



Victor Pizarro
New Orleans, Louisiana

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Location: New Orleans, LA
Interviewer: Justin Nystrom
Length: One hour and nineteen minutes
Project: Career Servers

Justin Nystrom: So, June 25th, 2019. I'm here with Victor Pizarro, who presently works at Gabrielle [Restaurant], but since Gabrielle hasn't been there super long, you've worked at a bunch of other places, I'm guessing.

[0:01:08.1]

Victor Pizarro: Yes.

[0:01:09.0]

Justin Nystrom: We are here as part of the Southern Foodways Alliance's Longterm Servers Oral History Project. My name is Justin Nystrom. I teach at Loyola University. And we are here at Victor Pizarro's Gentilly home on Baccich Street, which is one of the few Slavic-named streets, I think, in New Orleans.

[0:01:35.5]

Victor Pizarro: Is it Slavic? I don't know. Yeah, I know they were the founders of the neighborhood. Like deMontluzin, Lafaye, and Baccich are—we actually have an old neighborhood map hanging right there, and it's got the original street names.

[0:01:48.8]

Justin Nystrom: Cool.

[0:01:50.1]

Victor Pizarro: But, yeah, I'd say it's rare. There's also Beau Bassich.

[0:01:55.1]

Justin Nystrom: Right. Beau Bassich, who I knew, yeah, yeah, cool guy.

[0:01:59.9]

Victor Pizarro: A City Park guy.

[0:02:00.9]

Justin Nystrom: Very—I called—I know this isn't an oral history about me, and the transcriber's like, "Well, get to your damn interview," but I remember after [Hurricane] Katrina, I called City Park because they had some photographs I was interested in for my first book, and Beau Baccich answers the phone, and he worked for nothin' and paid his secretary's salary to rebuild City Park.

[0:02:20.1]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah, that's amazing. If you really want me to talk about City Park, I will, but your ears will probably melt, because I think Bob Becker's a piece of shit [Nystrom Laughter] and I think the current leadership is just monetizing and turning that park into Disneyland, and it's really unfortunate that an institution with barely over two hundred employees pays its CEO as much as it does and hardly pays a living wage to the rest of the employees. My husband just finished working for City Park and got a job with the City of New Orleans and got a 50 percent wage increase for doing the same kind of work.

[0:02:52.8]

Justin Nystrom: Wow, wow.

[0:02:54.2]

Victor Pizarro: So there's my thoughts on that. [Nystrom Laughter] Yeah, I miss Beau Baccich.

[0:02:59.5]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, Beau was—

[0:03:01.4]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah, one of a kind.

[0:03:02.1]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, civic, civic leader.

So tell me a little—I guess I'd really like to start a little bit about yourself as a person and just kind of growing up, because I like to know my interview subjects more as people.

[0:03:12.9]

Victor Pizarro: Sure.

[0:03:13.3]

Justin Nystrom: Can you tell me where you're from and kind of like growing up?

[0:03:16.4]

Victor Pizarro: I was born at Baptist Hospital in New Orleans, but grew up in Chalmette, Louisiana.

[0:03:22.3]

Justin Nystrom: Okay. So, in the parish, huh?

[0:03:27.3]

Victor Pizarro: In the parish.

[0:03:28.9]

Justin Nystrom: What did your folks do?

[0:03:31.4]

Victor Pizarro: You know, my parents really got here just a few years before I was born. My mom's Cuban, and she immigrated here, you know, in 1960, [19]61, like when it all went down, when she was a teenager. She was actually part of the Pedro Pan Program, which was this whole other thing where the Catholic Church worked with the U.S. government to send the kids of basically the upper-middle classes ahead of them during the revolution, and she ended up in southern Florida with my uncle.

When my grandparents finally came, they ended up looking for work. My grandfather was hired by the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, and so that's where they kind of grew up, went to high school, went to college. My mom graduated college early, eloped with my biological father, and they were on a trip back to Miami to find work as educators, and they stopped off in New Orleans. He had friends here. And they said, "Well, you know, they're hiring in St. Bernard Parish," and they both got jobs in, like, 1970 in St. Bernard Parish, and I was born in 1971.

[0:04:47.2]

Justin Nystrom: So your parents were both educators in St. Bernard?

[0:04:49.3]

Victor Pizarro: Yes, yes, yes. They split up by the time I was two, but my mom married another man, who effectively raised me, who was also Latino. So, you know, she's Cuban, he was Chilean. And I ended up having relationships with both my dads in my adult life. But he was a Merchant Marine from Chile and he had lived in California, and he had come through here on a boat and ended up meeting my mom. They had a date. Their first date was at the Bali Ha'i at Pontchartrain Beach, and it ended up working out for them. So my mom was an educator.

My dad, once he settled down in New Orleans, the one that raised me, worked—had his own carpet-cleaning business out of St. Bernard Parish, but in addition to that, he also worked at the Marriott. He opened it when it opened in the early [19]70s, on Canal Street. He worked in convention services. That was his full-time job, with the benefits, etc. My

mom taught in St. Bernard Parish schools. And then he also had this carpet-cleaning business, which I ended up helping him out with as I—you know, by the time I was like eleven, twelve, until Katrina, actually. As he got older, that was the only thing he would do. He'd be an old man with his old carpet-cleaning machine, and as he got older, I would just do the work for him and just, you know, give him a big chunk of the money.

[0:06:24.1]

Justin Nystrom: That's a great New Orleans story and a great coming-to-New-Orleans story of a different generation.

[0:06:29.4]

Victor Pizarro: I think it is, and also one of the things I've always appreciated—I hated it when I was a kid. Oh, man, I hated it. I hated the sound of the machine, the smell of those chemicals, but as I got older—and then it was all over with Katrina, right? By the time Katrina hit, I was in my early, mid-thirties, and, you know, there was no—my dad was old, and so that was it for the carpet-cleaning business. But one thing it did afford me was that I saw the inside of so many New Orleans homes and business like across the strata of New Orleans culture, from homes in the Lower Ninth Ward to houses uptown to just everything, and you see that people live a whole bunch of different ways, you know.

[0:07:13.8]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah. That is awesome, and—

[0:07:15.9]

Victor Pizarro: So that was interesting.

[0:07:17.5]

Justin Nystrom: —an education.

[0:07:17.3]

Victor Pizarro: Right, right. And later on, I would be a bike courier, so I got to go into all the New Orleans high-rises for about a year, and that was interesting, too, seeing all the offices, but—you know.

[0:07:26.8]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, a witness.

[0:07:30.0]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah, yeah, I guess.

[0:07:31.7]

Justin Nystrom: Cool, cool. Well, on to witnessing, let's get a little bit into—so I know you said, of course, you helped your father with the cleaning business, but—

[0:07:41.6]

Victor Pizarro: Sure, that was a sporadic—

[0:07:43.2]

Justin Nystrom: —but when did you decide to—or did waiting tables come to you or did you come to waiting tables?

[0:07:50.9]

Victor Pizarro: I mean, I was trying to remember last night what my work history was exactly. I do know that when I was about fourteen, my friend's dad had a hand-cleaning company, like the chemicals, in Arabi, and I would help them out there, but then I when I was fifteen, I decided I was going to go get a real job and I went and applied and was hired at the Shoney's in Chalmette, which, you know, I'd always had a fascination with Big Boy. So I lasted there a whole three days [Laughter] when I was fifteen, in which I was just told to mop the floor over and over, and I just didn't get it, and I thought, "Well, this isn't for me," and I just didn't go back. I never collected a paycheck. [Laughter] I was like, I think I'm done with that.

Then when I was sixteen or seventeen, I got a job at McDonald's, like a lot of people in the Parish did. Eventually, I got a job at Arby's, which my dad cleaned the carpets in there, he knew the guy. The guy hired me. It was a little part-timey job in high school.

Then at some point, I—and this is—you know, there's a lot of other stuff in the narrative besides food service. I remember getting a job at Maison Blanche in high school, in New Orleans East. I worked there for the better part of a year.

