?

[00:08:58.26]

**Jon O.:** At the Hog's Breath Saloon. Hog's Breath is better than no breath at all, or so they say.

Which is . . . it was a good gig for comin' into town. Twenty-three stool bar with a grill and it was a party bar. Had a great time on it. There were bras and panties over the bar.

My job was to get 'em up on the bar and give 'em a staple gun and . . . anyway, it was a good time. It was a lot of fun.

[00:09:30.17]

**Justin N.:** [Laughter] And where was that located?

[00:09:32.02]

**Jon O.:** On Chartres. Chartres, it's . . . where Kingfish is now. Their back dining room used to be the Hog's Breath Saloon, you know. But . . . they're out of Florida. There were four of 'em in the chain. It was a lot of fun.

[00:09:55.00]

**Justin N.:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Was that the one associated with Clint Eastwood? Was that right?

[00:09:56.27]

**Jon O.:** No, no. That one's in Carmel, which there was named conflict issues when I was working there between the two.

[00:10:05.21]

**Justin N.:** That happens, yeah.

[00:10:06.25]

**Jon O.:** Sure, of course.

[00:10:07.19]

**Justin N.:** So where on to from there?

[00:10:11.21]

**Jon O.:** Actually, after that is where I waited tables for the first time. I was out of work for a while. I got fired from that job. Outta work for a while and I couldn't find a good bar gig, so a buddy of mine that worked at 711 Tricou House on Bourbon Street, he got me a job waitin' tables. I was clueless walking in waiting tables. Not good at it. Didn't know what to do. Faked my way through it very much.

[00:10:42.27]

**Justin N.:** What are some memorable moments from that time?

[00:10:45.02]

**Jon O.:** Well, I was first time working on Bourbon Street and first time working Mardi Gras. You know, they had the balcony with the bar upstairs, so I was waiting tables at this place that had . . . with all the flashing and everything that goes along with being on

Bourbon Street. You know, and workin' that crowd. I'm glad I did that, but I'm glad I got away from it fast, too. But I can't even think of a most memorable time. I can think of some real dysfunctional times there, for sure.

[00:11:24.13]

**Justin N.:** Tell me about 'em.

[00:11:24.16]

**Jon O.:** Uh . . . we did the all-you-can eat shrimp, and the kitchen was probably the sketchiest kitchen I'd ever seen in my life. I was afraid to walk into the kitchen, in the dish pit, sometimes, just because I didn't want to see it. As in, there's other places in New Orleans that are very similar to that. Work that tourist crowd and . . . not a whole lot more mattered than the dollar comin' in the door, if you know what I mean. Yeah, again, through that time, this was a place when those video series of "Girls Gone Wild" were out, so they had—across the street—they had cameras coming in, they could control, and they had the V.I.P. balcony with strippers from all over the world and all those things. It was just a . . . I came here for a completely different set of rules... for a completely different thing, and it was completely different from anything else I had ever done.

[00:12:33.15]

**Justin N.:** You sought what you found, huh?

[00:12:37.02]

**Jon O.:** I guess so.

[00:12:37.02]

**Justin N.:** Found what you sought. [Laughter]

[00:12:37.18]

**Jon O.:** Know where you're goin' with it. Leavin' there, I went to work at the Olde N'Awlins Cookery, and that's where I learned how to make money on the tables. I increased my money on the tables. I learned, put together a system as far as a working system, to where I could work the numbers and increase my sales. I ended up bein' top sales on my tables.

[00:13:02.02]

**Justin N.:** Where is that place again?

[00:13:02.02]

**Jon O.:** Olde N'Awlins Cookery.

[00:13:05.03]

**Justin N.:** That's . . .

[00:13:05.06]

**Jon O.:** It's where Oceania Grill is now. Okay? And when I was there, they had so many of the concierge referring 'em, so we had a line out the door practically every night. Sixteen dining rooms, something like that.

[00:13:24.29]

**Justin N.:** Who owned that restaurant?

[00:13:26.11]

**Jon O.:** Michael Lala.

[00:13:28.10]

**Justin N.:** Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. The Lalas.

[00:13:28.11]

**Jon O.:** He—

[00:13:30.02]

**Justin N.:** Yeah, I know the Lalas. That's right.

[00:13:31.03]

**Jon O.:** But, he alienated all those concierge. He used to put on a free party of appreciation every year for the concierge, and . . . [Laughter] Then he threw a party and put it as a cash bar.

[00:13:49.23]

**Justin N.:** Oof.

[00:13:51.11]

**Jon O.:** And it killed his sales, you know? I mean, he was doing—the numbers I heard was over five million a year, and that put it down to a third or less.

[00:14:03.29]

**Justin N.:** Wow.

[00:14:05.13]

**Jon O.:** He lost business that fast.

[00:14:06.29]

**Justin N.:** Now, you having worked in a hotel, were probably keenly aware of the importance of the concierge.

[00:14:11.01]

**Jon O.:** Sure, sure.

[00:14:13.00]

**Justin N.:** Did you know any of the concierge yourself, or—?



[00:14:14.09]

**Jon O.:** No. No, I don't know 'em here, either. You know, where I am now. We get concierge sending us business at Arnaud's all the time, but I don't know.

[00:14:25.29]

**Justin N.:** It's an interesting subculture.

[00:14:27.23]

**Jon O.:** I'm sure.

[00:14:27.23]

**Justin N.:** Concierge.

[00:14:27.23]

**Jon O.:** I'm sure.

[00:14:29.08]

**Justin N.:** Yeah . . . great, great. So, was there anyone there that kind of showed you how to be a waiter?

[00:14:36.26]

**Jon O.:** Sure. I don't really recall his name at this point, but I kind of patterned many things after him. I was able to, like I say, learn how to make money at the tables. But then, there was, I had never worked in such a rude management house in my life, either. You know? The managers all had write-up pads on them, all the time. So, if you walked in two minutes after . . . you were supposed to be there, that was a write-up you'd get at the door. If you leaned against a wall, that was a write-up. And anything you did was a write-up. If you get so many write-ups in the course of a ninety-day period, you get suspended for a week or two, whatever. It's just kind of really odd place in that respect. That's where I found there was no respect for the servers. So, that only went so far.

[00:15:40.07]

**Justin N.:** So, an antagonism between the servers and the management kind of ran through the place.

[00:15:47.05]

**Jon O.:** Oh, man. The owner would never know your name. You know, that kind of place, even though he's there all the time. He'd never know your name. Didn't want to.

[00:15:56.13]

**Justin N.:** Is that were you decided that you were going to be a waiter? Now, let me ask you, I interviewed somebody who didn't like the term 'server.' How do you feel about that term?

[00:16:06.20]

**Jon O.:** It's not one of my favorite terms. I'm a waiter. Yeah, I don't have any offense to it, but . . . yeah, I end up going to, with one of the managers, was going to Alex Patout's. He was returning there as a maître d'. He took me and one of the other guys, a guy named Kenneth, with him to Alex Patout's when it was Royal Street, right across from the Monteleone Hotel. So, that was my introduction to fine dining.

[00:16:42.15]

**Justin N.:** Um-hm. Yeah, and at a time when a maître d' was a much more important figure.

[00:16:50.19]

**Jon O.:** I think they're still important figures, you know. I wouldn't want to do their job in any way, shape, or form. I'm glad there are people that do that, because it's the coordinating efforts. You know? There's a lotta attitudes in that world. That was back in the days when you had to pay them on the side every night over what their cut was, okay? If you expected to be treated well on your seating.

