



Rick Hughes
New Orleans, Louisiana

Date: June 24, 2019
Location: Slidell, LA
Interviewer: Justin Nystrom
Length: One hour and forty-three minutes
Project: Career Servers

Justin Nystrom: So today is June 24th, 2019. I'm in Slidell, Louisiana, sitting down with Rick, but not really Rick, Hughes—

[0:00:46.4]

Rick Hughes: Right.

[0:00:47.3]

Justin Nystrom: —and we'll talk about that in a minute. And we're here as part of the Southern Foodways Alliance's Longterm Servers Project, and my name is Justin Nystrom, and I'm with Loyola University New Orleans.

Thank you so much for taking time with me for this interview.

[0:01:04.1]

Rick Hughes: No problem.

[0:01:05.6]

Justin Nystrom: Great. So the first thing I like to do a little bit is to get a little bit of your own background and where you grew up and all that kind of good stuff. So tell me a little bit about yourself. Are you a native New Orleanian?

[0:01:19.3]

Rick Hughes: No.

[0:01:20.3]

Justin Nystrom: I didn't think you were. So tell me a little bit—

[0:01:22.1]

Rick Hughes: No, I'm an Army brat. I was born in Germany—

[0:01:24.1]

Justin Nystrom: Oh, okay. Great.

[0:01:25.4]

Rick Hughes: —lived all over, yeah.

[0:01:27.0]

Justin Nystrom: Okay. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So you lived all over in your childhood. What was the first time you ever came to New Orleans?

[0:01:32.8]

Rick Hughes: I was working on the oil rigs, and then the business—well, I had come back and forth to New Orleans many, many times earlier when I was living in Houston, Texas. And then I was working on the rigs and the business went dead, and I wasn't, like, a high-skilled person, so I had to find something else to do. I didn't really like getting dirty. I liked, you know, waiting tables and talking to people, and so I came back to New Orleans and started, you know, really seriously waiting tables.

[0:02:22.7]

Justin Nystrom: So you'd waited tables before?

[0:02:24.7]

Rick Hughes: Right.

[0:02:26.2]

Justin Nystrom: Oh, can you tell me about what was that experience like? Where was that?

[0:02:28.5]

Rick Hughes: The first time, my mother's side of the family got me a job at a place called Orsini's in New York. She was from New York. And I was a busboy. I lasted about, oh, I don't know, about three weeks there. The owners were two brothers, Elio and Armando Orsini, and Elio was, like, the greatest guy you ever wanted to meet. He was in the kitchen. And Armando was kind of a pompous ass. He walked the dining room and told everybody he was a count, and one day he bumped a table and spilled a bottle of red wine while he's talking—and he would drink a little, too, while he was talking—and I was the closest person around, and he yelled at me. And at age seventeen, my tolerance for being yelled at by a person I didn't really like, you know, I didn't—so that was my first job.

[0:03:35.5]

Justin Nystrom: [Laughter] Which lasted all of three weeks.

[0:03:37.6]

Rick Hughes: Yeah. [Laughter]

[0:03:39.6]

Justin Nystrom: But you stuck with it a little bit, huh?

[0:03:41.4]

Rick Hughes: Pardon?

[0:03:42.5]

Justin Nystrom: You stuck with waiting or—

[0:03:44.5]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, here and there, but really Brennan's was the first high-end place that I worked. I worked some other jobs. I worked during the day in New Orleans at a place called La Boucherie and then was, like, a drink waiter, ladies' night, you know.

[0:04:11.1]

Justin Nystrom: So what year did you come to New Orleans?

[0:04:14.8]

Rick Hughes: God, I don't even remember.

[0:04:15.9]

Justin Nystrom: So, oil bust, [19]80s sometime?

[0:04:18.4]

Rick Hughes: Yeah. You could see it coming. It wasn't quite busted yet, but you could see it coming, and—

[0:04:29.4]

Justin Nystrom: Were you here for the World's Fair?

[0:04:30.3]

Rick Hughes: Yes.

[0:04:30.9]

Justin Nystrom: Okay, so before '84 then?

[0:04:33.0]

Rick Hughes: Oh, yeah, yeah.

[0:04:33.9]

Justin Nystrom: Okay.

[0:04:34.8]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, I left during the World's Fair. I was working at Brennan's and I had been there like maybe a year, year and a half, and the World's Fair came in, and they were, the first two weeks, just great people, you know, the food and beverage people. And then come all the rednecks from Mississippi and Tennessee [Laughter] and, you know, Alabama, and they weren't good at all.

But also New Orleans was trying to really gouge everyone. They put a special 15 percent tax on for the liquor. You remember that, the 15 percent tax for just the liquor? So these people would look at their bill—and you had to handwrite the bill because we didn't have computers, you know, in those days—and they would see that extra tax on there and they'd think, “Oh, well, he's already gotten his tip. He's just hiding it from me,” you know.

And so I went to Florida. What I used to like doing was trying to get as many names on a résumé doing this, you know, because I love to travel, being, you know, an Army brat. So I would leave New Orleans, go to Florida and work, come on back. You know, I traveled around.

[0:06:07.6]

Justin Nystrom: So I want to back up a little bit, because you came to New Orleans, you were out of the oil fields. You had enough of that. That industry was flat. And you start working at a place called La Boucherie?

[0:06:21.8]

Rick Hughes: Mm-hmm.

[0:06:22.6]

Justin Nystrom: And where was that located?

[0:06:23.7]

Rick Hughes: That was on Chartres.

[0:06:25.7]

Justin Nystrom: Okay, in the French Quarter, then.

[0:06:28.1]

Rick Hughes: Mm-hmm. And the Brennan's waiters would come in there and drink, and I'd see how much money they made, and I wasn't making, you know, anywhere near that, you know.

[0:06:38.4]

Justin Nystrom: Was La Boucherie a restaurant or a bar?

[0:06:39.8]

Rick Hughes: It was both. It was mostly a bar, but it had a little—it always ran like a little luncheon place. And these waiters at Brennan’s would go in for 8:00 in the morning and come out at 2:00 with, you know, 150 bucks, and back in those days, that was a lot of money.

[0:06:59.8]

Justin Nystrom: So this was the early [19]80s. You said this was before the World’s Fair.

[0:07:02.3]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[0:07:04.0]

Justin Nystrom: Maybe ’81?

[0:07:05.3]

Rick Hughes: Maybe, yeah.

[0:07:05.8]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah. Okay, cool. So when we were mic’ing up, you told me a really great story about how you got your job at Brennan’s.

[0:07:11.6]

Rick Hughes: Yeah. Because these waiters kept telling me about the money they were making, and they liked to hire people that didn't have a lot of, you know, high-end, you know, experience, and so I kept going in there and going in there, and I couldn't get hired, you know. They were always full. And I saw this obviously gay waiter go to the obviously gay dining room manager, and his name was Louis Million. He's dead now. But he says, "My friend Richard French is coming in."

And Louis says, "I'll hire him," you know.

And I could see him at the bar, and I was getting the paper from the podium. And there was a bench right alongside the wine display that was there with these hundred-year-old bottles of wine, you know, and so I went over there and I said, well, you know, like a joke or something, I go, "Richard French." And they hired me.

So I worked my butt off for, like, three days. I did things that nobody—you know, they were saying, "You're a butt-kisser," and stuff, but they didn't realize that I really wanted this job.

And so Teddy Brennan called me in his office when, I guess, Richard French came in, and he says, "What have you done?" Only Teddy had a real boisterous way of saying things.

And I said, "Well, Mr. Ted, I really wanted to work here. I *really* wanted to work here. I've always heard—and I really, really wanted to work here."

And he says, "Well, if anybody wants a job that bad, they can work at Brennan's." And so—

[0:09:24.9]

Justin Nystrom: And so your name's not really Rick.

[0:09:28.0]

Rick Hughes: No, it's Harold Hughes.

[0:09:28.1]

Justin Nystrom: Harold Hughes. And so did people just keep calling you Rick after that?

[0:09:32.1]

Rick Hughes: Yeah. It was like a joke at first.

[0:09:35.8]

Justin Nystrom: But then it became your own name, right?

[0:09:39.8]

Rick Hughes: Right, yeah.

[0:09:40.7]

Justin Nystrom: Do you prefer being a Rick to a Harold?

[0:09:43.3]

Rick Hughes: Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine, fine with it.

[0:09:45.7]

Justin Nystrom: Did Richard French ever stay in the job there?

[0:09:48.9]

Rick Hughes: No, he didn't last.

[0:09:50.9]

Justin Nystrom: They came and went. So how long were you at Brennan's? You said you left at around the World's Fair for a while.

[0:09:59.8]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, and then I came on back and I worked at Broussard's. And then I got a job at the old Caribbean Room and I worked there twice.

[0:10:20.6]

Justin Nystrom: So when you went to Florida—now, tell me a little bit about this first stint at Brennan's. What were some of the things that were new to you at that time?

[0:10:28.8]

Rick Hughes: Everything, everything. Food covers, carrying a tray, because I would, you know, work in these little dives, you know, where you arm it, you know.

[0:10:39.1]

Justin Nystrom: Stack it up on your arm.

[0:10:40.3]

Rick Hughes: Right, yeah, and I wasn't very good at stacking either, you know.

[Laughter] I was pretty green, you know.

[0:10:48.5]

Justin Nystrom: About how old were you at this time?

[0:10:52.1]

Rick Hughes: I was in my twenties.

[0:10:54.5]

Justin Nystrom: Mid, early, or—

[0:10:55.8]

Rick Hughes: Mid, mid by that time, yeah.

[0:10:59.5]

Justin Nystrom: An old saw.

[0:11:01.2]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, yeah.

[0:11:02.8]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah. So food covers, trays.

[0:11:04.5]

Rick Hughes: Tableside cooking. You know, I had never done any of that, so I was like a really green waiter, and they put me all the way in the back, you know, because I can't wait on the VIPs or nothing, you know. So when I realized that I was going to move, you know, well, I had a friend of mine in Florida send me a list of all the high-ranking places there in Florida from Miami to Boca [Raton], and I got a letter of recommendation from Brennan's. Larry Bozun gave it to me. And I went down there, and everybody would hire you then, you know, because you have a letter of recommendation from Brennan's, but a lot of places in Florida, their service was so much better than like at Brennan's, and I ended up, you know, having to start out at the bottom there, too, you know, because—

[0:12:19.6]

Justin Nystrom: When you say the service was so much better, what do you mean by that?