But after high school, I got a job at the Marriott, where my dad worked. He helped me get a job there. And I'd already moved out. I was living in the Lower Garden District, and I

was actually a doorman at the Marriott, which was interesting, and sometimes a bell person. I want to say I worked there for maybe a year, and then I was just tired of being outside all the time, and I applied at Arnaud's, which what's interesting is I know that some of the other guys you interviewed, Rick [Hughes] and Scott [R. Scott Harrington], they were there. They may have been there at the same time. I think they were there before me, even though I'm forty-eight now and this was probably almost thirty years ago, but I know a lot of the same guys that they talk about. I started off as a back waiter there. I made it to front waiter. You know, the top of the food chain there is captain, as far as the teams, where they work.

I do remember a lot of my time there, a lot the people they might have talked about, Charles and Samir and... I just remember kind of fragments, because it feels like it was so long ago.

[Redacted portion of interview]

But, you know, those are two of the things that stand out for me the most at Arnaud's, and that was probably my first fine dining. I was there for probably a year and a half. I think after that, I went into more generalized hotel work. I worked at Le Méridien. I was a front desk agent there. But then eventually I would, you know, go back to fine dining and service and that sort of thing.

[0:12:44.4]

Justin Nystrom: Let's start with Arnaud's since we're kind of going in order. Tell me a little bit about the—I guess you and I are the same age. I'm forty-eight. So this helps me

chronologically position this, I suppose. So we're talking 1989, [19]90, thereabouts, I guess.

[0:13:02.8]

Victor Pizarro: Mm-hmm, yeah. Well, 1990 is when I graduated high school. I was probably at Arnaud's in like [19]90, [19]91.

[0:13:08.2]

Justin Nystrom: Okay, okay. So you mentioned a few of the names, Samir and Charles.

[0:13:16.0]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah. They were like the maître d's or the head captain. One was one, one was the other. There was another guy, a white guy, he was actually the maître d'. Samir and Charles [Abbyad] were the two, like, lead captains, like station one, station two, and I can't remember the maître d's name, Will maybe, white guy named Will, I think.

[0:13:38.5]

Justin Nystrom: Did you feel like you stood apart at that time as somebody who was more or less out and had what we would today consider normative views on race and gender or—

[0:13:54.9]

Victor Pizarro: I think at that point, I don't know if I was out to those people, honestly. I think I was—like, friends and people that knew me, sure, but at work, probably not. Like, there was maybe—I remember having a, shall we say, dalliance with someone I worked with, and I remember it being like a big hush-hush thing at the time.

[0:14:17.1]

Justin Nystrom: And things were very different in 1990.

[0:14:20.3]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah, totally. Thirty years ago, you know. There were certainly, like, the older gay men that worked in that industry, you know. Like, years and years later, after Katrina, I'd work at Muriel's for a while, and it was like the mustachioed older gay waiter who was very much the Lothario, you know, blah, blah, blah, like capturing all the young guys. So, you know, certainly there were archetypes like that that existed at the time, but as far as, you know, I think a lot of the time, if you were perceived as queer or gay, you were, like, not taken as seriously or not—you know what I'm saying? Like, you weren't the measure of a man that they would be. I mean, one would hope that things are pretty different now, but you never know. I think it depends on the circumstance.

[0:15:14.8]

Justin Nystrom: Umm-hm, Um-hm, Um-hm. So you were kind of learning your trade, I guess, at Arnaud's.

[0:15:20.1]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah, at Arnaud's, definitely.

[0:15:21.5]

Justin Nystrom: What were some of the things that kind of hit you with the most force at that time, if you remember from that time, professionally or just kind of like “This is the way the world works” kind of lessons?

[0:15:32.7]

Victor Pizarro: The obsessiveness with certain things, right? Like, I get it now. Like, for example, like not letting your water levels get too low. But it got to the point where it kind of felt like there was an interpersonal dynamic between the people working there where it became like this kind of form of torture or, you know, not—I would observe it more than have it be bothered be me, and now I think, from my perspective, I'm like, don't bother the table that much. Don't be that intrusive, where it's like every—it felt like every two minutes, somebody was pouring water at that table.

[0:16:10.3]

Justin Nystrom: Kind of hovering, huh?

[0:16:11.5]

Victor Pizarro: Kind of hovering a *lot*, where I think—I know now, you know, from the other end of things, like, nobody goes out to eat to talk to a waiter. [Laughter] Like,

maybe if you're like a favorite regular waiter or whatever, but sometimes, you know, if people want to engage with me, I think it's important as a server to be able to read the people, and sometimes they want to engage with you a little bit, but as far as, like, the hovering, constant attention thing, like for me personally as a guest, I'm just like, "Back off. I'm just here to have a meal, not go on a date with you where I'm tipping."

[0:16:50.8]

Justin Nystrom: [Laughter] So do you feel like—you know, your style has probably evolved over time in the way—would you say you were a much different server at that time than you are today?

[0:17:03.6]

Victor Pizarro: Oh, absolutely, I think a lot more personal, and I think it also depends where you work. It's like know your audience, right?

[0:17:11.5]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah.

[0:17:12.2]

Victor Pizarro: Where you work—and you develop I wouldn't say a persona per se, but you develop tactics and ways of communicating with people. Like, for example, like, Gabrielle, I'm the bar manager now, so I'm almost always behind the bar, and that's a fairly recent development. It's been like four or five months. I was a server there, but,

you know, servers do get a little bit of a following. You have friends, you have people that come in to see you and you have people that you know outside of the restaurant world that want to come spend some time with you, and so they'll go have a meal to do it, right? Completely contradicting what I said five or ten minutes ago [Nystrom Laughter], but, you know, this is also Gabrielle's, a family-run place. It's a very familiar place, so I think there's an expectation to be recognized.

There's an expectation to—I have certain people that come and sit at my bar that, you know, expect me to use foul language and be, you know, very personal because that's a little bit of the character I've built, and then there's other people, like, you know, if they don't live here or if I don't really know them, I'm going to be pretty professional, pretty courteous, but I'm not going to invest personally that much in our personal interactions because, you know, there's—I don't want to say there's no payoff, but there's no reason to. Like, if I know you, sure, we're going to engage on a personal level. If I don't or if I know I'm never going to see you again, why would I? You know, I'm going to give you professional service, but I'm not going to give you a piece of me, I guess, is what I'm trying to say.

[0:18:47.8]

Justin Nystrom: And I guess you could be overly familiar with somebody you don't know, in a way.

[0:18:53.7]

Victor Pizarro: Right. So that's the thing. Like, I'm never going to be overly—like, Mary's brother Jack comes in a lot and I'm *horrible* to him, but he loves it and he knows I'm joking, and I do actually kind of adore him. And Jack's complicated. He's, like, scared of gay men, I think, because of—I think he's been hit on a lot. He's a little bearish-looking, so I tease him a little bit with this, but I want him to be comfortable, and I like to engage him in conversation. He's a good guy.

And I have people that come in like once or twice a week, and the long-running joke is like, "Sorry, sold out. Can't sit here," [Nystrom Laughter] to an empty bar. And it's cheesy, but it breeds a little bit of familiarity for them and it allows, I think, a—you know, loosens it up. It's like, okay, when I—it's not going to be purely transactional. It's also going to be personal.

[0:19:48.3]

Justin Nystrom: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. It's what they're seeking.

[0:19:50.4]

Victor Pizarro: Right, yeah.

[0:19:51.4]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah. Great, great. So we've been through Shoney's and McDonald's and Arby's and then Arnaud's and—

[0:19:59.1]

Victor Pizarro: Stellar places.

[0:20:00.8]

Justin Nystrom: Well, you know, you've got to start someplace, right?

[0:20:02.9]

Victor Pizarro: Right.

[0:20:03.9]

Justin Nystrom: So you're at Arnaud's a year and a half, and at some point you decide or it's decided for you that you leave, or how does that occur?

[0:20:12.6]

Victor Pizarro: I don't even really remember. I don't remember if I quit or got fired or what happened.