[00:17:20.07]

**Justin N.:** Interesting.

[00:17:21.11]

**Jon O.:** And I think that's all over the world, in one fashion or another. Where I am at Arnaud's, it used to be that way, but they kyboshed that long before I started there. So . . . which is good for where I am now.

[00:17:37.29]

**Justin N.:** Yeah, yeah. Interesting. So, was that something that was—when you got to Patout’s, was that something that was still in force?

[00:17:51.24]

**Jon O.:** Yeah, absolutely. But . . . yeah, and it was really kinda weird, because I had never been in fine dining. I hadn't been waiting tables that long, and I was put right in as a captain. So . . . I didn't learn the ropes in the same fashion that everybody did. I could navigate, absolutely, but . . . for example, where at Arnaud’s, everybody starts as a back waiter. Doesn't matter what your skill level is. Doesn't matter what your work history is, everybody starts as a back waiter. Then move into a front waiter, then captain, if you're so inclined. On a three-person team.

**Justin N.:** So, what were some of the kinda like, "Oh, this is different," moments when you got there?

[00:18:43.08]

**Jon O.:** To Alex Patout’s?

[00:18:43.08]

**Justin N.:** Um-hm.

[00:18:43.08]

**Jon O.:** You know, where we have a great wine list. 'Course, I don't know anything about wine, but we've got this great wine list. We have an upscale buyer. It's my first time wearing a tuxedo to work. Lotta interesting times there for sure. The G.M. was a . . . very flamboyant gay man, and he was—he was also the bartender, and he was right in the middle of the dining room. And he'd go on these sordid stories, to where people can hear him out here, and you know what? They really shouldn't be hearing these kind of stories, but he's a G.M., don't say a word to him. Upscale restaurant. We figured out that he would have the attitude of . . . "You order Absolut, they don't know. Doesn't matter." And he'd fill that order with whatever he so chose, and we got the idea that he was refilling the bottles at night, so we'd put a little tick on the bottles when he wasn't around, and kinda funny where the bottles'd go up and then they'd come back up over that tick. That was . . . an old French Quarter navigating that you'd find a lot of places, like on Bourbon and so forth. But I was really surprised to find that in that fine dining restaurant.

[00:20:20.26]

**Justin N.:** So, the customers when you were at Olde N'Awlins Cookery were mostly from out of town?

[00:20:26.26]

**Jon O.:** Sure. Actually, every restaurant I've ever worked at were mostly out of town. Now, at Arnaud's, we have a good local clientele, but majority, I expect people to be from out of town in the dining room.

[00:20:42.07]

**Justin N.:** Um-hm. So Alex, when you're at Alex Patout's, this is fine dining. What year would this be?

[00:20:51.26]

**Jon O.:** Started there in . . . I have it writ down. I did that last night. Tail end of [19]94 is when I started there, tail end of [19]94. So, end of [19]93 and [19]94 was from Tricou House to Olde N'Awlins Cookery to Patout's.

[00:21:16.02]

**Justin N.:** Um-hm. So what kind of a . . . like, they have a dress code at Alex Patout's? Were you responsible for that?

[00:21:25.21]

**Jon O.:** I mean, we wore tuxedos. I don't recall what a dress code might be for the guests. You know, I don't recall that. But, you know, it was upscale, so most people came in with the idea of going out to a fine dining restaurant. That was my first time being around selling champagnes and more expensive wines. We had a *gueridon* with the cognacs, and I have never been around cognacs, including Remi Martin Louis XIII's cognac. I think we sold it then for eighty-five dollars a shot. Sales for over \$500 a shot.

[00:22:14.00]

**Justin N.:** Where were these people from? What kind of people were you waiting on?

[00:22:21.08]

**Jon O.:** You know, the business, the conventions, and the tourists. Like all restaurants here, as far as that goes.

[00:22:30.28]

**Justin N.:** Do you find, when you're waiting tables, that you learn very much about the people you're waiting on?

[00:22:35.19]

**Jon O.:** Sometimes, sometimes. Some people want to talk. Some people want to be left alone, you know? But you gotta gauge that all the time.

[00:22:41.23]

**Justin N.:** Yeah, yeah. In this time, you feel like you're developing your style as a waiter?

[00:22:48.17]

**Jon O.:** Sure. But I've been in the people business since I was this high. . . I used to get my mother to make donuts, and I'd go and knock—door knock—and sellin' door-to-door, pssh, when I was in elementary school. When I was a small kid. I grew up around . . . as I mentioned, the country club. I've been around people all my life. And sixteen years in pro

sales between commission work and overrides on businesses. It's not hard to get into that aspect of it.

[00:23:20.29]

**Justin N.:** So, describe to me your style as a waiter.

[00:23:27.22]

**Jon O.:** Wow, okay. I'm definitely upbeat, always. I don't know what a bad day looks like, is exactly what will come out of my mouth on a routine basis. I believe that 100%, but that's a choice I made so many years ago, that I was gonna have a good day today. It gives me permission every day to wake up and make a good day. But I also know that I'm one of the few in this industry that have that, because the attitudes I ended up working with—and it's at every place I've worked at—are all over the page. Up and down. Ah, you know one of the nice things that I feel like I've honed over the years is, I don't care what a person tips me anymore. You know? Not at all. And people go on such meltdown if they have somebody that treats them less than what they think they should have, they're boisterous about it and all those things. You know what? I've tracked it for so long, I don't even have to look at the tips. If I get a bad tip, I'm not gonna tell my team about it. 'Cause at the end of the night, when I do my math, I'm over twenty percent. As long as I'm over twenty percent for the night, I'm in good shape. It doesn't matter what that one table did or what those two tables did, or what that person said, or any of those things. You know? Like water running off a duck. Keep smilin', keep goin', and people are welcome on my station every night. It's not always the case, and it doesn't matter if it's a



street corner restaurant on Bourbon Street or fine dining restaurant. All the servers seem to have the same kind of . . . mellow approach to it.

[00:25:20.25]

**Justin N.:** Huh. Interesting, interesting. So, you spent how long at this restaurant? At Alex Patout's?

[00:25:30.20]

**Jon O.:** At Alex Patout's? About four years. Yeah, about four, four and a half years.

[00:25:36.01]

**Justin N.:** And a new opportunity comes along?

[00:25:40.01]

**Jon O.:** No. I went down a hole with drugs.

[00:25:43.23]

**Justin N.:** Ah.

[00:25:44.20]

**Jon O.:** Yeah, there's a big gap in there where I was livin' to hustle rather than take care of things. I got my wake-up call, and got away from that aspect.

[00:25:57.01]

**Justin N.:** Did you see a lot of that in the restaurant business at that time?

[00:25:58.10]

**Jon O.:** Absolutely. That's laced all the way through. And that's never gonna disappear in that industry. You know? Everything's readily available, and especially in a town like this. The bars are open late enough for your drinking convenience. Everything else follows suit with all that.

[00:26:16.15]

**Justin N.:** Um-hm.

[00:26:18.02]

**Jon O.:** I moved here to live and work in the bars, you know. I haven't been to—I don't go to bars anymore. I'm so happy to go home, into my world, and take care of my things. But it cost me a fortune to meet all these people around town, way back when, and I know a lot of people.