[0:12:23.2]

Rick Hughes: Well, I worked at a place called Le Café de Beaujolais that was there. It was mostly for—it was right off of A1A on the beach in [Fort] Lauderdale, and the coke

dealers used to pull their Porsches up, park it on the beach, and walk over there. So we had different glasses for each kind of wine, you know, and I'd never seen that. You know, everything had to be cooked at the table, and I'd really never done that. You know, at Brennan's we'd—"Folks, Bananas Foster. Here we go." And if you were really unlucky, you might have to do a café brûlot, but you kept it hid, you know. Wasn't like Arnaud's, where we had to do it over and over and over again, you know. It was like once a week you might have to do a café brûlot. If you were working at night, you might have to do a Steak Diane, you know, but they'd already prepped everything for you. At Le Café de Beaujolais, most of it wasn't prepped. You had to actually cook it, you know [Laughter], and it was, you know, was a lot to learn.

[0:13:52.4]

Justin Nystrom: What kind of things did you have to cook there?

[0:13:54.5]

Rick Hughes: Well, you had to learn how to bone a fish, you know.

[0:13:57.7]

Justin Nystrom: So the filet de sole d'Orly, things like that?

[0:14:00.5]

Rick Hughes: Yes.

[0:14:01.1]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[0:14:01.6]

Rick Hughes: And they had sweetbreads that you had to warm, and then you would have a silver platter with the little potatoes, and then you had to French them out on the thing. The Chateaubriand you had to carve, you know. I mean, everything was tableside, you know, and I'd never really done this, so I had to learn that, you know.

[0:14:38.8]

Justin Nystrom: How were the tips at a place like that?

[0:14:41.0]

Rick Hughes: Oh, great, yeah, great, yeah. But we were pooling tips, and it was a smaller place, you know, so you didn't do a lot of volume, you know.

[0:14:54.5]

Justin Nystrom: When you first got to Brennan's the first time, was there anybody there that you met that you kind of stayed in touch with and kind of—

[0:14:59.5]

Rick Hughes: Well, [R.] Scott [Harrington].

[0:15:01.4]

Justin Nystrom: Oh, yeah. So you met Scott?

[0:15:03.1]

Rick Hughes: Oh, yeah.

[0:15:03.7]

Justin Nystrom: Scott Harrington.

[0:15:04.5]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, Scott and his brother [Jeffrey Joseph Harrington] that died, you know, at Arnaud's, you know.

[0:15:09.2]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So Scott Harrington, one of our other interviewees.

[0:15:11.0]

Rick Hughes: Mm-hmm.

[0:15:11.7]

Justin Nystrom: So you met him first then—

[0:15:13.3]

Rick Hughes: Yeah.

[0:15:14.2]

Justin Nystrom: —and did you become friends then or—

[0:15:14.4]

Rick Hughes: No, no. Brennan's then was a very ruthless place. You had to get in there early, get your silver, do your tables. And I don't know if I should even be telling you this, but we had wine buckets in the morning, we'd put water in them, and every piece of silver that would come off your table, you had to more or less wash it then in the bucket and get it back on your table, because if you missed a turn, you were going to lose at least fifty bucks. And what I mean by a turn, they used to seat us all at once. You had like a three- to four-table station. So they would put the tables down on you, you took everybody's order, and then you went in the kitchen with these tickets. You went to the app side and then gave them the app sheet, then you go to the kitchen part, you know, where the main courses are coming out. You've already put your bread in the oven. The busser's doing the coffee, water, and tea, and the tea was Lipton bags in one of those white things with the mirror things in there. And the guests would say, "Well, what kind of tea is it?"

And I'd say, "We proudly serve Lord Lipton for your dining satisfaction." [Laughter]

And I never got any feedback off it. "Oh, it's wonderful."

I said, “Yeah, it’s brewed especially for the Brennans,” you know. [Laughter]

But it was more of a slaughterhouse, you know, then. You know, they had really good food, but New Orleans, in those days, did such a huge convention thing that, I mean, you know, 20,000 people, you know, and then right after that, 40,000 people, you know, some smaller ones would come, and then another 30,000 people, you know, I mean, just over and over and over again, you know. And you had all this money and all these people coming, you know, and there was days that, like, you would do five turns on your station, and it was just, like, frantic, you know, hurry up, you know. And if a waiter couldn’t handle it, you know, he was in trouble, you know.

[0:18:18.2]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, we talked about sort of the, before, the scarcity of silverware.

[0:18:21.7]

Rick Hughes: Yeah. And Scott and his brother were masters at this, and I was pretty good about hiding silver, especially if I was working the previous night. There was all these little stash places, and you’d get silverware and you’d stash it so you didn’t have to come in quite as early, because when the doors would open at the back of the kitchen, the waiters would come slamming in there for the silverware. And if you already had some, yes, you’d go and grab some, but you knew you already had it, and anybody come in late, they were in trouble, you know, because there was no silver. Nobody’s going to give you their silver. They’re just not going to do it, you know. It was *brutal*, you know.

[Laughter] You couldn’t let it go back to the kitchen, like on the tray. If you were going

to wash it, you had to bring it back in the kitchen, watch it being washed, and grab it, because if you didn't, somebody was going to take it from you. [Nystrom laughs.] It was the most brutal silverware thing I've ever seen in my life.

[0:19:45.7]

Justin Nystrom: Now, did you find silverware is an issue at other restaurants you've worked at?

[0:19:49.5]

Rick Hughes: The Caribbean Room, the only thing that I found then was the bouillon spoons, we always ran out of the bouillon spoons. And there I worked in the C Room, the actual old Caribbean Room, and they had the A Room, which had the atrium, you know, and the little fountain, and that was the guys that had been there like twenty-five years, you know, were working there.

But my station was the left-hand side of the Caribbean Room, and we would put our spoons down, because you would have your tables fully silvered, you know, salad fork, regular fork, you know, butter pat on the butter plate, a knife, bouillon spoon, and a cocktail fork. You had to have, you know, those down. Well, if there was like a big party or something, these other waiters would come and say, "Well, I got the party. You've got to give it to me." And they would take all your spoons, and you couldn't do nothing. So, of course, after working at Brennan's, I learned to hide spoons, you know, but, you know, that's just staying, you know, alive [Laughter], you know, in the business.

[0:21:33.3]

Justin Nystrom: So when you were at this place in Florida, you learned a lot, I guess.

[0:21:39.7]

Rick Hughes: Right.

[0:21:40.5]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, and did you feel like you were able to bring that back? Did that make you better at your job?

[0:21:43.6]

Rick Hughes: Oh, yeah, of course, yeah, yeah. I could do a lot of things, yeah. I could do a lot of things that, like, people didn't know about, because New Orleans, you know, basically, then was a place where just heavy, heavy business came, you know, over and over and over again, whereas if you work a place that, you know, is really fine dining, you have to learn a lot, yeah.

[0:22:16.5]

Justin Nystrom: So when you came back to New Orleans, did you come back to Brennan's or did you work somewhere else?

[0:22:19.8]

Rick Hughes: I went to Broussard's.

[0:22:22.2]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, so tell me about coming to Broussard's. Did you know anyone at Broussard's?

[0:22:25.4]

Rick Hughes: No, but, you know, after working at Brennan's, you can work at all those little places.

[0:22:33.8]

Justin Nystrom: So who had Broussard's at that time?

[0:22:35.7]

Rick Hughes: It was just Gunter Preuss, and George Huber just bought it.

[0:22:43.7]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, because it was Joe Segreto and Joe C. Marcello right before that, right?

[0:22:48.3]

Rick Hughes: Right, yeah.

[0:22:49.1]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[0:22:49.9]

Rick Hughes: And the new owners were very bitter because the Mafia people had taken everything out of there, you know, which you've got to figure they would, you know, but—

[0:23:02.7]

Justin Nystrom: Tell me about that. I don't know—I think I've heard that story, but what was missing?

[0:23:08.7]

Rick Hughes: Everything that they were promised, I guess, and what are you going to do? Go up to them and say, "I want it back"?

Well, "We didn't take it," you know. I mean, it's, you know—

[0:23:20.3]

Justin Nystrom: Like the furniture, I guess, or—

[0:23:22.5]

Rick Hughes: Everything, yeah, the plates, everything.

[0:23:25.0]

Justin Nystrom: Silverware, certainly, right?

[0:23:26.3]

Rick Hughes: Oh, probably, yeah.

[0:23:27.5]

Justin Nystrom: They were probably rolling it and stashing it somewhere. [Laughter]

[0:23:29.6]

Rick Hughes: I don't know what they were doing with it.

[0:23:32.7]

Justin Nystrom: So you got to Broussard's, and this was—had a pretty good run under Marcello and Segreto and Gunter Preuss. What were some of the things that were new to you about Broussard's, or was this sort of an opportunity for you to put what you'd learn in Florida into practice?

[0:23:51.1]

Rick Hughes: No, no, there not, no. No, there, it was kind of like Brennan's, you know, they had nice food, nice people, you know. You just had to work, you know.

[0:24:08.8]

Justin Nystrom: Were there more regulars at Broussard's or—

[0:24:11.3]

Rick Hughes: No. No, it was tourists.

[0:24:13.1]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[0:24:14.0]

Rick Hughes: Tourists, yeah. The only place that I've ever really had regulars, the old Caribbean Room and Christian's.

[0:24:24.3]

Justin Nystrom: Okay. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, we'll talk about those. I definitely want to talk about that Caribbean Room. I mean, so Broussard's did anything to kind of, you know, set it apart as a place to work or—

[0:24:36.8]

Rick Hughes: I had a guy steal my shoes once there, you know.

[0:24:42.7]

Justin Nystrom: [Laughter] What happened?

[0:24:43.8]

Rick Hughes: They used to let us leave our shoes and jacket and stuff there and come in with the street clothes, you know. There was a lot of people that would rob a waiter at night, you know. So I left my jacket and my shoes, and somebody stole my shoes. And I was kind of a big, rough person then, and I made kind of a scene about it, but I had to go out and buy some more shoes, you know, was the thing about it, but—

[0:25:34.3]

Justin Nystrom: Were waiters generally fearful of getting robbed when they left work?

[0:25:38.6]

Rick Hughes: Some were, yeah.

[0:25:40.7]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Was that a kind of thing that happened, you think, or you knew people that it happened to?

[0:25:44.6]

Rick Hughes: I was never robbed as a waiter, you know, but I can remember times seeing little guys on the back—let me see—on Dauphine watching me as I was walking down Bourbon, and you could see them go, you know, because in those days, they could rob you and run right in that project, you know. If they could get in there, the cops weren't going in there, you know.