[0:20:21.8]

Justin Nystrom: Because then you went to do the door—

[0:20:23.7]

Victor Pizarro: Oh, at Arnaud's to the Marriott? I have no idea. I just think maybe it was summer and I wasn't making money. Like, it's hard getting close to fifty [chuckles], because there's, like, a lot of details where I'm like—I'm sure things that had a lot of

gravitas in that moment are just kind of like, “Whatever. Worked out.” I’m pretty sure I left Arnaud’s. The Marriott, when I left there, I’m trying to remember where I went to. Or maybe it was the Marriott, then Arnaud’s, then the Méridien. I could probably look up—there’s probably a file somewhere that tells me the order.

[0:21:03.6]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, the NSA or something will have it.

[0:21:06.6]

Victor Pizarro: Right, or Louisiana Workforce Commission, possibly. But I do know that at the Méridien, I ended up working in one of the restaurant outlets to pick up a little bit extra, because I was doing front desk, and I think I’d gone to being tip, tip, tip, to actually having kind of a living wage, and I was burnt out on being tipped, for a little while.

Then I ended up—that may have been about the time that I went to Le Pavillon, and I ended up working at Le Pavillon for years and years and years. And I did realize that I did enjoy working for locally owned or smaller owned places, because Le Pavillon was privately owned. It’s a ten-story hotel. It’s not anymore; it got sold years ago. But, you know, I started off in there as a server in the Crystal Room, which was their outlet. The Crystal Room was very busy for lunch. They did a pasta and salad bar, and a lot of the businesspeople—so this was like in the late nineties, I’m going to guess, mid to late nineties. A lot of the people in the area, businesspeople, went there for lunch; for dinner, not so much. And at that point, I’d gotten used to working, like, you know, the night

shift, and I started working there as a dinner server, which, actually, financially ended up being okay, because there wasn't that much business, but the prices were so astronomically high. [Laughter] And you did single service, so you really just needed like two tables and you had a great night.

So in my time there, I met a lot of great people. They had interns from Europe. One of them's my really good friend Silvio, who I ended up being in his wedding in Switzerland. Another one's my friend Noemi who's also from Switzerland, a French couple. And I've kept up with these people. Two years ago, I went and saw all of them and, you know, did a big road trip through Europe. You know, I fostered a lot of friendships. One of our wine reps right now, Jody, worked in sales at Le Pavillon, and we've known each other for over twenty years.

So that was probably one of my longest-term jobs, where I stayed there for about five years, and I did everything. I ended up doing room service; I ended up bartending at the Crystal Room; I ended up answering the room-service phones. I became really good friends with the executive chef at the time, and when she was terminated by a new food and beverage director for seemingly no reason, I was one of the ones that led, like, the cause to lobby to get her back, because the new food and beverage director was completely coked-up all the time and he was a bad hire. [Laughter] So, you know, after a couple of months, everything got put back in place. It was like this wacky guy's, like, trying to change everyone's uniforms and doing really inappropriate, like, sexual harassment stuff to people. At least they got her job back. She works two or three days a week now at Lakeview Grocery on Harrison, lives not too far in Gentilly. We've still kept in touch. She's pretty wonderful.

And I think at Le Pavillon I really learned, from a hotel perspective, so many different layers and complexities of food service, whether it was, you know, like I said, the room service or the bar service, or sometimes I would do, eventually, like, mornings and breakfasts. They have the whole peanut butter and jelly thing there. Do you know about that?

[0:24:47.0]

Justin Nystrom: I've stayed there, yes. Yeah, yeah.

[0:24:49.0]

Victor Pizarro: So for a while there, I was the peanut butter chef, and they got me an embroidered, like, toque and, like, thing. [Nystrom Laughter] And I'd bring out the peanut butter. They'd pay me extra to do it, and I'd bring out the peanut butter and jelly and the blah, blah, blah.

[0:25:00.4]

Justin Nystrom: Were they doing the big New Year's Eve things back then?

[0:25:03.0]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah, yeah. I remember it was the millennium and everyone had to work, and I went to the general manager and I said, "Dude, I got one of those Y2K tickets and I'm outta here. Sorry. Like, I can understand if you have to fire me, like, but I'm going to Japan for two hundred bucks. It's just the way it is." You know, like, very polite,

and that's kind of how always when I—I travel a lot, but I've always been very, like, succinct. Like, "I don't want us to break up over this, but we can remain friends, and I'm not going to take it personally if you have to find somebody else. I understand how the business works."

[0:25:39.2]

Justin Nystrom: I don't want to interrupt the train, because this is great, but do you find that you're—you say you like to travel a lot. When I got here, you were unpacking a travel guide, if I don't mind helping you share that, and I thought, "Ah, he must like to travel." Do you find that working in service industry complements that well?

[0:25:58.9]

Victor Pizarro: Oh, definitely if you're—oh, shoot. I completely spaced a place we've got to revisit.

[0:26:04.7]

Justin Nystrom: Okay.

[0:26:05.6]

Victor Pizarro: [Laughter] Definitely, yeah, probably one of my tormentuous and horrible work experiences, and I'm trying to remember if this was after Le—I think it was after Le Pavillon anyway, so we're still on the right track, and that place was Broussard's. I worked for the Preusses, **[Portion of interview redacted]**

[0:27:17.4]

Justin Nystrom: Travel. We were talking about the joy of travel.

[0:27:17.4]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah, travel. Well, I remember when I left that job, I was like, “I’m going to—.” Oh, we can put a time mark on it. I had turned thirty. I was turning thirty, so maybe I went to Le Pavillon after that, then went back to—I don’t know. So that was—okay. Le Pavillon was before that. Broussard’s was after that, because that was 2001. Yeah, I was just like, “Y’all, I’m going to be nice about it, but it’s my thirtieth birthday. I’m going to Argentina, going to Brazil, going to be gone a couple of months.” And I really wanted to leave that job, so it was kind of like the nice, polite way of being like, you know, “I’m getting outta here. I’m moving away,” that sort of thing.

[0:28:06.5]

Justin Nystrom: Were you ever tempted, when you were on the road like that internationally, to try to pick up a job or something like that, pick up waiting tables somewhere else, or were you places that your linguistic skills weren’t adequate for that?

[0:28:18.3]

Victor Pizarro: No. I mean, I’m multilingual. Yeah, no, I don’t think it ever really came to that, because basically I could make more in New Orleans, and cost of living in other

places—like, I was in Argentina during an economic crisis and having five-star meals for like two bucks, you know.

[0:28:40.3]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah.

[0:28:41.2]

Victor Pizarro: And, like, protests in front of the Pink House in Buenos Aires. So I've always, like, been lucky with stuff like that, but, no, I've never really tried to pick up work internationally.

[0:28:52.3]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah. So New Orleans always came back. It was home and also a good place to do what you were doing.

[0:28:57.3]

Victor Pizarro: Right, right, right.

[0:28:58.7]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Cool, cool, cool. So I guess there was a stint at Broussard's.

[0:29:03.4]

Victor Pizarro: Well, yeah. I was at Le Pavillon for a good long time. I fostered a lot of relationships. I did the trip to Japan. I think shortly thereafter, there was another trip, and I just kind of wanted a break. I had been in a relationship and I just needed time away from New Orleans. Shortly around then, I became one of the resident managers of the Ronald McDonald House on Canal Street. Basically, the deal there is you got free rent and free utilities and you basically shared with another person working the desk on the weekends, and you had to be there every night by like 11:00 o'clock at night or 10:00 o'clock at night.

[0:29:47.9]

Justin Nystrom: Every night?

[0:29:48.7]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah. You got a break like every four weeks or something like that, for a long weekend, or six weeks, but, you know, it was free rent. I had a roommate at the time, so I would work later at Le Pavillon—this was at the end of Le Pavillon—and she would—you know, I was the one who was able to be there in the morning, she was there at night, unless we switched it up. So it kind of worked out for free rent for a couple of years, and at that point, I was less beholden to making, like, you know, weekly money or daily money.

So I wanted something different, so I took a break for a while. I traveled, and when I came back, you know, Broussard's was hiring. I didn't know much about the place, so I applied. I got the job, and I was always pretty confident with my skill set, but, you know,

if there was a job I really wanted, you know, I would get it, like, and if I didn't, it wasn't for me. So I went over there, and it was very hierarchal, like, you know, team-based waiting. I think that Rick worked over there, but for the regime before me, you know. He worked for the Marcellos [Joe C. Marcello] or—

[0:31:04.1]

Justin Nystrom: I think he said yesterday—this is fresh in my mind since it was yesterday—he got there right when they took over.