[00:26:38.24]

**Justin N.:** So, you of course, we've talked—you live in the Quarter and have lived in the Quarter. Were you living in the Quarter at this time?

[00:26:45.16]

**Jon O.:** Close enough. Close enough. Like right across the street from the Quarter on Rampart Street in . . . in . . . or into Tremé, just a few blocks into Tremé. Yeah, it's always been close enough.

[00:27:01.18]

**Justin N.:** It's a lot different now.

[00:27:03.09]

**Jon O.:** Sure.

[00:27:09.06]

**Justin N.:** Tell me some of the things that you miss from that time.

[00:27:11.08]

**Jon O.:** From . . .

[00:27:10.03]

**Justin N.:** The nineties, mid-nineties when you were working, at this juncture in your life.

[00:27:14.29]

**Jon O.:** You know—

[00:27:17.10]

**Justin N.:** Or not necessarily—

[00:27:17.00]

**Jon O.:** You know, I . . . when I was scrapin' the underbelly in New Orleans, scratchin' the underbelly of New Orleans, so, this is . . . there's plenty of players out there to be bouncin' off of. But like I say, I'm in such a different direction now from where I was then. I learned some real weird lessons back then. A lot of it was a real dark part of my tapestry that is behind me now.

[00:27:49.23]

**Justin N.:** So you get through that.

[00:27:53.24]

**Jon O.:** Sure.

[00:27:55.04]

**Justin N.:** And then you get back into the restaurants.

[00:27:54.29]

**Jon O.:** Um-hm, well, actually with Katrina is when I walked out of the restaurants. I was workin' at the Alpine restaurant at Katrina. So, anyway, yeah, I went from Alex Patout's to The Alpine in [19]97, as I was raising my head back out of that hole I found. Worked there until Katrina.

[00:28:19.05]

**Justin N.:** So, this is about the first time I came to New Orleans, in the late [19]90s like that.

[00:28:22.24]

**Jon O.:** Yeah.

[00:28:24.00]

**Justin N.:** So, tell me a little bit about the Alpine.

[00:28:25.29]

**Jon O.:** Alpine, you know, it had been there since [19]50s or [19]60s. It was notorious. It was completely different ownership now than, truly, its notorious days. But then again . . . we put the fun in bein' dysfunctional, if you know what I mean. Amer Badr, the guy that owned it for so long, his hiring pool—if he needed somebody to go to work, he'd go to the Stage Door bar or Jackson Square. "Come on, come on! You can work right now!" [Laughter] So, that's . . . that brought in elements that were unsavory, oftentimes. You know. Oh, I had been threatened by chefs in the window, wagging knives at me. I'm just tryin' to get what I need for the table, you know? I don't know.

[00:29:30.22]

**Justin N.:** I know, in a restaurant like that—especially in the more cash area, in New Orleans, there's a lot more cash in the late [19]90s than there is today—

[00:29:40.25]

**Jon O.:** Oh, absolutely.

[00:29:42.07]

**Justin N.:** Did you see a lotta skimming?

[00:29:46.09]

**Jon O.:** You know, sure. Sure. Through association, I learned that in some bars, too. But then again, my personal integrity came to the surface again, and I am white on sheet. And very much have been, even through my personal difficult times. You know? I don't do that, but it was around. And people encouraged it. In fact, when I was there, there were a couple servers. They'd had a credit card skimmer in their pocket. So, there was somebody that would pay them so much for a credit card number. I was shocked when I heard that people were actually doing anything like that. But that's, I'm sure, was found many places in the Quarter. If it was found in The Alpine. It was found in a lot of places.

[00:30:49.24]

**Justin N.:** Yeah. 'Cause I recall, around that time—the credit card, the scanner issue got in the news, and people were all of a sudden checking their statements much more closely, yeah.

[00:30:56.13]

**Jon O.:** Sure, absolutely.

[00:31:01.08]

**Justin N.:** So, you're at the Alpine, who are—are you in touch with any of those people you worked with back then?

[00:31:08.08]

**Jon O.:** Ah, I run into a few of 'em around. Not too much, though. It's a small little block we all live on, so we're gonna cross paths from time to time. In fact, it's . . . the gentleman that owned the Alpine— Amer Badr —his brother came over from Beirut, they're Lebanese. He came over from Beirut, I was the first American, Wassek, his brother, met. Taught him how to bus tables and used to be, "Hey, roll my silverware for me." His sons both came over, and I was the first Americans they met. Same thing, I taught 'em how to be busboys. I'd pay 'em four dollars a day to roll my silverware for me. Now, of course, they own Oceania Restaurant, and Old N'Awlins Cookery, and just picked up Petunia's, so they're doin' very, very well. [Laughter] But it's kinda fun to look back at—I taught 'em how to be busboys many years ago.

[00:32:19.25]

**Justin N.:** You played your part.

[00:32:20.21]

**Jon O.:** Absolutely, absolutely.

[00:32:24.13]

**Justin N.:** We're all someone else's stop on the wheel, after all.

[00:32:26.26]

**Jon O.:** Sure.

[00:32:28.09]

**Justin N.:** So, tell me a little bit about your relationship with the back of the house, whether it be dishwashers or cooks. Are these separate worlds? Is there a lot of interaction in your minds?

[00:32:42.00]

**Jon O.:** There's gonna be a lot of interaction, but you know what? It's a soap opera in every restaurant. Every restaurant is gonna have their soap operas. There's people I get along with terrific; I usually get along pretty good with chefs. But that's not always the case. Where I work now, it's the most . . . stable kitchen I've ever seen in my life, and that's from the dish pit to the lines. Doesn't mean there aren't attitudes that fly sometimes, but it's stable, as far as what job gets done every day. It's not always the case. Dishwashers like to scream a lot. People in the kitchen like to scream a lot. And servers like to scream a lot, too.

[00:33:30.17]



**Justin N.:** [Laughter] Back up to The Alpine. This is where Katrina found you.

[00:33:36.24]

**Jon O.:** Um-hm. I'd been there for eight and a half years.

[00:33:40.19]

**Justin N.:** So tell me about that time, if you don't mind.

[00:33:43.07]

**Jon O.:** Sure. Ah . . . you know, that's going through the turn of the century, so the traffic comin' to New Orleans was incredibly good. People were partyin' like it was 1999. So, our numbers coming through were fabulous. Again, what I learned in sales, I put together upsales that found . . . I ended up getting onto the menu. So . . . I built a good reputation, table-side. I had more call tables in that restaurant than any other place I've ever worked, was at the Alpine. Every night, I had people comin' in. These are guests that are comin' back to see me. So, I felt really good about those aspects.

[00:34:34.26]

**Justin N.:** So, these are people visiting who are coming back multiple times on the same—

[00:34:40.29]

**Jon O.:** Sure, sure.

[00:34:40.29]

**Justin N.:** Not necessarily locals.

[00:34:44.22]

**Jon O.:** Some locals, but primarily travelers. Tourists come back to New Orleans over and over again.

[00:34:52.23]

**Justin N.:** Ah, interesting.

[00:34:55.01]

**Jon O.:** Sure. Absolutely.

[00:34:55.24]

**Justin N.:** Capistrato.

[00:34:56.06]

**Jon O.:** I had . . . people being sent to me when I was at the Alpine in such huge numbers, too. I had people referred to me from Europe, comin' in from Europe, all over the States. Which, that was a real feather in my cap, too, that people would have 'em come see me.