[0:26:18.5]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah. That was a pretty—this is the [19]80s—this is a pretty a high-crime time for New Orleans.

[0:26:22.4]

Rick Hughes: Yes, it was, yeah.

[0:26:22.9]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. Was that something that kind of like people working in restaurants were generally aware of? Were they worried about—

[0:26:28.6]

Rick Hughes: Oh, *yeah*, yeah. Everybody was, yeah.

[0:26:31.1]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. Did that affect life in the Quarter a lot for people coming in there, you think, or—

[0:26:37.5]

Rick Hughes: It made people scared, you know. I knew, you know, I wasn't going to go in certain areas at certain times, you know. I mean, you know, you just didn't do it.

[0:26:50.4]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah. So you left for the World’s Fair. What year did you come back, about, when you start at Broussard’s?

[0:26:56.3]

Rick Hughes: I wasn’t keeping track. [Nystrom laughs.] Honestly, I wasn’t. I was, like, “young, dumb, and full of cum,” you know. [Nystrom laughs.] I mean, I just was traveling. You know, I love fishing, you know, so I would fish there, you know, I would work, I would come on back, I’d fish here, I’d work, you know.

[0:27:20.1]

Justin Nystrom: So the attraction to New Orleans was?

[0:27:22.9]

Rick Hughes: I just liked it. You know, it was cheap, you know, at the time, you know. You could always find a job, always. I mean, you could just—you know, I can remember times that there’d be signs all over the place, “Waiters wanted,” “Waiters wanted,” you know. Those days are gone, you know. They’re gone. You know, I mean, it was just like so easy, and, you know, if you paid more than \$200-a-month rent, you were living in a nice, nice place, you know.

[0:28:01.6]

Justin Nystrom: And were you living in the Quarter at the time or—

[0:28:04.8]

Rick Hughes: I lived in the Quarter when I was working at Broussard's, and I was shocked—this dancer and I were living down at a place called the Beauregard House [Beauregard-Keyes House] all the way down, you know, where—

[0:28:22.3]

Justin Nystrom: Sure.

[0:28:22.7]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, and we had to pay \$500 a month then for a little one-bedroom place. And we lived right over the manager, and the manager was this guy from *Soldier of Fortune* or something. I mean, he was on the cover. And, you know, being waiters and a dancer, you know, we'd have friends, you know, and if we got a little noisy, the next day, that guy was like, "Hey, you can't be making this damn noise." We're like, "Whoa, whoa, dude. Yeah, okay." We ended up moving, you know. I mean, it was just, you know, crazy, you know.

[0:29:01.6]

Justin Nystrom: So you stayed out of the Quarter then?

[0:29:03.7]

Rick Hughes: Yeah.

[0:29:04.3]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. What neighborhood would you live in?

[0:29:06.8]

Rick Hughes: Mostly the Irish Channel, yeah.

[0:29:09.6]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah. That's changed a lot.

[0:29:11.8]

Rick Hughes: Yeah. Yeah, it sure has. I haven't been there in years, but—

[0:29:16.0]

Justin Nystrom: When did you decide that you wanted to—I mean, maybe this wasn't a conscious decision. Was it a conscious decision that you were going to become a professional waiter then, that this was going to be your—you were going to make a career out of it?

[0:29:28.4]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, Brennan's, at Brennan's.

[0:29:32.1]

Justin Nystrom: So right in that first stint at Brennan's, you said, "This is for me"?

[0:29:35.8]

Rick Hughes: Right. Yes, sir.

[0:29:37.3]

Justin Nystrom: And that was based on sort of the mobility of—

[0:29:39.4]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, because you could go anywhere and always get a job, you know, making, you know—then, you got paid every day, you know. You didn't have all these taxes, you know. You know, whatever you made, you just made, and the check was just lagniappe, you know.

I can remember at Brennan's, they used to have these things called Tauck Tours. Now, everyone calls me Rick Tauck because, you know, the Tauck Tours, nobody wanted to work them because you had to wait for your check to get paid on that, but it was one turn, and there was times that I would have like a seven-, eight-hundred-dollar monthly check coming from working Tauck Tours, you know. And in those days, the minimum wage was, like, what, a dollar something, you know. And so, like, you know, this is like paradise to me, you know.

And so anyway, there was this one busser, Jerry Weathersby, and he hated working the Tauck tours, and so I told him, "Jerry Tauck, he don't give a fuck." [Laughter]

And, "Yeah, I don't give a fuck!" And it just kept coming.

Now everybody calls *me* Tauck, you know. [Laughter] You ask Scott, he'll say Tauck, yeah.

[0:31:16.1]

Justin Nystrom: Well, so it was just the wait for the money? It wasn't the clientele, necessarily, or—

[0:31:21.9]

Rick Hughes: Well, they could be a pain in the ass, you know, mostly, like, Jewish people, you know, a little demanding, but, I mean, you're getting your money, and some of them would give you extra money, you know, cash on the side, and I was good at being able to sell them the regular coupon menu, you know, where they would all get basically the same thing, you know. And the regular menu for groups was a spiced baked apple and double cream followed by Eggs Hussarde and Bananas Foster. And, you know, I would say, "This is the meal we're famous for, and you have to try it," you know. [Laughter] And then it'd go "boom, boom, boom," quick, you know, and then you're out, you know.

[0:32:24.7]

Justin Nystrom: They're on their bus and they're—

[0:32:26.7]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, and you're setting up for whatever, you know.

[0:32:31.3]

Justin Nystrom: Going to your secret hiding place for your silverware.

[0:32:33.4]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, that's it, yeah. [Laughter]

[0:32:37.9]

Justin Nystrom: So how long did you stay at Broussard's?

[0:32:40.6]

Rick Hughes: Not very long. The Governor [Edwin W.] Edwards trial came up, and they sent the jury, the grand jury, to Broussard's for a lunch there. Felix [Gallerani] was the dining room manager. He owns a place up on the Riverbend now [former Café Volage]. I forgot the name of it. I could find it for you, but—

[0:33:08.8]

Justin Nystrom: Felix's last name?

[0:33:12.4]

Rick Hughes: I don't remember his last name.

[0:33:14.1]

Justin Nystrom: Okay.

[0:33:15.5]

Rick Hughes: But he was famous because you had to tip him, you know, to get any tables, and it was he and Rafael Gordon and I did the grand jury for Governor Edwards' thing. It was, like, 5,000-dollar lunch. They called the police on us, you know.

[0:33:41.8]

Justin Nystrom: Wow.

[0:33:44.1]

Rick Hughes: Yeah. So then I was working at the Pontchartrain [Laughter], and this is months, months later, you know, because I left right after that.

[0:33:57.4]

Justin Nystrom: So if you don't mind me—explain to me what that meant. So the grand jury luncheon for Edwards, and—

[0:34:03.6]

Rick Hughes: The DA and the judge, because the grand jury returned an indictment on Governor Edwards—this is before he was reelected back in late [19]80s or early [19]90s.

[0:34:21.0]

Justin Nystrom: Okay, yeah, yeah.

[0:34:22.0]

Rick Hughes: This was earlier.

[0:34:23.9]

Justin Nystrom: Okay.

[0:34:24.7]

Rick Hughes: They told them that they could go to lunch anywhere, and they picked Broussard's. Well, Broussard's didn't even *have* a lunch, so we gave them the dinner menu, and then we got them drinking the Dom Pérignon and stuff [Laughter], and before you know it, you know, I was selling them Felix's stogies—you know, he had these big nasty stogies—so they could take pictures. You know, they were all drunk now, sitting on one another's laps. You know, they could take pictures, you know.

[0:35:00.2]

Justin Nystrom: So they got a lot of trouble for this?

[0:35:02.7]

Rick Hughes: Yes. And I think the judge and the DA had to pay the bill back, so there was all this stuff in the papers and stuff, and I was tired of giving Felix money anyway, so I managed to get on at the Caribbean Room in the Pontchartrain Hotel.

[0:35:25.4]

Justin Nystrom: Who was the maître d' at the Pontchartrain at that time?

[0:35:27.6]

Rick Hughes: Oh, that was Douglas Lamont for like—he was there till he died, I guess.

[0:35:36.5]

Justin Nystrom: Tell me a little bit about Douglas.

[0:35:38.3]

Rick Hughes: Well, he was this very elegant guy, that he was *wonderful* with the guests. He was. He was *wonderful* with the guests. He could be kind of a pain, you know. I could be coming out of the kitchen with a tray of food—and the Caribbean Room was one of the most unusual places I ever saw. They had like those doors that open up for you, and they were huge. I mean, they went *way* up, I mean, like, you know, probably fourteen, fifteen feet high, or twelve anyway, and the whole door would just open up. Well, you come out with a tray of food and you want to give it to your guest, and Doug'd say, "Hey, Rick. I need a glass of chardonnay. I need it now." And so you had to put the food down, go to the Bayou Bar, get him a glass of chardonnay, bring it back to him on a tray, so you had to have a little—you know, so he could relax his nerves.

[0:36:59.4]

Justin Nystrom: [Laughter] Just for him?

[0:37:01.4]

Rick Hughes: Just for him. Then you could go on and do your guests.

[0:37:05.4]

Justin Nystrom: So he was kind of a prima donna a little bit?

[0:37:10.3]

Rick Hughes: Yes, he was, but, I mean, he handled the people. The Aschaffenburgs loved him, you know, kind of like Charles at Arnaud's, you know.

[0:37:23.0]

Justin Nystrom: So it was Lyle, Lyle Aschaffenburg, I guess, who was the—

[0:37:25.6]

Rick Hughes: Yeah.

[0:37:26.3]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Those were the owners of the Pontchartrain Hotel—

[0:37:28.5]

Rick Hughes: Mm-hmm.

[0:37:29.3]

Justin Nystrom: —where the Caribbean Room was located.

[0:37:29.3]

Rick Hughes: Well, Albert was the owner when I was there.

[0:37:34.8]

Justin Nystrom: Okay, okay. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[0:37:36.9]

Rick Hughes: Yeah.

[0:37:38.1]

Justin Nystrom: So tell me a little bit more about—who was the chef at the Pontchartrain Hotel?

[0:37:42.8]

Rick Hughes: That's Louis Evans.

[0:37:44.1]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[0:37:44.8]

Rick Hughes: He was there for years.

[0:37:46.8]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, successor of Nathaniel Burton, correct?