[0:31:09.6]

Victor Pizarro: The Preusses?

[0:31:10.5]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[0:31:12.1]

[Portion of interview redacted]

[0:34:25.7]

Justin Nystrom: Rick [Hughes] described working at Arnaud's as being a really stressful environment.

[0:34:31.8]

Victor Pizarro: Oh, yeah, it was.

[0:34:33.1]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah. Do you find that generally, in those bigger places like that, to be the case?

[0:34:37.2]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah. I feel in the bigger places with this kind of like male-dominated hierarchy that kind of, you know, performance and pressure and pressure and performance. And you can see on the old-timers like Rick and Scott how it has cemented itself into their personality. They're very competitive. And the older guys, it's almost like, "Come on. Just relax."

You know, we're in a small place. We tip-share at Gabrielle. Everything's cool. But these guys have such a drive to perform and to let—you know, "Oh, they tipped me this much. Oh, they did this."

Where it's just like, "Okay."

And, you know, Gabie and I have had conversations. I'm like, "That happened to them. Like, they're not just built that way." Like, the industry made them that, especially if they were at places like Broussard's and Arnaud's for long periods of time.

[0:35:30.7]

Justin Nystrom: I think when you say male-dominated, that's a really good insight, and it's something that's emerging more and more as I do these interviews. Talk a little bit about, like, how many women servers did you have at Arnaud's in 19—early [19]90s.

[0:35:44.0]

Victor Pizarro: None.

[0:35:44.2]

Justin Nystrom: None?

[0:35:44.9]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah, there was no such thing.

[0:35:46.0]

Justin Nystrom: As a female server. And, of course, they have them today.

[0:35:48.5]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah.

[0:35:49.0]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. When did you first start seeing women—you know, I guess they would start as back waiters, maybe, or would they come in as front waiters. Are there women captains?

[0:36:00.5]

Victor Pizarro: I will tell you this. Post-Katrina, and even before Katrina—because after Broussard’s, I went to Upperline, and I worked for JoAnn [Clevenger] three different times. JoAnn’s her own set of problems, right? Like, there is a part of me that loves and respects JoAnn, there’s a part of me that’s terrified of her. But what I learned then is I’m going to work for women. Like, even with all the issues with JoAnn, after that, I worked at Bayona. I’m either going to work for women or gay men. You know, after that, I worked at Bayona, I worked at Marigny Brasserie, I worked at Gabrielle, I worked at The John, the bar, which is a dive bar on Marigny and Frenchmen, and that’s owned by a woman, Beverly K. Vereen [phonetic], who politically we’re pretty different, cerebrally and, like, personality-wise, get along—like, total respect that woman. I also worked at The Country Club, which is gay-owned. Like, I learned. You know, once I started working for JoAnn and once Katrina happened, I was like, I’m not working for any of these places anymore. There is no way in hell.

[0:37:14.9]

Justin Nystrom: Were you at Broussard’s when Katrina hit?

[0:37:18.5]

Victor Pizarro: No. Funny enough, I was at Upperline. No, I had left Broussard’s by then, for the second time, the second time only—no, no, that’s not true. I worked for

them once, went back to them, and then after Katrina, I was like, let me go see if I can make some money and help out for a couple of days. **[Portion of interview redacted]**

[0:38:34.7]

Justin Nystrom: When you say, you know, the world's different with Katrina, did you feel that generally with other people too? Like, I know a lot of people kind of had, for lack of a better word, kind of a “fuck it” moment with Katrina in their own lives and the way they lived their lives kind of more broadly, that they weren't going to put up with stuff that they put up before. Do you feel like that's—

[0:38:51.2]

Victor Pizarro: Absolutely. That's true for my parents, it was true for my mom, that was true for me. But I also think, very specifically with the restaurant industry, they were very much in need of us. Like, the tables had been turned, right? It wasn't like, “Oh, let me clamor for the good job that might pay me really well and have this insane competition.” Post-Katrina, it was like, “There's nobody can work these jobs and we have all this business.”

[0:39:14.0]

Justin Nystrom: So it was a better labor market all of a sudden.

[0:39:16.0]

Victor Pizarro: Absolutely, it was a better labor market.

[0:39:19.4]

Justin Nystrom: Interesting, interesting. So when did you first meet JoAnn Clevenger?

[0:39:23.1]

Victor Pizarro: I think when I went and applied there, I think it was a newspaper ad, old school. And I was hired. I had an interview with her, and I remember—so that was probably—I want to say like 2002, 2003, around then; hazy. But I remember going in there, and, you know, she can charm your pants off. She really can. And her senior waiter, Mark, who I don't know if you—if you ever get a chance, you should interview him, Mark Rein, R-e-i-n. He's still working for her. I saw him not that long ago. But he was this, like, super dominant alpha queen, and he was going to be bitchy to me and just not be—just sneer down his nose at me.

I remember halfway through the first shift in the middle of everything, I was like, “Look, bitch—,” and just laid it all out. I was like, “You can play this fucking thing. I'm sure you do it with all the new people. But I'm fucking old. I'm in my thirties. I don't give a shit. You want to do this to me? You want to torture me?” He just stared at me wide-eyed and started laughing, and I was like, “We have an understanding.” And best of friends ever since then. He tortured everyone else, horrible, mean queen, just, like, shady, awful, abusive. But I was like, “Not with me, dude.” Like, “Not with me. I'm going to buck your system.” But he'd be a good one to talk to. And she's got lifers there. She's got Gerald behind the bar—sorry—Gerard, who's been there forever. And I'm friends with, you know, her former chef, that he had the big social media, James [Cullen].

[0:41:14.6]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah. Yeah, sure, I know James, yeah.

[0:41:15.7]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah, Mary’s good friends with James. James comes in a lot. It’s so strange, because, you know, we’ve had a talk about it, and he’s like, “Well, tequila kind of fueled that,” and I was like, “Yeah,” you know, the big social media blowup. **[Portion of interview redacted]**

[0:41:42.8]

Justin Nystrom: Do you think you have to be sort of, I don’t know, for lack of a better word, canny, to run a restaurant like that?

[0:41:49.3]

Victor Pizarro: Oh, fuck yeah, you do. Definitely. Look, JoAnn started off—and I’m sure you can interview her, and I’m sure you will. I know of JoAnn’s history a little bit more than other people because for a while I worked as her personal assistant, number two. Secondly, one of her longest-term employees, Nicole—that’s another one, Nicole Karmisool, who she works at Ralph’s on the Park now, and she’s been there for over a decade. She was at Upperline for over a decade. She’s pretty amazing. But her mother, Sue, worked with JoAnn at the Playboy Club on Iberville in the Quarter. See, now, JoAnn was well known for selling these flowers out of the flower cart, like the hippie

kind of culture, but then she had to make money and she bartended, and I think Sue cocktailled, JoAnn bartended at the Playboy Club. So what's funny is that she started off as this French Quarter 1960s kind of, you know, countercultural person, but where is she now? At Upperline. Who's she serving?

[0:42:54.3]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah. Not the counterculture, for sure.

[0:42:56.5]

Victor Pizarro: Exactly.

[0:42:57.5]

Justin Nystrom: Some of them may come in there, you know, but they might not [inaudible].

[0:43:01.4]

Victor Pizarro: I mean, I'll go in, but for me, it's kind of like there's always this, like, if you're going to be successful in this business, there's always the strange irony, right? Like, at the end of the day, especially in the New Orleans, like, food-world hierarchy, it's a small town, and you're going to see the same people over and over.

[0:43:19.7]

Justin Nystrom: Very true, very true. So Upperline, was that a single service or is that a team or how is that done?

[0:43:29.8]

Victor Pizarro: God, I'm trying to remember. I want to say it was team. Well, I mean, we—yeah, it was definitely team, but it was set up a little bit differently. Like, you had your main waiters, but then I think the food runners actually had, like, larger sections than the waiters did and did a little bit more, and then there were also bussers. So, kind of single service, but not really, where it felt like single service, but a lot of people were doing a lot of the workload. Or maybe it was two-person service. I really can't remember.