[00:35:19.10]

**Justin N.:** Some people will come to New Orleans, and they'd remember the restaurant, but equally, they would remember you.

[00:35:25.28]

**Jon O.:** Sure.

[00:35:25:32]

**Justin N.:** So your brand, your upbeat brand. What else—if you're listening to this recording, you hear a jingle every now and then. You're wearing these really—

[00:35:34.04]

**Jon O.:** [Laughter]

[00:35:34.04]

**Justin N.:** —fabulous bracelets there, and we'll have photographs of them, certainly, before it's all done. They're a fork, it's a dinner fork that's been bent into a bracelet, and it features a small Hohner harmonica, as well as additional decoration. And there's some inscription on it. But they are auditory, and you had your spoons on your beltline, and another one with a level, which I particularly like.

[00:36:08.26]

**Jon O.:** And these are all made by the same artist, too.

[00:36:10.22]

**Justin N.:** What's the artist's name?

[00:36:10.22]

**Jon O.:** Clyde Casey.

[00:36:14.22]

**Justin N.:** I'm gonna clack these spoons for my microphone. And these are part of your brand?

[00:36:22.06]

**Jon O.:** Yeah. At Arnaud's, you know. And I'm not a musician, I only fake the funk. But people ask about it. And people ask about 'em, and the crowd really does go wild over it. These, I can kinda clap as I'm goin' through. I work in the bistro at Arnaud's, so we have live music going table to table. I really like that atmosphere for waiting tables. It's a three-piece band, and the Gumbo Trio. They're all wonderful musicians. With that, I can kinda tap my way through my station. If I'm just kinda walking through, and people like it.

[00:37:08.06]

**Justin N.:** So waiting tables as a performance. Do you consider it a performance?

[00:37:10.23]

**Jon O.:** Absolutely. In fact, it's . . . I call it the Jonny O. Show. When we get first table, it's always show time, is what I'll say.

[00:37:26.07]

**Justin N.:** Yeah. People say, "When I come back, I'm gonna sit in his section."

[00:37:30.25]

**Jon O.:** I don't get as many call parties at Arnaud's as I did at Alpine, honestly. But might get a lot of the same guests comin' over and over, sure.

[00:37:40.06]

**Justin N.:** Ah. That's great. That's great. So, I'm sorry, I asked about Katrina, but I love interviews to go where they go, so I'm not a real constringer of flow. But tell me, so, when were you first aware that something was going to happen?

[00:38:00.25]

**Jon O.:** What do you mean?

[00:38:00.25]

**Justin N.:** In terms of the storm, that there was going to be an impact?

[00:38:05.20]

**Jon O.:** Ah . . . actually, I had just gotten back from a month vacation. When the storm was in the Gulf, and I'd decided—I had three days before we packed our bags and headed out.

And, of course, I thought I was gonna be coming back, just like any other one. Run and return. But . . . well, that's not the case.

[00:38:35.00]

**Justin N.:** How long were you gone?

[00:38:37.29]

**Jon O.:** Actually, I was gone for about three months. I came back on the dump truck and a Bobcat, and did a dump truck Bobcat service for five years after Katrina. There's a lot of work in this area.

[00:38:47.28]

**Justin N.:** Yeah. Oh, yeah.

[00:38:48.17]

**Jon O.:** As you can imagine.

[00:38:50.21]

**Justin N.:** Oh, yeah. I can recall it. Yeah.

[00:38:52.04]

**Jon O.:** Sure.

[00:38:53.13]

**Justin N.:** So, you weren't doing restaurant work for a while.

[00:38:57.21]

**Jon O.:** Five years, yeah.

[00:38:59.10]

**Justin N.:** It was customers at the Alpine that would come in a couple times a year, with their family, and they'd come—they'd be at my tables most nights of the week, and being evacuated, I end up making calls around . . . customers, with this one family in Minnesota, ended up giving me a dump truck. You know, I was talkin' about—I was just tryin' to go into the luxury soap business. I was making great handmade soap at that time, and in fact, the day Katrina hit, I had myself scheduled to go down and get my occupational license so I could start selling into shops and down at the French Market. Okay? But the reality was, here came the storm. In the wake of the storm, I knew that was not the time to be in the luxury soap business, selling bars at seven dollars a pop.

[00:39:53.24]

**Justin N.:** Yeah. People needed cleaning supplies, but a different nature.

[00:39:57.07]

**Jon O.:** Yeah, absolutely. So I ended up coming back with that dump truck and Bobcat, and did that for five years.

[00:40:03.08]

**Justin N.:** For five years, wow. Wow. So, what brought you back to restaurants?

[00:40:09.05]

**Jon O.:** I had old equipment, and I had some breakdowns, to where I . . . I ended up losing all my resources trying to get my equipment back on the ground, back up and running. You know? My business had developed into repeat and referral for the majority of it. We were doin' concrete demolition and concrete pouring, still debris hauling, and all those things, but . . . I just gave up on it after losin' my butt. Decided to get back into it. A friend got me referred into the Marigny Brasserie on Frenchman Street.

[00:40:52.28]

**Justin N.:** Yeah, a place I recall with great fondness.

[00:40:56.05]

**Jon O.:** Okay, all right.

[00:40:59.12]

**Justin N.:** How does your recollection marinate with—

[00:41:00.23]

**Jon O.:** Um . . . [Laughter] Sweet and sour there, too.



[00:41:04.21]

**Justin N.:** I guess I knew it was Cafe Marigny before. It was across the street originally.

[00:41:11.03]

**Jon O.:** Oh. That, I don't know. Marigny Brasserie, I remember it as Rubyfruit Jungle, which was a lesbian bar. [Laughter]

[00:41:23.20]

**Justin N.:** So tell me about the Marigny Brasserie over there.

[00:41:27.14]

**Jon O.:** Getting back into it, I was fakin' my way through the wine list, and I started takin' wine classes. Not that they really came into good play at that restaurant, but I started gaining wine knowledge, first through book study and then through the proper way, through wine tasting. And development that way. I was takin' several wine classes over the years now. But . . .

[00:41:57.17]

**Justin N.:** Where did you receive that wine education, if you don't mind saying?

[00:42:01.27]

**Jon O.:** Where did I receive it?

[00:42:01.28]

**Justin N.:** Yeah. Where did you—

[00:42:06.09]

**Jon O.:** Where I took most of my classes was at W.I.N.O., Wine Institute of New Orleans. He's an accredited wine teacher offering several courses, so I took the general classes that they would have throughout the year, and then the W.I.S.A.T.—or, not the W.I.S.A.T., French Wine sommelier course I took through him as well, and became a lot more knowledgeable at that time. Now, since, I've been able to travel through Bordeaux and to some of the finest wineries around. But . . .

[00:42:42.25]

**Justin N.:** That's tremendously gratifying, too.

[00:42:44.20]

**Jon O.:** Oh, yeah. Yeah. My ex-wife is French, and so I had opportunities, a couple opportunities, to spend time over there. A good friend of ours had recently retired from the . . . Bordeaux Wine Exchange, Bordeaux.com, and she gave me a personal tour up and down the Modoc Peninsula, through Pomerol, Saint-Émilion, and I couldn't have asked for a better orientation over there. That's when I was working at Arnaud's, which we have a fabulous wine list. Some of the properties I was on, we sell from up to seven thousand dollars for the bottle. Now, do we really sell those seven thousand dollar

bottles? Ah, perhaps not. But . . . the most prestigious ones we have on our list, I have been on those properties. So, that was very gratifying, for sure.