[0:37:50.0]

Rick Hughes: Yes, I believe so.

[0:37:51.7]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. Were people aware of Louis Evans when they went there?

[0:37:57.0]

Rick Hughes: Not as much as they were later on, you know. You know, black chefs didn't get a lot of, you know, recognition. It was mostly, like, French chefs. And the Caribbean Room had started off with a really elegant French chef, and then the people, the locals, didn't want that. They wanted, you know, good solid Creole food. You know, we had to bring out a basket of melba toast, hot blueberry muffins, all these crackers, and this huge basket of goodies with butter, and bring it to them before they got *anything*, you know. You pour the water, you go and grab that for them and put it on down, then you go get them a drink.

[0:39:02.6]

Justin Nystrom: At lunch, I guess, or—

[0:39:04.0]

Rick Hughes: At anytime, lunch, dinner.

[0:39:07.0]

Justin Nystrom: So blueberry muffins at dinner?

[0:39:08.8]

Rick Hughes: Yes, yes, yes. And then when they ordered their food, well, then you bring them a loaf of hot French bread, you know.

[0:39:21.3]

Justin Nystrom: Did anybody finish their meal after all that?

[0:39:26.1]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, yeah. I mean, most of those people were locals. You could, like, almost go look on the book, see the names, and know pretty much how your day or night would be, you know.

[0:39:44.1]

Justin Nystrom: So tell me a little bit about the Caribbean Room crowd. Who were some of the people that you waited on?

[0:39:48.4]

Rick Hughes: Well, one of the best was Mrs. Richardson. She lived there. She made sure that every Christmas, that everybody, *everybody* in the whole place, the whole—you know, from the car parkers, they got an envelope, everybody, and it depended upon how many years you were there. God, I can't even imagine how much Douglas would have got, you know. I mean, he must have, you know, like, danced, you know, whenever he was getting his [Laughter], because, I mean, she was a really kind lady. That's the main person that I—

[0:40:36.2]

Justin Nystrom: And when you say lived there, she lived in the Pontchartrain Hotel [unclear]?

[0:40:38.7]

Rick Hughes: Yes, sir, yes, sir. She lived there. Mrs. Katz, I believe it was either her or Miss Besthoff, lived there, you know, from K&B [drugstores]. Maybe both of them did. I don't know. But it was wealthy, wealthy people.

[0:41:01.5]

Justin Nystrom: Were celebrities still coming to the Caribbean Room?

[0:41:05.0]

Rick Hughes: Oh, yes, sir, yes, sir.

[0:41:06.9]

Justin Nystrom: Who were some of the people you'd see in there?

[0:41:08.6]

Rick Hughes: Well, one was Betty White, you know, from *The Golden Girls*, and she wouldn't go anywhere else. She told the people in the papers, "Why do I have to go anywhere else? I've got the best food in New Orleans," you know, because in those days, the Caribbean Room was *the* place, you know. I waited on more movie stars and stuff at Brennan's and at Arnaud's, and at Christian's, I waited on Joe Pesci, but, you know—

[0:41:54.2]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So how long did you stay at Caribbean Room?

[0:41:57.7]

Rick Hughes: The first time, I stayed like a year and a half, and then my father got really ill and I went to visit him and I worked two jobs there when I was there.

[0:42:15.9]

Justin Nystrom: Where was "there"?

[0:42:16.9]

Rick Hughes: St. Louis.

[0:42:19.4]

Justin Nystrom: Okay. Not known for its fishing or—

[0:42:22.7]

Rick Hughes: No. But my father, you know, lifer in the Army, he was dying of cancer.

[0:42:31.0]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. So you took care of him then?

[0:42:33.1]

Rick Hughes: Well, I just was up there, you know. We weren't close.

[0:42:38.1]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So after the stint in St. Louis, you came back to New Orleans?

[0:42:43.3]

Rick Hughes: To the Caribbean Room.

[0:42:45.0]

Justin Nystrom: Back to the Caribbean Room. Okay, yeah. And then you decided—
what was the point you decided you were going to move on?

[0:42:49.5]

Rick Hughes: Kind of, yeah. Yeah, I would get tired of it and I'd, you know—

[0:42:56.2]

Justin Nystrom: So they didn't say, "Rick, or whatever your real name is, it's time for
you to go"? [Laughter]

[0:43:01.7]

Rick Hughes: No, no. I wasn't fired.

[0:43:04.0]

Justin Nystrom: Uh-huh, yeah, yeah. So where did you go from there?

[0:43:07.0]

Rick Hughes: I think I went to Louis XVI for a short while.

[0:43:18.6]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, tell me about that, because that was kind of an unusual restaurant
for New Orleans at the time, right?

[0:43:22.0]

Rick Hughes: Not really. It was more of a pain in the ass. You had to do about two hours of work when you went in, you know, setting it up, because at the time, it was in the St. Louis Hotel or something, and you had to do about two hours of work setting up, and then you had to bring your own knife and all this other stuff so that the captain could carve the Chateaubriand and do all the tableside stuff. You were more or less a flunky, you know, I mean, unless you were the captain, and I wasn't the captain, so—

[0:44:08.5]

Justin Nystrom: How was the structure at the Caribbean Room? Was that a [unclear]?

[0:44:12.4]

Rick Hughes: You had in between a four- to a six-table station. You worked it on your own. They had captains there, but the captains there were more or less just chair pullers and get the drinks. You could actually order the captain out of your room, and then you paid the captain and Uncle Doug, you know, 10 percent of your tips. You know, Doug was just there to meet people, you know, and go over and schmooze them, you know. He wasn't doing any work, you know.

[0:44:49.9]

Justin Nystrom: He wasn't bringing out water or—

[0:44:51.2]

Rick Hughes: Oh, no, no, no, no, no. [Laughter] He would tell you, “Jump,” and you’d tell him, “How high?” you know, because, you know, he was *it* there, you know.

[0:45:02.7]

Justin Nystrom: Supreme, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[0:45:04.2]

Rick Hughes: Yeah. He wasn’t a bad guy, though.

[0:45:06.1]

Justin Nystrom: But you had a lot of independence, though, within your station?

[0:45:08.8]

Rick Hughes: Right. You could actually drink. The managers could see you. They didn’t care as long as you never got drunk and acted stupid. You could—I used to smoke then, and, you know, you went behind the—actually, *everybody* smoked back in those days. And, I mean, they had a room for us to go up and get a bath, sleep, you know, in between lunch and dinner when it’s slow. You know, it was really a good, good job. If I’d been older, I would have probably stayed until it ended. You know, I mean, it was a really good job.

[0:45:57.5]

Justin Nystrom: So then Louis XVI had this illusion of being a great place to work. They aspired—very fine-dining restaurant, right?

[0:46:02.7]

Rick Hughes: Right, but it really—

[0:46:04.4]

Justin Nystrom: It didn't turn out so well for you there?

[0:46:06.9]

Rick Hughes: No, no. I mean, they had great food. You know, I didn't like it, you know, and I figured it out quick that I didn't like it.

[0:46:18.1]

Justin Nystrom: Didn't like starting at the bottom and all this other—

[0:46:20.3]

Rick Hughes: No. By that time, I didn't want to do that, you know. They didn't have any bussers. You know, you had to do it all, you know, and you were basically a busboy and food runner there if you weren't the captain.

[0:46:42.7]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So you leave Louis XIV. Where to next? Sixteenth. I'm sorry. I got my French kings mixed up.

[0:46:50.8]

Rick Hughes: I am trying to remember where I went. I think I went back to Brennan's then. Was it then or—I went back to Brennan's. No, I went to Christian's then.

[0:47:13.7]

Justin Nystrom: Okay, because Christian's, which I think is now the site of a restaurant called Vessel, if I'm not mistaken.

[0:47:18.3]

Rick Hughes: I don't know what it's called. I heard it was called the Renovation or R'evolution or something, and—

[0:47:25.7]

Justin Nystrom: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, okay. I'm thinking of a different place.

[0:47:28.2]

Rick Hughes: Yeah. It was in an old church behind Schoen Funeral Parlor, and the reason they called it Christian's is the owner, Chris Ansel, was part of the Galatoire family. And Mr. Schoen is part of that family, too, you know, the guy that owns—

[0:47:48.2]

Justin Nystrom: The funeral home on Canal Street, yeah.

[0:47:49.5]

Rick Hughes: Right, yeah, yeah. And they were very, very, very, very nice, he and his partner, Hank Bergeron, nice, nice guy. We used to call him the special man, Mr. Hank.

[0:48:04.1]

Justin Nystrom: Like the commercial.

[0:48:05.0]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, yeah.

[0:48:05.1]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[0:48:05.9]

Rick Hughes: Because whenever Chris would go home, Chris and Sonya, his wife, whenever they would leave, well, then Mr. B, who was kind of pushed to the back because Chris, you know, was really the guy running it, he would be drinking his JB and water—well, he quit drinking that the last time I worked there, but—and he'd say, “Rick, those are my friends. Café brûlot, let ‘em have it,” you know. And we'd be like, “The special man's going,” you know. [Laughter]

[0:48:44.5]

Justin Nystrom: “Let ‘em have it.”

[0:48:45.6]

Rick Hughes: “Let ‘em have it.” [Laughter]

[0:48:46.4]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah.

[0:48:47.0]

Rick Hughes: “Give it to ‘em, Rick,” you know.

[0:48:48.2]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah.

[0:48:48.8]

Rick Hughes: So you’d have to make the café brûlot for them, but it was like a cheating brûlot, you know. You already had the orange/lemon peel thing on there. You just got some liquor from the thing, heated the bowl, ran it out there, you know, poured the liquor in it, lit with a lighter, and then [demonstrates] pour your coffee and, you know, and you’re gone, and it was easy, but—

[0:49:11.6]

Justin Nystrom: What kind of food did they serve at Christian's?

[0:49:14.7]

Rick Hughes: They had the best soft-shell crab I've ever seen in my life. They would hickory-smoke it while it was alive, and they told me that it actually came out, you know, boiling smoke at times. And then they would flash-fry it and then put it over French-fried parsley, and it was *delicious*, with lemon butter sauce. It was just *wonderful*. You know, I mean, you've—you know, just the best that I've ever seen in my life. But Chef Roland Hewitt was there, and he was the French chef that Chris stole from Galatoire's when he left Galatoire's. And he was just a great chef, I mean, really, he was. He was in *Great Chefs of New Orleans* more than any other chef, I mean, you know that show that they had? And, I mean, he was just great.