[0:44:13.1]

Justin Nystrom: Well, let me follow up. One of the reasons why I'm asking this, because so far in this—and I've interviewed—I've done five of these so far, and a lot of waiters, servers say that they used to be able to make more money on single service, and then when you moved to the tip-out, especially when tip-out included managers and others, that they're working as hard, but making less money. Do you think that's true, or to what extent is it true?

[0:44:45.4]

Victor Pizarro: Well, you know, one of the places I worked at, single service, post-Katrina, for a while was Elizabeth's.

[0:44:50.5]

Justin Nystrom: Oh, in the Bywater.

[0:44:51.8]

Victor Pizarro: In the Bywater. And that was probably, at that point, the most casual place I'd ever worked at, and I was terrified of not making money, but it was single-service, and even though dinner was sleepy, like, I made good money, you know. I actually hated working the super busy brunches. I think you can make more as single service because of the whole tip-out thing, and I think especially in that era of the [19]90s, 2000s, where management was getting a cut of the tip-out, which, you know, now it's kind of like people know, "Fuck that." You don't do that anymore. Yeah, I think you could make more doing single service. It depends on the intricacy of the service and the price point. There's a lot of factors. I think there's no single response to that question. It just depends on the situation, honestly.

[0:45:43.0]

Justin Nystrom: Well, good, good. I like subtlety, so—

[0:45:49.2]

Victor Pizarro: Well, look. I think from a service perspective, if you don't think about it too deeply, you can be like, "I made more as a single-service server," but when you start considering what was the price point, what was the volume, what was all of this, these were all factors that contributed to how much money you made in that situation. So I

think there's always a lot more to consider than whether it was single service or team service, you know.

[0:46:13.9]

Justin Nystrom: Um-hm, Um-hm, Um-hm. Some of this is quantifiable, some of it's perception.

[0:46:17.5]

Victor Pizarro: Exactly.

[0:46:18.5]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[0:46:19.8]

Victor Pizarro: Sorry. I'm just readjusting. I have kind of a messed-up knee.

[0:46:22.6]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, I hear you. Do you find, you know, with knees and all that, you said you like to work out. You swim, right?

[0:46:28.6]

Victor Pizarro: I swim and do the elliptical so my legs hurt less. Like, I carry a lot of weight, and I actually think it's gotten worse since I've been bartending because I walk less. I just stand more.

[0:46:40.6]

Justin Nystrom: Stand, uh-huh.

[0:46:42.1]

Victor Pizarro: So, you know, I'm also planning on doing, like, gastric sleeve surgery, which I was going to do this summer in Mexico, but now my husband's new job covers it, so I have to go through this whole process, so I probably won't have it for seven or eight months. But in the interim, like, I kind of watch what I eat, I swim, and I work out like four or five times a week.

[0:47:07.2]

Justin Nystrom: Um-hm, Um-hm. And so being on your feet, of course, you're in a job where, like, there's—the physicality of your work, right?

[0:47:13.7]

Victor Pizarro: Right.

[0:47:14.7]

Justin Nystrom: Have you ever had healthcare at anywhere you've worked? In the food business, of course.

[0:47:23.5]

Victor Pizarro: God, let me think. That's a damn shame that I have to think about it that hard, but I really don't think so. Only when I worked for hotels, like more corporate entities.

[0:47:35.8]

Justin Nystrom: So maybe Le Pavillon or—

[0:47:37.7]

Victor Pizarro: Le Pavillon, we had insurance. I did have insurance. But, you know, I will tell you, like, in most of my post-Katrina experience, the only insurance I ever got was, you know, once I married my husband. He was in the military. That was the first—I was on public health for a long time, and, you know, I've—that's another big issue with me. I really think that—I mean, but it's also healthcare in this country. That's a bigger conversation, right? It's not just the food industry. It's what's accessible and how large the groups can be, especially if you work for smaller restaurants, in the insurance marketplace. But, yeah, for being very physical jobs with sometimes very inherent risks, you know, within the parameters of the labor that you're doing, you know, there should be healthcare. Absolutely.

[0:48:34.8]

Justin Nystrom: So this is related to kind of this—we’ll weave back into the restaurants again, but this is related to the idea of healthcare and, like, what it is to live as a server in New Orleans. Now, you told me that you became a homeowner five years ago, you and your husband.

[0:48:50.9]

Victor Pizarro: Right.

[0:48:51.3]

Justin Nystrom: But I imagine you work with people who are forever renters, I guess.

[0:48:56.2]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah, I do.

[0:48:57.7]

Justin Nystrom: And, you know, what’s that conversation in prep time while you’re all—do you have conversations about the cost of living in New Orleans?

[0:49:07.2]

Victor Pizarro: You know, I have that conversation outside of work all the time. I think the—you know, I was always a renter until we were able to purchase this house, and I am thankful that I almost always had locals, you know, quote, unquote, “locals-rated” rent

that was affordable, and I really don't see that happening anymore, you know. I'm sure it does in some instances, but the cost of living, the scarcity of housing, you know, I attribute a lot of it to the short-term rental market, etc. But I think it's harder and harder to be a working-class person, whether you're in the service industry or not, in New Orleans.

And, you know, I have friends that rent, and, you know, older friends that rent, too, and Scott rents, and one of the things I learned is that it's great if you have a great deal and you have a generous landlord that allows you to have affordable rent, but there is a precariousness inherent to that situation. That person could die at any moment. You know, that person could become ill. Somebody else could buy the house. They could foreclose. There are no guarantees in that situation, and I learned that very strongly because I managed a nonprofit and we lost our spot, and, you know, realizing that being at the largesse of, you know, of somebody who is fragile—anyone's fragile—is a dangerous situation. So that's what I think about a lot when I think about people who still have to rent, when I see, you know, on social media, I see friends, like, looking for an apartment, looking for this, and, you know, I know they're service industry. They're living hand-to-mouth, and it's a little terrifying. I think it will eventually change the nature of the city and the industry.

[0:51:03.7]

Justin Nystrom: Um-hm, Um-hm. Yeah, I've experienced that in my own work in academia. I guess, you know, I do okay, but, like, there are a lot of people, working staff at the library or something like that, they don't make a lot of money, you know.

[0:51:13.8]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah. No, no, no. Or even, like, a lot of univer—you're in academia. The people that they hire now as—god, what do you call that where you're not tenure track, you're not—

[0:51:23.7]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, adjuncts.

[0:51:24.5]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah, the adjuncts are—I think people at fast food get paid more than adjuncts.

[0:51:29.5]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, I think you're right, yeah, yeah. So you have mentioned a few other places that you worked. Now, Upperline, which is, of course—you worked for Susan Spicer at Bayona.

[0:51:41.6]

Victor Pizarro: I did, I did. She was lovely.

[0:51:44.2]

Justin Nystrom: Can you tell me any more about that other than that she was lovely?

[0:51:47.9]

Victor Pizarro: You know, I think she's a businessperson and I think she's *very* professional, and I think also, like, a lot of the day-to-day stuff she left to Regina or whoever she had managing at the time. But she was a formidable presence and really good with food, and smart and somebody you could respect, you know, which was—given other situations I'd been in [Laughter], was really refreshing and nice. And it was grueling work, you know, I'll say that, the intricate menu items and a lot of memorization and a lot of professionalism required and expected, but it was rewarding. You made money and you were treated professionally, for the most part. You know, there's always some bullshit, but it was a good situation. I have *nothing* bad to say about her.

[0:52:42.1]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. So Bayona, of course, has this reputation, I think one of the higher reputations outside of New Orleans, and so did you find a lot of people coming to that restaurant who were like, you know, "I read about this"?

[0:52:53.2]

Victor Pizarro: Oh, yeah, definitely.

[0:52:54.2]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. Because I know Susan does reasonably well with food media. Maybe she's not of the Brennan level, but pretty well.

[0:53:00.9]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah, she does really well. Trust me.