[00:43:40.18]

**Justin N.:** Sweet and sour at Marigny Brasserie.

[00:43:43.00]

**Jon O.:** Every restaurant is sweet and sour.

[00:43:45.16]

**Justin N.:** Explain to me what you mean.

[00:43:49.26]

**Jon O.:** You know . . . when I talk sweet and sour, oftentimes, it's more about the people you work with. So many people have to walk in the door with so much attitude, and they want to apply attitude throughout their daily routines. I shield my joy. I kind of put a bubble up and shield my joy as best I can, but you can't always. I mean . . . the guy that used to own Marigny Brasserie, he'd get so stuck on stupid on things. I remember one Friday night, we've got a line out the door, and he calls the host that's doing all the seating. And it was about 8 o'clock at night with a line out the door, and he says, "Check out. I don't want to pay you overtime." Ah . . . okay. Well, I'm right . . . I had earned my way into the prime station there. You know? Either bar tables, which I had quite a few bar tables to work and slingin' food, or the Frenchman Street tables, the ones on the sidewalk along with

Frenchman Street. Whichever station was gonna be hot that night. Well, I was in the bar and all of a sudden, everybody walkin' in the door is cornering me about seatings and so forth. So, for the lack of a little bit of overtime, he just cut it. I remember another time when he . . . we're gettin' ready, we don't have many—we have rolled silverware—and we didn't have linens to roll the silverware. There was a few on the rack for backup and then what's on the table. He says—I brought it to his attention—he says, "Ah, we should be able to make it." "We have a busy night comin' into the weekend." So, it wasn't long before we're out of our regular linens and we're putting down two cocktail napkins with the silverware on the table. And that was because he didn't want to pay a little extra for the after-hours delivery of linen, which he could have had, and I'm sure was a twenty or twenty-five dollar bill. But no, we're servin' food with cocktail napkins in a full-service restaurant. It's just like . . . it's kinda hard to work with some of these things.

[00:46:31.07]

**Justin N.:** Do you find many managers who are owners who have never waited tables?

[00:46:35.10]

**Jon O.:** I'm around that. You get around that sometimes, primarily owners. So, they don't really have much routine understanding. But . . .

[00:46:55.29]

**Justin N.:** I want to talk a little bit—and I definitely want to talk about Arnaud’s . . . you became . . . you said you managed to, when you got really Alex Patout’s, you decided to become a professional server. Or was it before then? A professional waiter.

[00:47:15.20]

**Jon O.:** You know, I always applied ethics to whatever job I might do. So, where do I make the call? You know, I never expected to be in the business as long as I have. I've got thirty-five years in the hospitality industry now, you know, 'cause it started in Portland in hotels, as bellman and bell captain. All the way through. Then I went into sales for about a sixteen-year period, and then in Daytona Beach, going into the bartending, was back into it. I've been, primarily, around it all the time. There was never a decision to be in this industry. It's just, that's the momentum, that's what I'm doing, so one year leads into another into another.

[00:48:02.04]

**Justin N.:** That's interesting. I find variety in this—as, I imagine, I'm glad I am finding variety in this and people's trajectories. So, let's talk a little bit about diners for a minute. At Arnaud’s, of course, you do have some regulars, I'm sure. But being in the Quarter, you have a lot of people. But in all the different places. You've been waiting tables over the emergence of cell phones.

[00:48:32.05]

**Jon O.:** Huh. Funny you bring that up, because at Katrina . . . as I mentioned, I came back with a dump truck and a bobcat, did that for five years. Okay? That five years I was out of the business was when the cell phones came in. The smartphones came in. Okay? So . . . for a second . . .

[00:48:56.15]

**Justin N.:** It's okay.

Jon O: So, coming back to waiting tables in 2010 at Marigny Brasserie, the world had changed. You know? It really stood out for me the first time I had a twelve-top sit down, and everybody was on their phones. They're not talkin' to each other. They're on their phones. It just amazed me. You're payin' some decent money to come here as a group, and you're not even talkin' to each other. So, that was my first awareness. Then, when people sit down, a couple sit down, the first thing that comes on the table is two cell phones. They're sitting back and texting. It just was really odd to see that transition. So, again, I went from Katrina to coming back when it's mainstream. So, it was really an odd . . . it was . . . very evident, the change.

[00:50:04.00]

**Justin N.:** What's the strangest thing you've ever seen a diner do?

[00:50:06.12]

**Jon O.:** Ooh.

[00:50:08.24]

**Justin N.:** Or, there could be a variety. A string of strange things.

[00:50:12.20]

**Jon O.:** Believe me, there's always strings of odd things. I'm gonna think about it a minute.

[00:50:22.22]

**Justin N.:** Okay.

[00:50:24.08]

**Jon O.:** You know, nothing's really jumpin' to mind. I mean, there's a million stories on that track, but . . . nothing's really jumped into my mind, I'm sorry.

[00:50:39.25]

**Justin N.:** We can circle back.

[00:50:39.25]

**Jon O.:** Yeah, sure.

[00:50:41.04]

**Justin N.:** To this, too.

[00:50:44.11]

**Jon O.:** Sure.

[00:50:45.20]

**Justin N.:** Another thing that we've seen emerge, of course, in that time, is the rise of social media and internet reviewing of restaurants. Have you had any—have you felt any of that impact as a waiter?

[00:51:01.26]

**Jon O.:** That's an ongoing concern, more so for the house. Actually, I started getting—in the early days of the internet, when I was at Alpine—I got such a good following there, and I started getting reviews. Good reviews online. You know, now, that's a conscious part of daily business, when we're getting that kind of feedback immediately, that we talk about it in the meetings at Arnaud's all the time. When things start slipping, when the reviews, overall reviews, start slipping. Then what we can do to bring it back, and then we get the long string of good reviews. So, that's a real conscious part of—in the service industry now, for sure.

[00:51:52.13]

**Justin N.:** So restaurant management is really, really looking at this—

[00:51:55.17]



**Jon O.:** They are reading those reviews every day. You know? They have to . . . the people I worked with, the maître d's I work with, they have to answers to the owners about these issues. So, it's—yeah, it has changed with the social media, for sure.

[00:52:17.29]

**Justin N.:** Do you know any waiters who particularly like to read their own reviews?

[00:52:23.11]

**Jon O.:** Sure, a lot of people do. I've never gotten involved in social media myself. I don't even have a Facebook page. So, I'm oblivious to it. I have seen good reviews when it's brought to my attention that there is a review on there. I remember one horrible review when somebody brought it to my attention. But that was kinda funny too, because I remember specifically this guest, and . . . I think that whole review became sport for some people, too. 'Cause every time I'm at the table, he's smilin' at me. When I'm away from the table, obviously, he had many things to complain about. I was really surprised this person did such a horrible review online, 'cause I saw the guy's picture, and like I say, every time I was at the table, it's smilin' and smilin' and smilin' at me. So . . . I think a lot of it can be a game.

[00:53:29.02]

**Justin N.:** Yeah. Are diners still photographing their food?

[00:53:33.18]

**Jon O.:** Oh, more so now than ever. Absolutely. When it was . . . dedicated cameras, quite a bit, but now that it's on the phone, everybody's photographing food—including myself.