They had a dish on the menu, we called it "Fish A." It was a filet of sheephead, which before then, I wouldn't even—I'd cut them off a lot, and, "Get out of here." But it was coated with the breadcrumbs. They'd panéed it off and then they'd put it in the oven with mushrooms and artichoke bottoms and lemon butter sauce. I mean, you'd almost eat your fingernails off your hand getting at it. You know, it was just that good.

[0:50:54.0]

Justin Nystrom: I'm a big fan of sheepshead, yeah. Ugly fish, but delicious.

[0:50:56.7]

Rick Hughes: Yeah. But, yeah, I mean, you know, they had some really good food, and it was a real easy place to work, because you had a six-table station. They had pews on the outer parts of the building, you know, and they had all these little tables there. And you would bring out their hot apps and their salad, and you put the salad down right alongside of it, so all you were worried about was the main course now. And you had your own private busser, and he would get 20 percent. I would, of course, pay him more because then the best would always come to me, you know, and he just wasn't allowed to put the main courses down, you know. The waiter or captain had to do that, you know. And it was a wonderful job, yeah.

[0:52:19.3]

Justin Nystrom: How many tables might you have?

[0:52:20.3]

Rick Hughes: Six, usually.

[0:52:22.2]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. Is that pretty standard?

[0:52:24.1]

Rick Hughes: Depends upon where you're at. Working at Brennan's, we had a three-table station.

[0:52:32.6]

Justin Nystrom: And you'd turn.

[0:52:34.7]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, you'd just keep turning them over. We did volumes at Christian's, too, but just not like Brennan's or Arnaud's, you know, never, you know.

[0:52:48.9]

Justin Nystrom: Interesting, interesting. So you worked at Christian's, and I'm guessing we're getting close to the time of the storm by this time, right?

[0:52:58.1]

Rick Hughes: No, this was years ago.

[0:53:00.5]

Justin Nystrom: Oh, okay, so—

[0:53:00.5]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, this was years ago.

[0:53:03.0]

Justin Nystrom: So where did you go—how long did you stay at Christian's?

[0:53:05.8]

Rick Hughes: God, I don't even remember, but I worked there more than once. I worked there several times.

[0:53:17.4]

Justin Nystrom: And during this time, are you going back to Florida and other places too?

[0:53:20.6]

Rick Hughes: I did, yeah. I went to Key West once, Asia [spouse] and I, when Asia and I met. That was like 1990.

[0:53:26.8]

Justin Nystrom: Okay.

[0:53:29.0]

Rick Hughes: And we went to Key West for a year and then we came on back. I went back to Christian's and I was there a while, and then I got in an argument with Chris and then, you know—my fault—and I went back to Brennan's and I was there for seven years. You know, I was starting to mellow out then, you know, starting to get that wanderlust gone.

[0:54:10.2]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[0:54:11.9]

Rick Hughes: And then I left Brennan's and went to Smith & Wollensky.

[0:54:20.1]

Justin Nystrom: Okay, the steakhouse chain, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[0:54:22.8]

Rick Hughes: Mm-hmm.

[0:54:24.1]

Justin Nystrom: What year was that? That was on Poydras, right?

[0:54:26.6]

Rick Hughes: Yeah.

[0:54:27.5]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, I recall. It's kind of where that Walk-On's or something was.

[0:54:31.3]

Rick Hughes: I believe it is now, but I haven't been there in years in that area.

[0:54:34.1]

Justin Nystrom: The location was a Maylie's was that not—

[0:54:36.9]

Rick Hughes: Yes, yes, it was—

[0:54:37.5]

Justin Nystrom: —famously—

[0:54:38.0]

Rick Hughes: —the old Maylie's, and the grandson of the Maylies was the chef there.

[0:54:47.2]

Justin Nystrom: Oh, I didn't know that. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[0:54:49.4]

Rick Hughes: Yeah.

[0:54:50.2]

Justin Nystrom: Maylie's being a nineteenth-century restaurant that was there for like a century or thereabouts.

[0:54:50.2]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, mm-hmm.

[0:54:55.1]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So going to the steakhouse on Poydras Street, very different from some of your other places, I would guess, huh?

[0:55:02.6]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, kind of, but not really, you know. You know, once you've worked one high-end place, you can—

[0:55:10.7]

Justin Nystrom: But in terms of the customer, right?

[0:55:13.1]

Rick Hughes: Yeah. At this time here, I was getting where I was, like, number-one waiter wherever I worked, you know, and the GM, Allie, this little Jewish guy from New York, he said, “Rick, I want my guests, when they come in, I want them just be hit with a wall of noise. I want just laughter and everybody having fun,” you know. So I would go fish and learn all these dirty jokes, you know, from people that I'd be out there fishing with, and certain guests, you know, I would tell them the jokes. Everybody would be laughing, you know. It was a good job.

[0:56:10.0]

Justin Nystrom: Mm-hmm. And so you stayed there—

[0:56:13.2]

Rick Hughes: Four years.

[0:56:14.6]

Justin Nystrom: Four years. So a pretty good run at Smith & Wollensky's.

[0:56:16.6]

Rick Hughes: Yeah.

[0:56:17.1]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[0:56:17.8]

Rick Hughes: I got too full of myself, I believe, you know. You know, I mean, if you work in a place and they allow you to get away with a lot of things, then after a while, it's almost like you feel that you're so valuable, you know, and—

[0:56:42.9]

Justin Nystrom: Well, like what?

[0:56:44.4]

Rick Hughes: Well, like whatever you wanted to do, you know. Yeah, well, whatever, you know. I mean, one of the things that angered me was I sold a 3,000-dollar bottle of wine to these guests, and they wouldn't let me tell them the price, so I told them the bottle—you know, it was a 15-liter bottle of Taittinger, and it was a group of twenty people, and I said, "It's 15 liters of champagne," you know, I mean, you know.

And I had just—I had staples in my elbow, and I remember this, the cork was so hard to get off, you know, but they were like, "Yeah, open it."

You know, I brought it to them, I says, "Are you sure you want it?" You know, we had to put it on a rolling gueridon, you know, to bring it in there. You know, I mean, it's *huge*, you know.

And the guy says, "Open it."

And so I remember the cork was like [demonstrates] this to get the thing off, and I'm turning the bottle, because with champagne, you've got to do the bottle, not the cork. And at last, I got it out, and we had to pour it into wine decanters to serve it because, you know, there's no way you can, you know—and we had one of those dish bins wrapped with tablecloths filled with ice to put it in, you know, because you can't, you know—and then at the end, the guy hands me his card. Well, the bill for the table's like \$6,000, and they were a drug company people, and the guy's card wouldn't take it. So I had to bring it back, and this other guy hands me a card. Well, his won't take it either. You know, they're using the cards from these places.

And so the ladies start crying, you know, "Oh, look how much the bill is!" you know.

And then I'm like, "Oh, god. What have I gotten myself into?" you know. [Laughter]

And then the managers were like, “Well, Rick, you didn’t tell them the price?”

I said, “No, he wouldn’t let me tell him the price.”

The other waiters are saying, “No, they wouldn’t—,” you know. [Nystrom laughs.]

You know, “But, Rick, you should have told them the price,” you know.

So we got in an argument about that, you know, and I was so full of myself, you know, that it was like, you know, “I’ll just go somewhere else.” And I did. I went back to Christian’s after.

[0:59:56.3]

Justin Nystrom: They took you back in?

[0:59:58.1]

Rick Hughes: Oh, yeah.

[0:59:58.1]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[0:59:59.3]

Rick Hughes: Yeah.

[1:00:00.2]

Justin Nystrom: Would you say that, like, somebody of your level of experience is a rare commodity?

[1:00:05.5]

Rick Hughes: Nowadays, yeah.

[1:00:12.0]

Justin Nystrom: Back when you were, you know, first starting waiting, what did the other waiters look like? Was it mostly men?

[1:00:17.8]

Rick Hughes: Oh, yeah. Yeah, you didn't see any women in high-end places. I mean, it just—

[1:00:24.6]

Justin Nystrom: And white men, I guess.

[1:00:27.0]

Rick Hughes: Mostly, yeah. At the Caribbean Room, the black people had to be bussers starting off, but once I got there, they had a few black waiters—

[1:00:44.4]

Justin Nystrom: Okay.

[1:00:45.5]

Rick Hughes: —but they weren't highly thought of, you know, by the locals.

[1:00:50.4]

Justin Nystrom: Which is ironic because, of course, like, the Boston Club or whatever there—

[1:00:55.3]

Rick Hughes: Right, it's all black there, yeah, yeah.

[1:00:57.6]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. And they're *very* highly thought of.

[1:01:00.7]

Rick Hughes: Right, yeah.

[1:01:02.1]

Justin Nystrom: Okay. So there's sort of this racial politics of the dining room. How did that change? When did you start to see that changing?

[1:01:08.8]

Rick Hughes: Probably the [19]90s. The [19]90s, it started to really change.

[1:01:18.4]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, more women or—

[1:01:20.1]

Rick Hughes: Yeah. You started seeing more black captains, more women, women as captains, you know. You know, some of them are very, very, very, very good, you know, the women.

[1:01:36.0]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah.

[1:01:37.2]

Rick Hughes: *Very* good.

[1:01:37.6]

Justin Nystrom: But would you say there's still a smaller percentage still today, of, like, career waiters?

[1:01:47.3]

Rick Hughes: I would say you would probably see a lot more black people as career waiters now than maybe white people.

[1:02:01.5]

Justin Nystrom: Okay. So you'd say it's shifted?

[1:02:03.5]

Rick Hughes: Yeah.

[1:02:04.4]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah.

[1:02:05.6]

Rick Hughes: Because now they have an equal bite at the apple, you know.

[1:02:10.7]

Justin Nystrom: And so that would be, like, at Brennan's and also—

[1:02:14.7]

Rick Hughes: Everywhere now, yeah.

[1:02:16.9]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. Interesting, interesting. I want to talk about—kind of shift some gears—sort of the economics of being a waiter. Do you prefer “waiter” or “server,” just out of curiosity?

[1:02:25.0]

Rick Hughes: I don't care as long as they tip. [Nystrom laughs.] Yeah, I mean, honestly.

[1:02:29.8]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, I've had a few interviewees say, you know, "I'm a waiter. I'm not a server; I'm a waiter," you know. But they had stronger feelings.

[1:02:38.4]

Rick Hughes: I don't care.

[1:02:39.1]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[1:02:39.9]

Rick Hughes: Yeah.