[0:53:03.3]

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

[0:53:05.2]

Victor Pizarro: Like, I think the only person that's given her a run for her money in the post-modern era is—what's her name—Bywater American Bistro, Compare Lapin—

[0:53:16.7]

Justin Nystrom: Oh, yeah, Nina Compton.

[0:53:18.1]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah.

[0:53:18.3]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[0:53:19.2]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah, I kind of see Nina Compton as a more postmodern version of—which is probably an unfair assumption or something, but as far as a powerful woman in

this industry in New Orleans, like, more filling that role than like a JoAnn Clevenger role or, you know—as far as similarities.

[0:53:36.6]

Justin Nystrom: Interesting. No, that's a great observation. So the Bayona stay, not super long?

[0:53:41.0]

Victor Pizarro: Probably a year, year and a half. That's what I'm going to say for all of them because I can't remember.

[0:53:45.9]

Justin Nystrom: [Laughter] That's all right.

[0:53:47.5]

Victor Pizarro: But, you know, at the same time, I was getting more and more—post-Katrina, I got involved with the New Orleans Community Bike Project, Plan B, and what we did was we wanted to empower people to work on their own forms of transportation and provide affordable bicycles for people. And what we did post-Katrina was we really pushed the whole bike envelope. Like, before, I think Bike Easy, the Bike Coalition, all of this really solidified, we were out there on the ground. We were like the advanced troops on the ground actually throwing bikes at the city for free, you know. Post-Katrina, we put over 10,000 bikes on the road that we got donated from Chicago, from Virginia,

and the whole reason the Marigny and Bywater got seen as, like, all these funky bikes was us. We were putting all of these, like, twenty- and thirty-year-old bikes back on the road, because—think about it—RTA [Regional Transit Authority] wasn't working, there's no buses—

[0:54:43.8]

Justin Nystrom: You could argue it still doesn't work, but, yeah, yeah.

[0:54:46.6]

Victor Pizarro: Right, right. Ninety percent of the cars were flooded out and piled out and gray, and so people had—they needed it, and we saw it as an opportune time to, “Okay, let's make this happen. New Orleans is flat, it's temperate. Let's get the bikes on the road.” And we did, and we survived until I want to say 2014, 2013. Our first big bump was, you know, we were at 511 Marigny, which is where Paladar 511 is now, and back then, that building used to be a very raw space. Artists and weirdoes rented space on the second and third floor and lived there illegally. We had our space downstairs, and we were a nonprofit. And there was the Infoshop, the Anarchist Bookstore next door. There was a circus-training thing. You know, it was all very dangerous and full of liability, but we were effective and it worked.

But then Julian Mutter owned it, who owns Doerr Furniture, and when he got an offer to redevelop that building, he had to let it go, because that building was crumbling, and they made those fancy apartments out of it. And he got a space in another building, but then it was a—and that's where I learned the lesson, like, you can't depend on like—sure,

there's this eccentric millionaire that believes what you believe, but, you know, when it's time to go, it's time to go.

So once we lost that space—and that became a lot—you know, I would center my work around that. Like, eventually that became a very small paid position for me, but then I would, like, bartend two nights a week to make ends meet, and, you know, I got more into the nonprofit world, and it was really when that all kind of just ended—I witnessed a very close bike death a block away from the place, and that was just kind of the end of it for me. I was like, “Not doing this anymore.” Like, “Not watching somebody die.” Like, “No matter what we do, like, people still kill people with their cars.”

So we ended up—that's when I got—I started doing culinary tours on bicycles after that.

So I had all this food experience, and I got reached out to by the oldest bike tour company, and I would bring people out to eat at different places and talk about food history and how Creole food exists and, you know, all of it, right? Like, and I'm pretty well-read and, you know, I understand pretty basic concepts of, you know, Creole and Afrocentric sensibilities. But that was pretty lucrative, but at the end of the day, I was working as an independent contractor on a bike in a dangerous situation and I still had PTSD over the other stuff, and after four years of doing that, I heard Gabrielle was reopening. I was friends with Sara, Gabrielle's cousin, and I said, you know, “I'm kind of thinking, like, I haven't done this for a few years.”

And she's like, “Just go talk to them.”

And I walked in and Gabie was putting up, like, little wallpaper things. I was like, “Okay, it's a weird situation.” And it was like a forty-second conversation, shoved her my résumé.

She's like, "Can you be here next week?"

And I said, "Yeah." And I was there. That was it.

[0:57:47.5]

Justin Nystrom: Nice.

[0:57:48.4]

Victor Pizarro: That was it, and I've been there since we reopened.

[0:57:49.7]

Justin Nystrom: Which is a pretty long stint now. I've guess they've been open two years now.

[0:57:52.4]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah, two years.

[0:57:53.0]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah.

[0:57:53.5]

Victor Pizarro: Two years.

[0:57:54.0]

Justin Nystrom: I mean long in Victor's world.

[0:57:56.0]

Victor Pizarro: Right, right, because I move. And what I told them is, like, "I will promise you a year, but after a year, I've got to take off." And after a year, I did. I left for a month. I went to Japan for a few weeks and I went to—then I was like, "Shit, I guess I'm going back," because they were like, "Well, we can maybe hold your space. Like, it's—," you know. And maybe that's the way I get validation. If they hold the space for me, maybe I'll really come back. That's the way I kind of prove it, you know.

[0:58:21.8]

Justin Nystrom: It seems like they've assembled a pretty experienced team.

[0:58:23.8]

Victor Pizarro: I love that we have a pretty experienced team. I love it. I love working with—are you kidding? I'm like one of the youngest people there, almost fifty. [Nystrom Laughter] It's pretty amazing. Like, you know, our tenant works at N7 and he talks about the twenty-year-olds that wait tables there and all the problems they have, and I'm like, yeah, we have different problems. We have old-people problems [Nystrom Laughter] where they'll bitch about the level of professionalism, but it's not like that. It's not like the whole station's going down in flames or there's a bunch of complaints. Like, the guests get good service. All of our fighting's infighting.

[0:59:03.2]

Justin Nystrom: Do you think people—is it as tenable as it used to be to do what you do for a living, like for somebody, say, who’s twenty years old and maybe not going to Loyola, because if they’re going to Loyola, they’re going to finish school and do what they’re going to do, but if they said, “Screw college. I’m going to go and do this”?

[0:59:23.4]

Victor Pizarro: I’ve got a friend who went to Loyola and she got out a year before the end, and that’s been ten years now, so it’s not always—

[0:59:29.6]

Justin Nystrom: It’s been working for her, yeah.

[0:59:30.7]

Victor Pizarro: I mean, not really. She was a pedicabber. Now she’s a tour guide. She worked in food service. I would say it can happen if you look the right way and know the right people and you’re at the right place.

[0:59:41.4]

Justin Nystrom: “Look the right way” meaning?

[0:59:43.3]

Victor Pizarro: If you're the right kind of hipster at the, you know, expensive hipster millennial place and, you know, you can make the right amount of money or if you look established and you're a local and you're at the right classic New Orleans place. I think the situation has to be much more precise, but I think it can still happen.

[1:00:02.6]

Justin Nystrom: Um-hm, Um-hm. So you've really always waited in the era of credit cards, I guess, but have you seen an evolution from cash to credit cards in your time?

[1:00:12.3]

Victor Pizarro: I think credit cards are much more prevalent than they used to be, definitely.

[1:00:16.6]

Justin Nystrom: So even in the [19]90s when you started, was that more of a cash—

[1:00:19.6]

Victor Pizarro: I think there was more cash in the [19]90s, definitely.

[1:00:22.4]

Justin Nystrom: Do you think the servers were carrying around more cash? Was it a different lifestyle?

[1:00:26.2]

Victor Pizarro: Oh, sure.

[1:00:27.1]

Justin Nystrom: Because a cash lifestyle's a different lifestyle.