[00:53:50.17]

**Justin N.:** Yeah. So, the phone, of course, has become kind of this almost accepted—begrudgingly, if so—part of the dining room.

[00:53:59.07]

**Jon O.:** Sure.

[00:53:59.07]

**Justin N.:** And the staff is just, it's just part of the furniture, I guess.

[00:54:02.19]

**Jon O.:** Sure, sure. Absolutely.

[00:54:06.24]

**Justin N.:** Now, Arnaud's isn't—Arnaud's has a very capable kitchen, but it's not one of those restaurants in New Orleans that has a celebrity chef per se.

[00:54:17.21]

**Jon O.:** Not per se, but you know, Tommy Giovanni, he has been there for probably over nineteen years now. Like I say, it's the most stable kitchen I've ever worked with.

Consistent product on that table, which makes my job so much easier. You know? The amount of times I've had to square off with kitchens that—"that's not the dish. I don't want to serve that. It's not right. You know?" – "Ah! Get it on the table!" Fightin' and fightin'. I said, "No." You know? And that puts everything way behind too, because it was to be re-prepared or whatever. It's real relaxing in that aspect, that I can pretty much count on the quality when it's put on the table.

[00:55:10.17]

**Justin N.:** What do you make, from your vantage point in the dining room, of the rise of the celebrity chef?

[00:55:19.12]

**Jon O.:** You know, again, I'm a little unplugged, so I'm not the right person to ask that type of— I threw my television away over sixteen years ago. I've unplugged from media. People will mention stars and all these celebrities, and I don't know who they're talking about. So, there's many people that can give you an intelligent answer on that one.

[00:55:45.13]

**Justin N.:** That's okay. In and of itself an answer, right? Do you think diners are more educated about food today than they were?

[00:55:57.17]

**Jon O.:** Sure. Sure.

[00:55:58.04]

**Justin N.:** Yeah.

[00:55:58.07]

**Jon O.:** Because of these T.V., the Food Channel. There's expectations. No, there's always been an expectation for a good meal. Always; I don't think that's ever changed. But people are looking through a different lens because of the media that they're bombarded with. For sure.

[00:56:23.02]

**Justin N.:** Restaurants, since you've been working restaurants—and I realize there are gaps where you did other stuff—but the way restaurants are run, have you seen, particularly from the standpoint of the dining room staff, do you see, what are some of the big changes you've seen in the way restaurants are run? Do you feel kind of like the essence is still the same as it ever was?

[00:56:45.27]

**Jon O.:** You know, every restaurant—this is a list of seven New Orleans restaurants that I've worked, and you know what? Every house is different.

[00:56:55.01]

**Justin N.:** Yeah.

[00:56:55.01]

**Jon O.:** So, the lens I look through is gonna be a little bit different, too. Every house is gonna be entirely different between attitudes, between operationals, and so forth. You know, I don't have long enough, other . . . eight years at Alpine, I'm at six years now at Arnaud's. I only hear stories about the way that it used to be, and Arnaud's has been there for a hundred and one years now. So, I mean, there's some of the stories that go way back in that restaurant.

[00:57:30.25]

**Justin N.:** Yeah, sure. Sure. When was the first time you used a point of sale system?

[00:57:35.02]

**Jon O.:** Ah . . . at Marigny Brasserie.

[00:57:42.25]

**Justin N.:** So before that, just tickets? Paper tickets?

[00:57:43.14]

**Jon O.:** Well, actually, there was a point of sale but not with a screen. It wasn't the same. It was just an ordering process. And a ticket would come up in the kitchen, but it was of a completely different fashion than what we have now.

[00:58:03.13]

**Justin N.:** Yeah. So when was the first time that link between dining room and kitchen—

[00:58:09.01]

**Jon O.:** I mean, at Alex Patout's, it was paper tickets. Everything was paper tickets. Which, you know, was . . . actually, the best transition I've seen is with the modern system is splitting checks up.

[00:58:25.19]

**Justin N.:** Oh, yeah.

[00:58:27.12]

**Jon O.:** Sure. 'Cause this lady wants to take care of her own, and next one wants to take care of these three people and those kind of things, which is so easy to do now. But even the last version of our micros was not. You know? So . . . yeah, it's evolved to the point where it's much easier to navigate separate checks. Actually, the whole ordering process, for sure.

[00:59:02.08]

**Justin N.:** Yeah. So, have you thought of your diners anymore?

[00:59:04.06]

**Jon O.:** What's that?

[00:59:04.06]

**Justin N.:** Have you thought of your diners anymore, has something kind of you—

[00:59:07.29]

**Jon O.:** You know, I . . . everybody's so welcome at my tables all the time. There are places, it's stupid—but you know, I have a habit of forgetting these things. I know I've got some juicy stories, but it's just that I'm trying to think of what comes to mind. I've had the opportunity to wait on some celebrities over the years, but then again, I don't cater to 'em as being celebrities either, if you know what I mean.

[00:59:36.05]

**Justin N.:** Um-hm. Do you think dining is a performance, if waiting tables is a performance?  
Do you see dining as a performance?

[00:59:44.14]

**Jon O.:** Some people, sure. Sure. They come with certain expectations, and . . . you know, like I say, I've got a good interaction with people. People are welcome at my tables all the time. The same philosophy, I don't know what a bad day looks like, and you are welcome here every day. So, my personal approach is a little bit different than the person runnin' that station next to me.

[01:00:13.21]

**Justin N.:** Yeah.

[01:00:13.09]

**Jon O.:** Ya know. It has to have a problem with that table, and it has to have a problem with that table, and it has to have a problem with that table, you know? And that asshole and that asshole. I don't . . . again, people hear me sayin' it all over the time, "There's no assholes on my station." You know? There aren't. I don't see it there. If I have a problem with somebody, kill 'em with kindness. Kill 'em with kindness, and all of a sudden, they're probably your best table of the night. You know? Don't worry about a rough start. Don't take it personally.

[01:00:48.09]

**Justin N.:** That's great. That's great stuff. So, thinking about working in New Orleans and the different seasons that we have, at Arnaud's, you're pretty busy at Mardi Gras, right?

[01:01:03.21]

**Jon O.:** Oh, extremely.

[01:01:05.07]

**Justin N.:** So you have a lot of, like—tell me about what it's like to work at Arnaud's in particular, I'm gonna say, at Mardi Gras.

[01:01:11.23]

**Jon O.:** Well, you know, we have big times other than Mardi Gras. Yes, Mardi Gras is huge.



[01:01:18.03]

**Justin N.:** Oh, yeah. Well, I'm gonna get to those—

[01:01:18.03]

**Jon O.:** Okay. Mardi Gras is huge. We take care of parade crews, on one aspect. The place is huge. I don't know if you're familiar with Arnaud's, but there's eleven building connected, seventeen dining rooms, thirty-eight thousand square feet of dining space, almost a full acre.