[1:02:40.2]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. Interesting. So, you know, it was funny, when I interviewed Scott, he called me the next morning and said, "And another thing." And he said, "Ask about Ronald Reagan's tax law." So tell me a little bit about, like—because you were saying, you know, you got paid, and you got paid that time, and, of course—

[1:03:03.3]

Rick Hughes: It wasn't Ronald Reagan. That was Bob Dole, the one-armed bandit.

[1:03:06.7]

Justin Nystrom: Ah, okay. [Laughter] So tell me about Bob Dole.

[1:03:09.2]

Rick Hughes: He got his fame by putting the tax on us so that they wouldn't have to take it out of the wealthier people, you know, which, you know, we need to pay tax. I mean, we had gotten away with it, you know, for years. Of course, it would be nice if we were paid more than \$2 an hour. But he came out with this hidden underground economy that was, you know, that was just like the Mafia or something, you know. They don't pay any taxes, you know. Well, I can remember a guy that worked at Joe's Crab Shack in Miami, which was a famous place for these stone crabs. The IRS got him for a hundred-thousand-dollar bill, and he went and hijacked a bus and then ended up killing himself on the bus.

[1:04:22.4]

Justin Nystrom: Do you need to grab a water? Do we need to pause?

[1:04:24.1]

Rick Hughes: No, no.

[1:04:24.4]

Justin Nystrom: Okay, okay, okay.

[1:04:25.0]

Rick Hughes: No, I'm fine.

[1:04:25.9]

Justin Nystrom: Okay.

[1:04:26.5]

Rick Hughes: You need a cold one?

[1:04:27.5]

Justin Nystrom: No, no, no. I'm fine. I just—you had a little bit of a cough and I thought—

[1:04:30.7]

Rick Hughes: No, that's something—you know, I used to smoke very, very heavily, and the heart doctor had me put on a medicine, and it was actually causing me—it was much worse than what it is now, and I dropped it, but I probably have a touch of COPD or whatever it is, yeah.

[1:04:55.6]

Justin Nystrom: Okay. And so I just didn't mean to interrupt.

[1:04:57.8]

Rick Hughes: No.

[1:04:58.4]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. So Scott said, you know, that you had a kind of a personal experience with this tax law, I guess, and he—

[1:05:07.1]

Rick Hughes: Who, me?

[1:05:07.9]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah.

[1:05:08.5]

Rick Hughes: Oh, yeah. I got audited, you know, and I had to pay—

[1:05:13.6]

Justin Nystrom: What a nightmare, yeah.

[1:05:14.4]

Rick Hughes: Yeah. Well, I mean, you know, the worst part is every month they hit you with this letter, you know, threatening you, you know, if you don't come up with this payment, you know. I'm going to pay you, you know. I mean, if I don't pay you exactly

on the day, it's because the rent came or, you know, whatever. But, yeah, you know, Scott is one of the hardest workers you'll ever see. He really is.

[1:05:44.4]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. He seems to, like, *love* work.

[1:05:48.5]

Rick Hughes: Yeah. He's one of the hardest workers you'll *ever* see. He can have a very strong opinion and he can get very bossy, but he's my friend, and we've been friends for years, you know.

[1:06:02.6]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So you had a lot of good times together at Brennan's, I guess.

[1:06:05.7]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, yeah. Well, you really were ruthless at Brennan's. He and I became closer at Arnaud's.

[1:06:16.0]

Justin Nystrom: Oh, okay. Yeah, tell me about that. So you and his brother as well, right?

[1:06:20.3]

Rick Hughes: Right. Well, his brother, after the storm, we had gone to Mississippi, and so Asia and I bought some land and a trailer and were staying there, and Jeff, Scott's brother, and his wife were living in Picayune. So Asia was working at—then it was called Casino Magic. Well, after the storm, it became Hollywood. And so when they were getting ready to open, they needed waiters for their high-end dining room, so Jeff and I went there and got the job and we worked together there.

Then I got lured to the Silver Slipper for a while, and I hated it there, but it was my own fault, you know. So I came back and went to Arnaud's, and Arnaud's, the first day that I was putting apps in, Arnaud's called me back and told me, "Of course I'll hire you, Rick," you know.

So I went back the next day. I hadn't even moved yet. You know, I hadn't even moved back to New Orleans yet. And they told me, "Take as long as you want," you know. "Whenever you're ready to work, just come on in and go to work."

So Asia and I moved, and I went to work at Arnaud's. I was on station one for, like, seven years, but Scott and Jeff, when Brennan's closed, they needed a job, and I said, "Well, you know, Scott, if you come here, you will make about 40,000 a year."

And he's like, "Ah, you're blowing smoke up my butt," and stuff.

I was like, "No, man. I mean, that's, you know—."

So he came and he realized I was, you know, telling him the truth. So he was my front waiter for, like, I guess, about a year and a half, two years, and then he moved as a captain with his brother in the back room. And I just kept getting more and more stress because you're waiting on all these people, all these VIPs, and you have these notes

called “see notes,” which is “See this note. This one wants this. This one wants this done like this, this one like this.”

The owners are *wonderful* people, I mean, just, like, the nicest owners you ever met, you know, and they were so nice to me, I started being overwhelmed, you know, because most owners, you know, you’re like a chair or something, you know, I mean, better than that, but, you know, like a dog or something, you know. You know, I can remember every Thanksgiving, I had to wait on the Brennan’s family, Mr. Pip and his sons and stuff, and I would get taken off of my very lucrative station and I’d have to go wait on them in the back room. And at the end of the day, they’d say, “Well, Rick, you want this food?” you know, that they didn’t eat, you know.

And I’d be like, “No.” And I’d be thinking, “No, I’m not your dog,” you know.

But Arnaud’s was totally, totally different. I mean, you know, they were up there, but, you know, the management, everybody was just—you know, as long as you did your job, they were just great. And one day, it was Mother’s Day and I was teaching Scott the ropes to be a captain, and I had this party, the Kolbs, that it was a party of twelve. They had Baked Alaska. Well, I was having Scott do all the paperwork and also coordinating these notes that I would have, so I’d hand them to him. Now, if it was me, you know, I’m a real nervous person anyway, I’d look at it like five or six times during the day, but he had it, and we were slam-dunked.

You know, I had to wait on [Tom] Benson, you know, like twice a year. You know, they’d put Benson and his very, very nice wife and the head priest that he had following him around all the time. But those were the kind of people that we had to wait on all the time, you know, anybody important, you know.

Scott and I forgot about these people's Baked Alaska, and so Charles yells, "Rick!" you know, once they left, because Miss Katy [Casbarian] had known it, and I felt so bad about it that I just—and then I screwed up something else. This is after years of being on that area.

And then it was to the point that I just knew that I was going to do something wrong, you know, and I kept telling Charles, "Charles, pull me off this area. I really like everybody here. I don't *want* to do this," you know. And he wouldn't at first. And at last, he did, you know, and I went in the back with Scott.

But Scott left Arnaud's and got the job at Gabie's [Gabrielle's Restaurant], and he kept saying, "You know, Rick, these waiters here are stupid. They're *horrible*. They're just *worthless*. Come over and put in your app," you know. And by that time, I was ready to get out, not that anything that *they* had done. You know, it was *me*, you know, and I needed a fresh start, and so I kept going on by there, and at last, she gave me a shot, you know. And I've been there now, you know, a year, year and a half or something.

[1:14:08.1]

Justin Nystrom: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. It's a small place, of course.

[1:14:09.7]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, but it's not all that stress, you know. You know, I had front waiter, back waiter, food runner, host, bartender, manager in the room, and you had to kind of manage everything but the manager, you know.

[1:14:30.3]

Justin Nystrom: And, of course, Scott's brother dies on the job. He told me the story.

[1:14:33.6]

Rick Hughes: Right, yeah.

[1:14:35.2]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. I mean, that had to have a pretty big impact on everyone.

[1:14:38.4]

Rick Hughes: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. He's waiting for Scott to do the paperwork at the end of the night and collapses, you know.

[1:14:50.2]

Justin Nystrom: Would you say that stress affected a lot of the people working there?

[1:14:54.3]

Rick Hughes: Oh, everywhere, yeah, everywhere, you know. I mean, if you get overwhelmed, it causes stress.

[1:15:05.3]

Justin Nystrom: Did you find a lot of people dealing with that stress in maybe negative ways or—

[1:15:10.8]

Rick Hughes: You mean like drugs and alcohol?

[1:15:12.8]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah.

[1:15:13.3]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, lots! [Laughter]

[1:15:16.0]

Justin Nystrom: I wasn't trying to lead you.

[1:15:18.2]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, they had drugs and alcohol. You bet, yeah.

[1:15:23.5]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, where was that—I mean, were there particular moments when that was a particularly bad thing? Is there an ebb and flow to it or is it just sort of constant?

[1:15:31.4]

Rick Hughes: When I worked at Commander’s Palace, there were—I forgot to tell you about that.

[1:15:37.2]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, tell me.

[1:15:39.1]

Rick Hughes: In the kitchen, they had—this is in between Christian’s and some other place, maybe Broussard’s, maybe.

[1:15:52.1]

Justin Nystrom: About what time frame?

[1:15:52.6]

Rick Hughes: When Emeril [Lagasse] was chef.

[1:15:56.3]

Justin Nystrom: Okay, yeah.

[1:15:57.3]

Rick Hughes: And in the kitchen, you go in the kitchen and the dish people are like, “Man, I got powder. I got rocks. I got this. You’d like it.” You know, I mean, this is

Commander's Palace, world-famous, you know, beautiful, beautiful place, you know.

And I hated Commander's Palace. I just did.

[1:16:23.4]

Justin Nystrom: Was it just the way it was run or—

[1:16:25.6]

Rick Hughes: You had to work four doubles every week, and—

[1:16:32.2]

Justin Nystrom: A double being a shift, a meal shift?

[1:16:37.9]

Rick Hughes: A lunch and then dinner, yeah.

[1:16:40.8]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[1:16:41.4]

Rick Hughes: And so if they were going to just leave it as that, that would mean you would have one day to rest, one day to do your shopping stuff—I was single—one day to, you know, hook up, you know. But it never was that, and, I mean, you worked *hard* at Commander's. And then you'd be finishing your last shift and there'd be a manager,

“Rick, Rick, Rick, can you please come in tomorrow? The captain in the Garden Room isn’t going to be there.”

And you’d say, okay, well, the Garden Room, I’m going to make \$200. You know,

“Yeah, I’ll come in and do it.”