[1:00:28.7]

Victor Pizarro: Oh, yeah. We got paid out—like, at a lot of places, I got paid—I think it wasn't until I got to Bayona that I got my tips on a paycheck, so even, you know, even, like, at Broussard's, we got paid out every night. It's *definitely* a different lifestyle. Like, a lot of those guys go straight to the bar or go buy a bag of coke or do whatever they needed to do to get through, and, you know, I was always the one, like—I think, right, like, not really expressing my own spectacularness or whatever, but I think I was atypical, because I was like, "I'm going on a trip. I'm going somewhere. Later, guys. I'm going to travel." Like, "I'm going to do this. I'm going to buy a house. I'm going to—." You know, like, that's what the cash was for me, and maybe that was being the son of immigrants, maybe that was, you know, a lot of different factors, right? Or maybe not really having much of an addictive personality. Just luck.

But I will tell you, I wanted to touch upon something that you mentioned earlier and that you said with Katrina changing a lot of things. So post-Katrina, I was doing all this bike stuff. I had some money from Katrina. I was actually in Alaska when Katrina hit. You know, I had been working at Upperline, and in the spring of 2005 going into summer, like May, you know, I told her I'd found a job, I wanted to try waiting tables in Alaska

and see what that was like. And I'd also met this guy who was going up there and working in fisheries or whatever, and I was like, "Oh, I'm going to go up there." Anyway, the guy called me and dumped me the night before the flight, and I was, like, devastated. I was in Mid-City. I'd already planned to go up. I'd, like, stored my stuff at a friend's house, and she was taking care of my pets, and I was—so I missed my flight. I went to Banks Street Bar and, a rare occasion, I had a few drinks. But then the next day, I was like, "You know what? I'm going to go anyway." And I showed up at the airport the next day and I was like, "Oh, I must have gotten the dates confused," you know, back when you could do this, and they put me on a flight.

I worked at a little place in Fairbanks, actually in one of the only fine-dining options in Fairbanks, Alaska, and that was an eye-opener, because the tips weren't as good, but I was making \$12 an hour. And you got shittier tips from the tourists. These were people, like a lot of, like, what we'd call [Baby] Boomers now, who had saved for this one big trip to Alaska, and they were on the land-option excursion to go to Denali, and they were like 12 and 15 percenters. But, shit, when you're making like twelve bucks an hour, you're like, "Okay." Like, you're still making money. Like, that's—you know, I think our minimum wage is a disgrace the way it's pretty much been the same my whole damn life, and I'm old. And that was kind of an eye-opener for me, and I was like, "Wow. So I can actually afford to come up here, rent another place." You know, and I was like, "Oh, I'll just do this every summer when it's slow."

Then Katrina happened. I was up in the Arctic. I'd borrowed a friend's truck. I went with another friend, and, of course, there's no phones, no nothing. We'd just gone up for a little road trip. I was supposed to be flying back in a few days, and when I pulled back up

in my cabin, my friend came out and said, “Oh, you need to come see the news.” And this is 2005, so not—you know, he had Internet and stuff, but it wasn’t like now where it’s ubiquitous. So, you know, I ended up getting drunk that night, because, you know, just, like, you’re seeing your neighbors and shit on the TV and on the Internet.

[1:04:05.8]

Justin Nystrom: Right. Were your parents still down in St. Bernard or—

[1:04:09.7]

Victor Pizarro: They were. My brother ended up working at Le Pavillon after me, and we both—I called my brother. Like, when I saw the storm in the Gulf [of Mexico] before I went to the Arctic, I was like, “Just in case, just go to Le Pavillon. They’ll set you up. They’ll hook you up.” And they did.

[1:04:24.7]

Justin Nystrom: Oh, good.

[1:04:25.4]

Victor Pizarro: That’s where they spent the night.

[1:04:26.0]

Justin Nystrom: That’s great, yeah.

[1:04:27.0]

Victor Pizarro: When they heard the city was flooding, they got out. They went to the Westbank and they made it Houston, where other cousins live, and then they came to Alaska and hung out with me so we could all have PTSD together—

[1:04:38.8]

Justin Nystrom: [Laughter] Oh, lord.

[1:04:39.3]

Victor Pizarro: —and argue and fight post-Katrina. And they did, because they were supposed to come up and see me at the end of my trip anyway. So they came up. We had a bunch of big fights. I ended up going to—I had a bunch of miles, so I flew to New York. I met a friend of a friend there, who is actually René. That’s when I met her.

[1:04:59.0]

Justin Nystrom: Of Juicy Lucy cold-pressed juice, which is at—not wearing my glasses, but—

[1:05:04.6]

Victor Pizarro: Avenue A.

[1:05:05.7]

Justin Nystrom: Avenue A, 85 Avenue A, New York City.

[1:05:07.8]

Victor Pizarro: In the East Village, yeah, about a block and a half from Tompkins Square Park. I met her through an Alaska friend. She actually grew up in Fairbanks. But, you know, I'm half Cuban, she's half Cuban. We both have crazy mothers. We ended up, like, not trusting each other for five years [laughter] and then becoming really good friends. She was in our wedding. I just went up and saw her. She's amazing. But, you know, while I was—and I know this has, like, diverged into a Katrina story, but I'll get to the point.

[1:05:38.5]

Justin Nystrom: It's significant.

[1:05:39.5]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah. While I was up there, I got news that my cat had disappeared. My dog had died in Katrina, but not just died in Katrina. My friend at the time who was taking care of the dog had evacuated to her parents' house in the Westbank. My dog got in a fight with their dog, so they killed my dog.

[1:05:57.8]

Justin Nystrom: Oh, jeez.

[1:05:58.4]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah. So, you know, I was at a point where I was like, I don't know where I'm going to live. I don't know what I'm going to do. I went up to Boston, hung out with a friend there, went back to New York. René hooked me up with a rooftop juice bartending gig at some fancy gay parties. Like, Missy Elliott was there, the guy from—like, celebrity weirdo shit, and I was just in, like, this still traumatized, freaked out a month after Katrina, and didn't know what I was doing.

So my friend Gretchen was living in Tampa, so I decided I'd just go and see her, so I went down to Tampa, and it was when I was there, I was like, "Maybe I'll settle in Tampa. Who knows." This is about a month after the storm, and I was on the phone with Nicole, the one that worked for JoAnn Clevenger at Upperline and now works at Ralph's on the Park, and she was like, "I don't know what you're doing, but I'm going home."

I was like, "Oh, yeah." Like, I hadn't even really considered coming back home.

I ended up meeting with her and my friend Marianne, who worked at Dick & Jenny's at the time, and we all ended up, like, semi-squatting an apartment uptown for a month and a half. I did work for the owners of the building. I re-glazed all the windows. I decided I didn't want to work right away.

Then I heard that Marigny Brasserie was reopening on the corner of Frenchmen and, you know, whatever, and so I went down there and said, "Look, I could do this, but, you know, I only want to work a few days a week," blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. "I just—you know, I want to help you guys out." And I remember when I talked to the guy, Roland Adams, I made it really clear that I wanted it to be equitable. Like, "I'm not your slave. I'm not your two-dollar-an-hour slave." Like, you know, "I'm experienced. If you need me, like, you come highly recommended." I'd actually met him like a decade before. "I'll

come help you out.” And I remember it was this kind of golden era in New Orleans where there were no cars, which is why I got involved with the bike thing, because I would ride from Lasalle and Louisiana all the way down to the Marigny, and it would take me like ten minutes on a bike. There were no cars, no lights.

So I started working there. Like a lot of other people post-Katrina, there was just a lot of drug abuse and a lot of shit going on. Nicole worked there too. I got Nicole a job there, I think, and we were both working at the Brasserie. Roland basically sexually harassed me out of a job within a year. He wanted me to go on dates with him. I was seeing someone. I kind of said yes to go to an opera rehearsal and then I, like, backed out when I realized it was a date thing, and he cut my schedule. And I was like, “Here we go again.” Like, this is—“God, why can’t you owners just be professional?” It’s *so* frustrating. He cut my schedule.

I spoke to his manager, Roseanne, who now works over at Mondo, and she said, “Well, I’ll fix your schedule for next week, but just be nice to Roland.” That’s what I was told. So, like, I feel fortunate, in a way, because I think as a male-bodied person, I understand sexual harassment in a way that, like, maybe not a lot of other men do. But, you know, he was always offering me coke. He was offering me coke at work, and it’s not my thing.