[01:01:34.23]

**Justin N.:** Wow.

[01:01:34.23]

**Jon O.:** And, see, almost a thousand people in that restaurant. Over half of that is private dining, okay? Which . . . I work menus, but there's a lot of times when we're farmed out to banquets, too, and do the private dining aspects, too. There's . . . going through Mardi Gras, there's huge days where—the drinking lunches. We're not open for lunch except for a few times a year. During Mardi Gras, we're open for a few of the days. Those are pretty notorious days with locals, you know. The same lineup every year, and the drinks are flowin' before they're gettin' to the restaurant, and they're definitely flowin' all the way through. I mean, there's one day where it's pretty common to find confetti cannons going off in the main dining room. But it's also pretty interesting to see the transition between a

crazy lunch like that—and we did the same thing around Christmas, too. And the last guest is gone at 4:30, maybe, and we're open for service for the next shift. Just that fast. It amazes me sometimes, the reconfigurations that go on in that place.

[01:03:09.24]

**Justin N.:** Um-hm. Friday before Mardi Gras, I guess—

[01:03:10.29]

**Jon O.:** Is huge.

[01:03:13.08]

**Justin N.:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. So, Mardi Gras is a big time. The jazz fest customer. Tell me about how that's changed over time.

[01:03:22.13]

**Jon O.:** Well, I don't work jazz fest.

[01:03:22.28]

**Justin N.:** Ah.

[01:03:22.29]

**Jon O.:** I work—I sell these bracelets out on the streets at Jazz Fest, so I'm not around during that time.

[01:03:31.15]

**Justin N.:** Ah-ha.

[01:03:31.28]

**Jon O.:** Gladly.

[01:03:32.29]

**Justin N.:** Yeah, yeah. But it's a big time for the restaurant.

[01:03:36.22]

**Jon O.:** Sure, sure. But it's also—the traffic patterns are different, because people are at the Fairgrounds all day. So, after they come back from the Fairgrounds, they get cleaned up in their hotel room, so people could be standing around just looking at—the servers can be standing around looking at each other until . . . 8:30, 9 o'clock, and the place fills. Goes from zero to sixty in about thirty seconds flat.

[01:04:05.06]

**Justin N.:** Hm, yeah. What does it look like when things are really clicking in your station?

[01:04:12.14]

**Jon O.:** Ah . . . that depends on the crew that I have. My normal crew, we can navigate through any kind of traffic. I don't mind getting four or five tables sat at the same time. It doesn't

matter to me in any way, shape, or form. There's other teams that'll go on meltdown if they get a double set. I don't understand that, but my back waiter, him and I have been working together for so long that . . . he's got my back and I've got his back on it. It's a three-person team, so there's a back waiter, front waiter, and captain. I'm responsible for everything taken care of, ultimately. The front waiter is beverage and desserts, primarily, and anywhere else he can help out, and back waiter is runnin' the ice, runnin' the bread, flippin' tables, filling waters, you know, replenishing butters and getting the cold appetizers out of the kitchen. Anything that doesn't have to be cooked, the back waiter will run in the kitchen.

[01:05:18.16]

**Justin N.:** Salad station and things like that.

[01:05:19.27]

**Jon O.:** Yeah, and so forth. Uh-huh.

[01:05:20.24]

**Justin N.:** Yeah.

[01:05:22.06]

**Jon O.:** Yeah. But . . . like I say, I'm fortunate with my team line up, but again, I've groomed that over the years, too, to where we just line 'em up and knock 'em down. We get so slammed busy sometimes. But you just . . . it's good, because again, we can play off each

other, and I fill in the gaps what other people's jobs are on the station, I fill in those gaps.

It ends up bein' smooth, even on really busy nights when we're running forty or fifty

covers through a station. In fine dining, forty or fifty covers is a lotta traffic.

[01:06:04.25]

**Justin N.:** Yeah, yeah. You've sometimes, I'm sure, seen . . . coworkers come in and join a restaurant, you're like, "That person's not gonna last."

[01:06:14.22]

**Jon O.:** Sure.

[01:06:15.27]

**Justin N.:** What does that person look like when they walk in the door to you?

[01:06:20.05]

**Jon O.:** [Laughter] That's all over the page there, too. And you know what? I wasn't very good when I started, too, so, I mean . . . I realize that oftentimes when I try to prejudge. But . . . if you're not layin' back, if you're not followin' lead, if you're . . . not doin' your share, it crumbles the station in the dining room. And we see these people all the time come in that, they're never gonna make it, and it makes it hard, because now I have to do two full-time jobs through the course of it—'cause everybody starts as a back waiter—so at least I don't have to have that same breakdown on the front waiter. At least the front waiter part of my team has got a little more time under their belt, but not always that much more.

Like I say, I'm fortunate with the team that I've put together. But again . . . if . . . there's a breakdown at the bar, okay . . . or . . . when people go into the weeds, if they don't . . . keep their attitude going right, it just breaks it down. You know? Some of the times, I have to jump through all those extra hoops if I don't have that experienced team with me, 'cause reality says, the five days a week that I work . . . I don't always have my team.

[01:08:01.18]

**Justin N.:** Yeah. Has the face of the dining room changed, dining room staff, changed over the time you've been doing this?

[01:08:09.16]

**Jon O.:** Oh, sure. The majority of . . .

[01:08:12.11]

**Justin N.:** Tell me about . . .

[01:08:12.11]

**Jon O.:** It's a turnover business, you know? And it's a transient business.

[01:08:15.00]

**Justin N.:** Well, I mean, the type of people who are waiting tables. Has that changed?

[01:08:19.05]

**Jon O.:** You know, I think it's the same mold as ever been, personally. You know . . . we look back over the history, long history of Arnaud's. We've got some people that've been there thirty years. You know? I think it's about the same. You know? I mean, it's always gonna be a mix. There's fewer career servers now than there used to be. Still a few. I mean, I never thought I was gonna be a career server, but here, after thirty-five years in the industry, I guess that's what you would call me.

[01:09:02.05]

**Justin N.:** Fair.

[01:09:03.21]

**Jon O.:** I never thought I'd be at this stage in this industry, either, but . . . anyway.

[01:09:14.16]

**Justin N.:** Yeah, yeah. Are there more women waiting tables?

[01:09:17.08]

**Jon O.:** Absolutely, absolutely. In fact, Arnaud's was exclusively male servers, even through the [19]80s. It was still exclusively male servers. Now, it's . . . probably 50/50, as an easy mark to say. In fact, they just did a huge remodel just to allow . . . a women's locker room expansion. We had a huge locker room for . . . for the men, and the women had to share lockers, because it just wasn't part of—it wasn't part of the business.

[01:10:04.10]

**Justin N.:** Um-hm. Are more people of color waiting tables?

[01:10:06.08]

**Jon O.:** I think there always has been, in New Orleans, anyway.

[01:10:11.02]

**Justin N.:** A lot of restaurants have a sort of very white front of the house and a very black back of the house.

[01:10:14.07]

**Jon O.:** There's always that demarcation, sure.

[01:10:18.18]

**Justin N.:** Yeah. So Arnaud's, you feel, has quite a number, or . . . ?

[01:10:25.16]

**Jon O.:** We've got a good number. We've got a good number. But then again, we have people from all over. We've got a lot of Moldovans speaking Russian. We've got a lot of Latinos. In the wake of Katrina, that's another of the demographics that changed.