And you come in and they say, “Well, Rick, that captain showed up. We need you for open patio,” which means you have to set up that whole patio, all the dishes, and then if a bird craps on the table, you’ve got to change the whole thing out, and you *might* make eighty or ninety dollars, you know. And your whole team is like, “Oh, man, please get us out of here,” you know?

And I just got to the point that I hated it. I had a front—I mean a back waiter. I had the only woman, at the time, waitress. Her name was Miss Doritha. And I would split tips evenly with them, you know. She’d tell me—you know, the captain was allowed to take ten, ten more dollars or something. And also I would share my side tips, which most of the captains wouldn’t, and so I’d throw that in the pot too.

But I had a back waiter, his name was Kyle, and he was always lifting weights, which I used to do that, too, but he’d come in with these little skinny shirts, you know, and he was about that tall [demonstrates]. And I believe he was taking steroids, because he was bald and he was, like, in his twenties, you know, and he was, you know, already starting to bald. But he thought he was something. And I had this beautiful newlywed deuce, young guy and *beautiful* wife, just beautiful, you know, and they order a nice bottle of wine. I open it for them, pour it, and then Kyle comes up and he goes to the lady, says, “Ma’am, that wine matches your red, red lips.”

And I says, “Mr. Kyle, could you come here for a minute?”

And I brought him to the side and I said, “Motherfucker, don’t you *ever* talk to any of my guests anymore. Don’t even *talk* to them. You’re not allowed to talk to them,” you know. And so I went up, and the following day, I went to the manager and, you know, told him. And I said, you know, “He’s a kid. He doesn’t know any better, but can I make a nametag that says ‘Lips’?”

And so when the guy came in, you know, and he has a jacket on the thing and he’s walking around doing this [demonstrates]. I went and switched the tags. It took him several days to realize why everybody was, “Hey, Lips. Hey, Lips,” you know. [Nystrom laughs.] I mean, he was that dumb, you know?

[1:20:36.8]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That’s great, that’s great. So Commander’s didn’t work out so well?

[1:20:41.8]

Rick Hughes: I didn’t like it. It was a wonderful place, wonderful food, you know. There was a lot of drugs going on there. At that time, there was probably everywhere.

[1:20:55.1]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. And this would have been, if Emeril were there, the [19]80s?

[1:20:57.8]

Rick Hughes: Yeah.

[1:20:58.8]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[1:21:00.4]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, he might have even—yeah.

[1:21:04.3]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. So tell me about seasons in New Orleans. We all know that summer can really be a drag.

[1:21:15.0]

Rick Hughes: Summer is a drag now, right now.

[1:21:18.4]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah.

[1:21:20.2]

Rick Hughes: It really depends on the place. Like, Arnaud's does really good up until July, and then July and August is bad. Last year at Gabie's, we did great during the summer. I mean, you know, now that everybody's tried it, now it's not, you know, the place that we have to go and try because it's new, so this summer sucks, you know.

[1:21:56.4]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[1:21:58.3]

Rick Hughes: But, you know, I actually make more money at Gabrielle's than I did number-one station at Arnaud's. One night at Arnaud's, Charles comes to me as we're closing and said, "Rick, you can't leave. Your team has to stay here." And Asia had already gotten off of work and she was waiting on me. So it was the incoming and the outgoing NBA commissioners. They were in New Orleans for that, and so they couldn't make it there till like 11:30. It was twelve people. And then Carmelo Anthony, his bodyguards, his wife, and his son come in, too, and I've got to wait on them too. This is like—so they don't even get—and the kitchen had to stay there too. So they didn't even get started till, you know, after midnight, you know, so we got out of there at like 2:00 in the morning. Poor Asia's laying on a bench somewhere, you know.

[1:23:12.0]

Justin Nystrom: Enough of that, huh?

[1:23:15.1]

Rick Hughes: Yeah. No, I mean, you know, it was one of those rare things, you know.

[1:23:21.3]

Justin Nystrom: So, now, what about Jazz Fest? How are your feelings about Jazz Fest?

[1:23:27.9]

Rick Hughes: I mean, the people are good, but they just come in late, you know. They all come in late because they've been out there, you know. And Essence Fest doesn't bother me. We don't get many of them, you know, in any of the places that I've worked.

[1:23:49.8]

Justin Nystrom: Because that was very controversial, because a lot of places used to close for Essence Fest, right?

[1:23:53.0]

Rick Hughes: Right. And they're not bad, you know, people at all. The one where it is bad is the Bayou Classic, and it's not the kids; it's the people coming from the bad areas of town to mingle with those kids. That's what makes it bad, you know. But Essence Fest, usually, you know, the people are nice. They're educated, you know. I've always found that an educated black person will tip you just as good as a white person, better than most, you know, if they're, you know, educated. If they're not, they won't, you know. They don't realize that ten dollars on a two-hundred-dollar meal isn't good, you know. [Laughter]

[1:24:46.4]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. So Mardi Gras—

[1:24:49.6]

Rick Hughes: I hate Mardi Gras.

[1:24:51.1]

Justin Nystrom: You hate Mardi Gras?

[1:24:52.2]

Rick Hughes: I hate it. I despise it.

[1:24:54.2]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, because different people have given a different answer about Mardi Gras.

[1:24:57.7]

Rick Hughes: Depends upon where they're working.

[1:24:58.8]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah. So tell me about that.

[1:25:00.8]

Rick Hughes: If a person's in a bar working, you know, they're making money hand over fist. If they're in some little dive, they're making hand over fist, you know, because

the prices are low. If it's a high-end place, you get mostly drunks trying to use the toilet or people go into TMS, toxic menu shock, you know, when they look at the menu, and, you know, then you have to do the whole table, you know. And during Carnival, you're looking for one decent table a night, one decent table, because most of the time, they're like trash, you know, foreigners that don't tip, you know, or drunks that just cause a scene, you know.

[1:26:03.0]

Justin Nystrom: Toxic menu syndrome.

[1:26:05.2]

Rick Hughes: Toxic menu shock, you know.

[1:26:07.5]

Justin Nystrom: Shock. [Laughter] Is that a common term or—

[1:26:10.7]

Rick Hughes: It is for me. TMS, yeah. [Laughter]

[1:26:13.7]

Justin Nystrom: Did you have anyone else pick that up or—

[1:26:16.5]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, Gabie [Sonnier] and Victor [Pizarro] and them know it, yeah, [Laughter], and, of course, Scott, you know. Yeah, probably all of Arnaud's knows it.

[1:26:28.7]

Justin Nystrom: [Laughter] I think I know what you mean, but just for the sake of somebody reading this transcript, what do you mean by that?

[1:26:37.1]

Rick Hughes: When they open the menu and their eyes dilate when they look at the prices, and they close it up and they, “Oh, I just remembered I have to go someplace else,” or, “I just ate. Can I have a cup of soup, please?” And those are the worst, because then, “Oh, I wasn't really hungry. Boy, this bread is delicious, Rick,” and then look at you, you know, and they've already ate the whole loaf of bread, you know, and they want you to go get them another one for free, you know. [Laughter]

[1:27:18.2]

Justin Nystrom: Oh, my gosh. Yeah, I could see that happening at some places certain times of year. How about the Saints?

[1:27:26.5]

Rick Hughes: The Saints?

[1:27:28.3]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah. I mean—

[1:27:29.8]

Rick Hughes: Oh, yeah, whenever the Saints play, if they win, you know, you're going to get bombarded, especially if it's a noon game. If they lose, you know, not as much, but, you know, the other team's people come in, you know. Yeah, the Saints are great for business. Hopefully, the Pelicans will be, too, now.

[1:27:54.2]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. So I had a friend who waited tables that said he always loved when the Saints played San Francisco.

[1:27:59.0]

Justin Nystrom: Oh, yeah. The 49er people are great. You know, they're great tippers. The Bears people are great. The Falcons, eh, off and on. [Nystrom laughs.] You know, I mean, you know, I mean, it's Georgia, you know. You get good ones and you get bad ones.

One of the best tips that I had gotten was Wayne Huizenga. He was the owner of the Miami Dolphins at the time. They had me leave my area at Brennan's to go wait on them, party of thirty, and he gave me like 35 percent on the bill, and he was just as nice as he could be. I mean, he was, like, the best owner you ever wanted to meet. He was bald. He had just a little bit of hair here [demonstrates]. And when he laughed, it was, like, a

genuine laugh, and his face would kind of scrunch like a big frog or something. I mean, he was just wonderful, you know, just a genuine person.

Probably other than Benson, probably the other cheapest one that I've ever waited on was Jerry Jones. The Brennans would give him the meal, and I waited on him, his sons, and his wife. And Jerry likes Dom Pérignon, vintage Dom Pérignon, so, of course, I went and got it for him. You know, this is right after he'd paid Deion Sanders \$35 million or something, which, back in those days, was a lot of money, and they were doing Pepsi commercials together and stuff. He was all over, on everybody's television. So anyway, his bill was like 500 bucks. Everybody in the main dining room was, like, looking at him, I mean, you know, and he's eating it up, you know? And he's about that much [demonstrates] taller than I am, and he's a big guy. His sons are big too. And he says, "Rick, bring me the bill."

And I says, "Sir, the Brennans have already picked it up for you."

And he was all ready for me. He says, "Well, thank you, Rick." And he reaches his hand out. I could see a little green there, so I'm like that [demonstrates], you know, and I could feel the money there. And I'm walking through the dining room and I'm thinking it's got to be at least 100. He didn't pay for nothing, two bottles of vintage Dom, you know. And I opened up, there's a twenty there, so I'm doing this to get at the hundred that I was sure was under, and it wasn't. I looked around like in shock, and the whole dining room saw me, and I was like, "Oh, fuck. I'm in trouble now." [Nystrom laughs.] You know?

And he knew what it was, so he got up and went to the toilet, and his oldest son, the one that's gray-haired now—he wasn't then—he come up and he says, "Here, Rick." He says, "Dad's just cheap like that," and hands me a ten.

I'm like, "Boy, the apple doesn't fall far," I was thinking to myself. [Laughter]

[1:31:30.0]

Justin Nystrom: Oh, my.

[1:31:32.5]

Rick Hughes: But Benson's bad too. I mean, he was, you know, bless his soul. He was rough.

[1:31:37.8]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[1:31:39.4]

Rick Hughes: Yeah.

[1:31:40.2]

Justin Nystrom: That's great stuff. So Mardi Gras is bad, Jazz Fest could be good but late, Saints—any other times of the year that you just really prefer?