And I was like, “No, dude. No, thanks.”

It was the first Jazz Fest after Katrina, so it was the last weekend of April 2006, and I said something to him. We were like—it was a busy night. It was, like, the Thursday or whatever. And he suddenly turned to me, and I don’t remember—like, I’ve blanked it out, but he said, like, the most kind of disgusting sort of stuff you can say to somebody

while they're working, like just very graphic and intense. And I was just so taken aback and I had a full station.

And Nicole said to me—I told her about it and she said, you know, “Nobody that’s signing your paycheck should be able to talk to you like that, but either do something about it or shut the fuck up, because we’re real busy.”

So I took that as a cue to do something about it, and I closed all my checks and I went around. Like, while he was trying to reset a table, I was like, “Hey, I want to talk to you real quick. I’m leaving right now.”

And he said, “What are you talking about? I was just joking!”

I was like—it turned into a screaming match, I threw some shit on the floor, stormed out. Then I filed for unemployment, which is the first time I’d ever filed for unemployment in my life, and I, you know, left it really simple and plain. And, of course, he denied it. He denied the unemployment. So then I wrote a three-page document detailing exactly every time I was offered drugs, every time I had been groped at work, and then I got the unemployment.

So I got unemployment. I focused on the bike project. I exhausted the unemployment.

While I was on the unemployment, I worked for a certain Uptown restaurant off the books a couple of days a week, you know, a place that’s kind of like Irene’s [Laughter], one of those places, which enabled me to expand the bike project, to expand our mission, to do everything. So I just kind of learned to, after that, you know, to not take any bullshit. Like, you can make a living in this city, but I think if you’re a certain age and of a certain experience, you just have to, you know—you have to have boundaries and enforce them. And I think that’s been the hardest thing about this career in New Orleans,

that you're expected to not have any boundaries, and I think that's changing, but, you know, it has definitely been an uphill battle for the past thirty years.

[1:11:55.2]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, that's amazing. I almost feel silly asking you about cash again, but [laughter], well, I had a follow-up to that.

[1:12:08.6]

Victor Pizarro: Oh, go ahead.

[1:12:09.6]

Justin Nystrom: And I'm still processing what you told me. So, mental health in service industry, do you feel that a lot of people working more than just like, "I waited tables in college," but people who've done it for more than like ten years and are making their bills waiting tables, how prevalent do you feel there's a sort of a—I don't want to say—deficit of adequate mental healthcare?

[1:12:45.5]

Victor Pizarro: Shitloads. I mean, I'm lucky in that I found—I went to a therapist before Katrina. I see a therapist now. Like, I pay for it out of pocket. I believe that there is inherent value in taking care of your mental health, but I think it's just basically not even considered for a lot of people. A lot of people don't, you know—

[1:13:10.9]

Justin Nystrom: They accept the sort of stresses of this job as part of it?

[1:13:13.8]

Victor Pizarro: Oh, yeah, definitely, and I think it's a very stressful situation. Like, you know, my husband worked at Gabrielle for a year, and he had never really done service industry before. He worked one or two days a week, and he's really good at it, but the amount of stress that it caused him—like, for me, it's just like [demonstrates]. You know, when you've been doing it for so long, you're like, okay, some people are real stupid. Some people are real dumb. Some people have ridiculous expectations of what they're going to get in a meal, and you just know that and you move on. He would personalize a lot of it, so I think for a person like him, I think it would not be an excellent long-term career choice. Like, I'm glad he did it for a year so he can understand what I do, but I think it takes a certain type of person to be able to survive the mental stresses of the service industry or to be able to thrive within it long term.

[1:14:08.4]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, the more I dig into this more, that's very apparent. I would be a terrible—I *was* a terrible waiter.

[1:14:16.5]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah, sometimes I'm a terrible waiter, but I think for the most part, if the situation's right—like, I really like the Sonniers. I know at some point I won't work

for them anymore, and sometimes I think that's a year away, sometimes I think it's two years away, but it's not going to be forever. I do hope to be able to still have a relationship with them. Like, it won't be at the same level of frequency or occurrence, but I really like them. They're doing it right, you know.

[1:14:43.4]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah. When you started getting a paycheck, did that change—right, when your tips ended up on a paycheck, did that change the people you worked with?

[1:14:54.4]

Victor Pizarro: Ooh, that's a good question. Maybe a little bit. Now that I really think about it, maybe a little bit. Like, maybe I had a lot less of the—I don't want to say transient people, because they certainly weren't transient, but, you know, the same guys that would go out to the bar every night, that would go—like, maybe less and less of that and a little bit more of a professional work environment. And I hate to say that, because I used to *love* getting cash. I used to *love*, like, feeling those bills every night.

[1:15:28.7]

Justin Nystrom: “So worldly, so welcome,” I always joke, yeah. [Laughter]

[1:15:31.0]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah, yeah, yeah, definitely. But, you know, I just—I think you have a point there. I think it did change the people that I worked with, because, you know, I

think about when it happened, and really mostly it was around Katrina, and before Katrina, a lot more of my work history, like, I just remember a lot more drunks and chain-smokers and blah, blah, blah, and just like [demonstrates], and just like faded people, and then post-Katrina, I almost feel like it got a little bit more competitive eventually, you know.

[1:16:04.2]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, yeah. Interesting. We're moving along. We've been over an hour, and I know you've got stuff to do.

[1:16:13.3]

Victor Pizarro: I do have stuff to do.

[1:16:15.5]

Justin Nystrom: But is there anything you'd kind of like to append to this? I know there are places I could go in these questions that I almost never look at, but you've told me a lot of really great, amazing stuff, but I was wondering—

[1:16:27.5]

Victor Pizarro: I'm good at the anecdotes. [Laughter] You know, I don't know. I've also—like, for a queer history project, same exact situation, same seat, same recording devices, young black queer guy. Sorry, you look a little different. [Nystrom Laughter] And also for Carnival history stuff, my friend Martha, recording devices, sat at that table.

[1:16:51.7]

Justin Nystrom: Yeah, we were talking about that, yeah, yeah.

[1:16:52.8]

Victor Pizarro: Right. So I have a little experience, I think, in just talking. But, I mean, the only thing I would append to it is just basically that I think a lot of the changes that have happened in this industry are somewhat welcome as far as accountability, as far as accountancy, and as far as, like, working conditions, but I think there's still a long way to go for equity, you know, as far as, like, income stabilization, benefits, that sort of thing. And I think in America we're stuck in this whole—and I'll say something that'll—yeah, I think the tipping is bullshit. [Laughter] Like, I think that we should be paid a fair wage for the work we do. And I know that the constant response from the restaurant industry is, like, “Oh, but then nobody can afford it,” and blah, blah, blah. And it's like, man, prices can just go up 20 percent. Like, that's all you have to do. The price of everything goes up 20 percent, everybody gets a livable wage. Done. You don't have to tip. Everybody's paying the same, you know. I don't see it as that complicated. Certainly when I travel, you know, people are remunerated equitably for their service industry job. I pay a little bit more for the food, and I know that because I don't have to tip, so I'm paying the same. But I think that that's one of the—that and the stagnant minimum-tipped employee wage, you know, they're still remnants of the Jim Crow era, and, you know, it's just amazing that in the year 2019, we're still doing it the same way. And it disproportionately affects people of color and Latinos. It does. It still does. So I think that's a legacy that I would

love to see in my lifetime for us to end, and to figure out a way to, you know, just kind of make it right, but I don't know if it will. So that's what I've got to say about that.

[Laughter]

[1:18:58.5]

Justin Nystrom: Great. Well, Victor, this has been amazing.

[1:19:00.7]

Victor Pizarro: Likewise.

[1:19:02.9]

Justin Nystrom: I really appreciate all the stuff, and I'm going to ask you a few questions here off the recording about other people I might want to talk to.

[1:19:09.0]

Victor Pizarro: Okay.

[1:19:10.1]

Justin Nystrom: Okay?

[1:19:10.8]

Victor Pizarro: Yeah.

[1:19:11.1]

Justin Nystrom: I'm going to hit the "stop" button.

[End of interview]