[01:10:41.06]

**Justin N.:** Well, I wanted to ask you about that, yeah.



[01:10:42.02]

**Jon O.:** Sure.

[01:10:42.12]

**Justin N.:** Sure.

[01:10:45.24]

**Jon O.:** In the wake of Katrina, the Latino demographics have completely and radically changed. The diaspora with Katrina had a lot of the black community exit and not necessarily have a way to get back once they got settled. That void was filled with—'cause that was the main workforce then for storm cleanup and so forth—and that changed. When I was evacuated over into Dallas, I heard a lot of people sayin', "Well, they're headin' to New Orleans, 'cause you can make money on the cleanup." And a lot of people moved here in the wake of, and like I say, it's changed all that aspect.

[01:11:29.16]

**Justin N.:** And in the restaurant, then.

[01:11:29.23]

**Jon O.:** Sure.

[01:11:29.23]

**Justin N.:** So, are we finding Latinos mostly in the back of the house, or are we finding them in the front?

[01:11:33.05]

**Jon O.:** Well, front. Both. Front and back, absolutely.

[01:11:38.24]

**Justin N.:** Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

[01:11:38.04]

**Jon O.:** Front and back.

[01:11:39.18]

**Justin N.:** Yeah. Nuevo Orleans.

[01:11:42.06]

**Jon O.:** Yeah, right. Absolutely.

[01:11:46.00]

**Justin N.:** Fabulous. We're—goodness, we're at almost an hour and a quarter . . . is there anything I'm not covering?

[01:11:56.28]

**Jon O.:** La la la la. I don't know. I'm still tryin' to get a good guest story goin' for you, but . . .

[01:12:10.05]

**Justin N.:** It's okay. You know, one of the things I do want to talk a little bit about—and it's a theme we've seen a lot, particularly in New Orleans generally, but you were talkin' about how you're fortunate in your living accommodation right now. But you've certainly seen coworkers impacted by the rise and the cost of living in New Orleans, right?

[01:12:35.12]

**Jon O.:** Absolutely.

[01:12:37.24]

**Justin N.:** Yeah. How has this changed working in a restaurant? Staffing a restaurant?

[01:12:43.14]

**Jon O.:** You know, I don't know. But it's always been a case where it's multiple—so many people are multiple roommates. I think it's always been that way, though. Touring, going through Aspen, Colorado, that was the first glimpse I got at that, of some of the servers had to have five people in the house. You know? To be able to afford it. I run into a certain amount of that here, too. I've always lived alone here. I've always had great living situations . . . at least navigable, I can navigate it on a solo. But I think that's always—but the rising costs, I've seen those costs spiral up. What my neighbors pay is not doable, so there's a lotta where you could have . . . before the storm, there were still places you

could get—not much of a place, just, say, a flop—for three hundred bucks. That's not gonna be there now, you know?

[01:13:58.08]

**Justin N.:** Yeah. I mean, I recall when seven-fifty would get you a very nice place in the Quarter.

[01:14:04.05]

**Jon O.:** Sure. Sure, yeah.

[01:14:06.03]

**Justin N.:** Might not get you a nice place in Terrytown now, you know?

[01:14:10.07]

**Jon O.:** Exactly, exactly.

[01:14:13.09]

**Justin N.:** What about healthcare and health insurance? Do you—

[01:14:18.27]

**Jon O.:** The only place I've ever had it is at Arnaud's.

[01:14:21.17]

**Justin N.:** Um-hm. And what kind of plan is it?

[01:14:24.10]

**Jon O.:** Costs me a hundred and fifty dollars a month, and that's broken up between two paychecks. And like I say, that's the only thing I did. I don't really use doctors much, so I have that in case of an emergency. I don't mind paying it, to have it as a backup.

[01:14:44.19]

**Justin N.:** Well, and you look like you're a physically fit person.

[01:14:47.02]

**Jon O.:** Um-hm.

[01:14:47.02]

**Justin N.:** Who takes care of himself.

[01:14:49.02]

**Jon O.:** Vegan.

[01:14:49.18]

**Justin N.:** Oh, vegan? Interesting. So, you've surely read Anthony Bourdain's—have you ever read any of his—

[01:14:59.04]

**Jon O.:** No, I haven't.

[01:14:59.25]

**Justin N.:** Very disparaging of that kinda thing.

[01:15:04.13]

**Jon O.:** Well, you know, and that's one of the reasons I kind of move on, too. July will . . . be the . . . July 6 will be four years off meat. Meat and dairy. In my personal life, I'm a yoga, I'm yogic. With all the philosophies, ahimsa, non-harming and those things. I have to exercise such a great disconnect every day I walk into work, 'cause I'm selling veal. I'm selling multiple murders on every fork. I have to disconnect, 'cause I do it with enthusiasm, 'cause that's the way I know how to interact with people. But it bothers me, and it's starting to bother me more and more. That's why I'm making a change. Actually, I'm setting up a grow house and growing microgreens.

[01:15:59.13]

**Justin N.:** Oh, wow. Where will that be?

[01:16:00.24]

**Jon O.:** I'm looking for the space right now. It'll be indoor grow house, so I'll have climate controls so I can have the same climate conditions year-round. I'll be selling chefs, I'll be selling at a farmer's market, and I'll flesh that into some home delivery routes, too.

[01:16:17.01]

**Justin N.:** Nice, nice.

[01:16:18.29]

**Jon O.:** I'm thoroughly excited about it.

[01:16:19.16]

**Justin N.:** What sort of greens in particular?

[01:16:23.19]

**Jon O.:** You know, the good commodity ones to get started with sunflower . . . shoots and pea shoots and radish. There's a few other salad mixes with some azunos and things of that nature, are the ones I'll open with.

[01:16:43.05]

**Justin N.:** Oh, very cool.

[01:16:43.21]

**Jon O.:** But there's so many you can grow into microgreens that have the full color spectrum and flavor spectrum, and they're so vibrant. They're so nutritious, and that's right up my alley. I buy majority of my food at the farmer's market anyway, and have for so many

years. So, this is a natural progression for me. I'm glad when that lightbulb finally went off in my head that this is what I'm gonna do.

[01:17:11.28]

**Justin N.:** That's great. That sounds very exciting.

[01:17:14.03]

**Jon O.:** It is for me. It's thoroughly exciting.

[01:17:17.15]

**Justin N.:** Well, I think the Southern Foodways Alliance will need to circle back with you in a few years.

[01:17:22.00]

**Jon O.:** I've got the same number.

[01:17:22.29]

**Justin N.:** [Laughter] Sounds good. Jonny, anything else you want to add to the end of this recording?

[01:17:30.28]

**Jon O.:** You know, we've covered a lot of territory. I didn't put a lot of forethought into doin' it, 'cause I figured . . . it would follow its own progression.



[01:17:41.25]

**Justin N.:** That's my job.

[01:17:43.03]

**Jon O.:** Yeah.

[01:17:43.25]

**Justin N.:** Yeah. Great. Well, thank you so much. This has been very interesting, and I wish you great luck with your agriculture pursuit.

[01:17:53.27]

**Jon O.:** I appreciate that.

[01:17:53.27]

**Justin N.:** That sounds very, very exciting, and it's great. This is part of your own personal journey that you are following.

[01:18:01.18]

**Jon O.:** It absolutely is.

[01:18:01.18]

**Justin N.:** So, that's also—I'm very impressed by that.

[01:18:05.11]

**Jon O.:** Thank you.

[01:18:05:16]

**Justin N.:** Well, thank you so much.

[01:18:07.27]

**Jon O.:** Absolutely.

[01:18:07.27]

**Justin N.:** Great.

*[End of interview]*