[1:31:50.5]

Rick Hughes: You know, Chris Ansel had a saying that I found really works. Whenever the weather turns colder, the people are going to come out and eat. If it's raining and they're out in any weather and they're already out, they're going to go out and eat. If

they're in their rooms, they're going to eat there. That's, you know, just the way it is, you know.

[1:32:26.4]

Justin Nystrom: We're running on an hour and a half, but I wanted to shift some—I've got a few things that I was hoping we could touch on.

[1:32:35.2]

Rick Hughes: Sure.

[1:32:36.2]

Justin Nystrom: You've been waiting tables a long time. Do you find your customers—well, first off, before I talk a little bit about customers, would you describe what you do as a performance?

[1:32:48.2]

Rick Hughes: At times, yeah, unless you're really, really busy, and then all you're doing is just making sure, you know, you serve them, you know.

[1:33:00.7]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah. Are you the same person in the dining room as you are at home?

[1:33:04.6]

Rick Hughes: No, no. No, I'm definitely not, you know.

[1:33:10.6]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So you've seen technology and a lot of things change in the dining since you—you worked in a lot of places with dress codes.

[1:33:21.4]

Rick Hughes: Right.

[1:33:22.6]

Justin Nystrom: What have you seen change over time?

[1:33:25.7]

Rick Hughes: Well, I mean, I can remember, you know, like Commander's and the Caribbean Room, you couldn't get in without a jacket, you know. I mean, they want you to have a tie, but, you know, without a jacket, you're not coming in, you know. And, you know, if you wanted to eat, you'd be wearing someone else's jacket that was left there, you know.

[1:33:58.6]

Justin Nystrom: Maybe say "Lips" on it or something.

[1:34:00.4]

Rick Hughes: Maybe “Lips,” yeah. [Laughter] No, that was a tag I put on his thing, yeah.

[1:34:04.5]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. So, I mean, nowadays, do you see the dress code waning further—

[1:34:13.5]

Rick Hughes: Oh, yeah, yeah.

[1:34:14.6]

Justin Nystrom: —or do you think it’s bounced back or—

[1:34:15.3]

Rick Hughes: No, no, it’s gone. It’s gone, and I can tell you when it started to for Arnaud’s, anyway. Right after the storm, they had, like, the Apple people came in town and none of them put on, you know—you know, they all wore, like, slacks and shirts or jeans and shirts, and they weren’t going to change for *anybody*, and so right then is when Arnaud’s changed. They said, “Okay,” you know.

[1:34:54.5]

Justin Nystrom: Right after the storm?

[1:34:56.3]

Rick Hughes: Yeah.

[1:34:58.2]

Justin Nystrom: I've heard some people refer to that as "Katrina casual."

[1:34:58.2]

Rick Hughes: Yeah. Yeah, it is.

[1:35:02.1]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[1:35:03.3]

Rick Hughes: It is. But really it was when all those people from Silicon Valley came, you know, and they had all that money, and these people were not going to let them leave with all that money, you know. [Laughter] They had to give some of it, you know.

[1:35:03.3]

Justin Nystrom: They became more flexible.

[1:35:26.4]

Rick Hughes: Yes, they did.

[1:35:27.4]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So how about technology? I mean, you see dining rooms, cell phones, when they first kind of became more portable, people answering them in dining rooms, and so there's a progression. Of course, now we have smartphones. When did you first start noticing that kind of stuff in the dining room?

[1:35:44.3]

Rick Hughes: In the last few years, really, you know.

[1:35:50.3]

Justin Nystrom: Okay. So is that something, like, where people talking on cell phones or stuff like that before smartphones, was that a big deal or—

[1:35:57.8]

Rick Hughes: No, no.

[1:35:58.8]

Justin Nystrom: So, not in a fine-dining restaurant?

[1:36:03.1]

Rick Hughes: No, no, because now they can see what everybody's saying about them on Facebook and stuff, and they have to—they're just drawn to it, you know. So almost every table, you know, somebody's got it out there looking at something.

[1:36:26.5]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah. How does that affect you as a waiter?

[1:36:29.7]

Rick Hughes: Well, if you're getting an order, you know, you have to kind of get the other people at the table to, like, tell him, "Hey, give him the order," you know, because *you're* not going to do it, you know.

[1:36:54.2]

Justin Nystrom: I guess you could send them a text message or something.

[1:36:56.1]

Rick Hughes: Yeah. Well, I actually have a flip phone [Laughter], so I couldn't.

[1:37:01.3]

Justin Nystrom: I think Scott said you had a flip phone, yeah, yeah.

[1:37:05.4]

Rick Hughes: Yeah.

[1:37:05.4]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah. What do you say are the biggest changes you've seen over your career in terms of just kind of what affects your life as a server?

[1:37:19.2]

Rick Hughes: The biggest thing is that we're not making any more money and the prices are going up on everything around us. So when I first entered this, you were making a lot of money in that you weren't paying all this out. You know, now with insurance, health insurance, house insurance, you know, I mean, you know, you just have to work, you know.

[1:38:00.3]

Justin Nystrom: So it's in two places, right? It's partly the economics of the restaurant, right? So you're paying more of your bill out, or more of your take-home money, you're sharing it.

[1:38:15.1]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, oh, yeah, of course, yeah, a *tremendous* amount more.

[1:38:18.8]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, but then it's also the cost of living, right?

[1:38:21.4]

Rick Hughes: Yeah.

[1:38:22.1]

Justin Nystrom: Okay.

[1:38:23.0]

Rick Hughes: Everything, yeah.

[1:38:23.6]

Justin Nystrom: So you're being squeezed in two different places. I just wanted to make sure we're clear that there's not just one place, but two places.

[1:38:28.0]

Rick Hughes: Yes, yeah.

[1:38:29.6]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. Do you think credit cards had a lot to do with that?
Computers?

[1:38:34.6]

Rick Hughes: I don't know. You know, I think it's just the way of the world, you know. I mean, everything's going up, and the waiter's salary has been the same. I believe the last time I heard, it was twenty-nine years, you know, the same salary.

[1:38:56.3]

Justin Nystrom: The base salary of two-whatever, 2.19?

[1:38:59.0]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, I think it went up to 2.19 from 2.13, so we did get that massive raise. [Laughter]

[1:39:09.5]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Make sure you don't spend it all in one place.

[1:39:12.6]

Rick Hughes: Right. That's it, yeah.

[1:39:14.5]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. When was the first time you used a point-of-sale system?

[1:39:18.0]

Rick Hughes: I think it was in Florida at a place called the Down Under, and I didn't really enjoy it, you know. You know, it was hard for me to—and I almost quit Brennan's when they first came in with that.

[1:39:39.3]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. I heard a version of that. Can you describe that?

[1:39:44.5]

Rick Hughes: They said that they were going to do this, and I was like, “I don’t want to do it. I just don’t want to do it. I don’t want to learn this. I don’t believe it’s going to catch,” you know. But, anyway, they did it on New Year’s Eve or something, and we were slam-dunk busy, and we actually did more covers than we did the previous year without it. I didn’t really like doing it because it was new, you know, and people don’t like doing new things when they’re, you know, comfy in their old way of doing things. But, you know, it obviously helps everybody, you know. I mean, it’s not as personal, you know, as writing notes and stuff. I mean, you can type in some things, you know, but then the other waiters are behind you like, “Come on, come on!” you know.

[1:41:02.3]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, harder to personalize your—

[1:41:07.0]

Rick Hughes: Oh, yeah.

[1:41:08.1]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Cool, cool. Let’s see. We’ve covered a lot of these different things. We’ve gone a lot of different places, and this has been great.

[1:41:18.1]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, I'm sorry.

[1:41:19.9]

Justin Nystrom: No, no, no, it's perfectly, perfectly okay. Do you think the customers are better educated about what they're eating now than they were when you started?

[1:41:29.3]

Rick Hughes: Oh, yeah. Yeah, of course they are, yeah.

[1:41:31.3]

Justin Nystrom: Has that made your job harder?

[1:41:33.7]

Rick Hughes: At times. It depends upon the person, you know. And they're definitely more educated on wine and liquor, you know.

[1:41:44.4]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So people come in, you find—like, is there a difference—do you still find yourself describing the difference between Cajun and Creole, or is that something—

[1:41:55.6]

Rick Hughes: Occasionally, yeah, yeah.

[1:41:57.2]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, but it's not like it was in, say, 1985 where that would be—

[1:42:00.4]

Rick Hughes: No, no, no.

[1:42:01.6]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[1:42:02.5]

Rick Hughes: No, no. Then every tourist, you had to be—, “Is it hot?”

“No, it's Creole.”

“No, but is it full of red pepper?”

“No, it's Creole. The difference is Cajun is with all the spices.” And then I tell them why, you know, that the Arcadian people had to live way in the swamp and they didn't have any refrigeration, and that they had to pack the spices and smoke everything.

And then they, “Oh, that's why. That's the difference.”

“Yes, ma'am, it is,” you know. And then it's fine, you know. But years ago, it was every single table, almost, you know, with a tourist, you know.

[1:42:46.8]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. Well, God bless that progress, I guess, yeah, yeah.

[1:42:50.3]

Rick Hughes: Yeah, yeah.

[1:42:51.4]

Justin Nystrom: Well, this has been really great. Is there anything else you'd kind of like—observations about being a waiter or, you know, kind of your life as—how much longer do you think you're going to do this?

[1:43:02.2]

Rick Hughes: Not that long, because Scott and I are both sixty-six, so maybe a couple of years, you know.

[1:43:10.5]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. Maybe you'll open your own place, right?

[1:43:14.2]

Rick Hughes: No. [Nystrom laughs.] Never, never. That was my dream when Asia and I went to the Keys, and then [Hurricane] Andrew happened. Even though it didn't hit there, it dried up everything down there, you know, and it was like, you know—I called Chris. He says, "Come on home," you know. [Laughter]

[1:43:39.0]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. That's great, that's great.

[1:43:41.9]

Rick Hughes: Yeah.

[1:43:42.9]

Justin Nystrom: Well, thank you so much.

[1:43:44.8]

Rick Hughes: Hey, the pleasure's mine.

[1:43:47.2]

Justin Nystrom: This has been amazing, some really amazing stories. I'm sure this'll be great, a really great contribution to the collection. Thank you.

[1:43:56.6]

Rick Hughes: Well, good. Thank you, sir. I appreciate it.

[End of interview]