



Patricia Cummings
New Orleans, Louisiana

Date: August 14, 2019
Location: Elysian Bar, New Orleans, LA
Interviewer: Justin Nystrom
Length: Fifty minutes
Project: Career Servers

[*BEGIN INTERVIEW*]

[00:00:22.03]

Justin N.: You're never more keenly aware of the musical track and ambient sound than when you're listening through headphones, so . . . today is August 14, 2019. I'm at the Elysian Bar with Patty Cummings, who works at Gabrielle Restaurant with our friend, Mary Sonnier. My name is Justin Nystrom. I teach at Loyola University. I'm gathering interviews for the Southern Foodways Alliance Long-term Servers Project out of the University of Mississippi. Patty, thank you very much for being here.

[00:00:59.12]

Patricia C.: Thank you.

[00:01:01.01]

Justin N.: I will say, this is the swankiest interview setting that we've had for these. [Laughter]
So, I'd like to start off a little bit by kind of just learning a little bit more about you as a person. So, can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up and what that was like?

[00:01:20.06]

Patricia C.: I grew up in Buffalo, New York in the [19]60s and [19]70s. I've lived all over the place, but I moved to L.A. when I was nineteen. So, that was 1976. We were there for a long time; little bit in San Francisco, then I had a French boyfriend, so I lived in France

for a couple years. Then came back to L.A. Then Aspen, Colorado. And then, finally, New Orleans, and I've been here for twenty-six years.

[00:01:46.09]

Justin N.: Wow, so you're gone a lot of different—what we would consider cool cities to live in.

[00:01:53.10]

Patricia C.: Oh, yeah. Of course. [Laughter]

[00:01:57.10]

Justin N.: So . . . was your family one of those families where food was a big deal, or . . . ?

[00:02:04.00]

Patricia C.: No. My mother always told us she was the worst cook in the world. And she was a single mom, so we actually had to cook for ourselves. She would maybe put aside, like, a pack of hot dogs and a can of some corn, you know? [Laughter] She was not a cook.

[00:02:21.07]

Justin N.: Did you have a lot of siblings, or . . . ?

[00:02:24.09]

Patricia C.: Older sister, older brother, and me. Just the three of us. So, we learned to cook basically on our own. Years later, my mother would say things like, "I can't believe what great cooks my kids are! 'Cause I sure wasn't."

[00:02:38.13]

Justin N.: So you learned to serve yourself.

[00:02:40.00]

Patricia C.: Yeah. We would stand on chairs to do that, 'cause we were little. [Laughter]

[00:02:46.11]

Justin N.: Yeah. So, from an early age, you were learning these self-sufficiency . . . so, when did you first leave your—you say you grew up in Buffalo?

[00:02:54.19]

Patricia C.: In Buffalo, New York, yeah.

[00:02:56.21]

Justin N.: What was the neighborhood like, I guess?

[00:02:58.08]

Patricia C.: It was very Italian. We were the only non-Italians there. It was a lot of kids. We all played together; we were all in and out of each other's houses. And during those times, we were on our own, all of us. Just runnin' the streets. [Laughter]

[00:03:18.15]

Justin N.: When did you first leave?

[00:03:18.26]

Patricia C.: I left—Buffalo, you mean?

[00:03:19.25]

Justin N.: Um-hm.

[00:03:19.25]

Patricia C.: In 1976 for L.A.

[00:03:22.27]

Justin N.: Right.

[00:03:24.21]

Patricia C.: But I had my first restaurant job in Buffalo at fifteen. I was in the kitchen at an Italian restaurant, cutting bread and making salads. So.

[00:03:33.08]

Justin N.: What was that restaurant like? Was it a family place, or . . . ?

[00:03:35.11]

Patricia C.: It was a very well-known Italian place, called Chef's Restaurant in Buffalo, New York. It still exists. And it's one of those classic, old-school Italian places.

[00:03:49.00]

Justin N.: So, you were doin' prep work in the kitchen?

[00:03:51.04]

Patricia C.: Yeah.

[00:03:51.04]

Justin N.: Summertime?

[00:03:51.04]

Patricia C.: After high school, after school. Get on the bus, go to Chef's.

[00:03:56.24]

Justin N.: So, like a regular gig.

[00:03:56.24]

Patricia C.: Yeah. Yeah, I started early.

[00:04:00.14]

Justin N.: Did you start waiting tables there, too?

[00:04:02.02]

Patricia C.: No. I never did there. After . . . you know, waiting tables and working in restaurants, I've always done . . . it's always been something to go back to. I've always done lots of other things, too, but there's nothing like working a restaurant. You don't take it home with you. You go in, you make your money, you leave. And you have the whole day for your artistic pursuits or whatever, you know? So, that's kinda how I managed with restaurants.

[00:04:33.06]

Justin N.: Are you artistic?

[00:04:33.18]

Patricia C.: Yeah. I do, actually, this kind of work. This faux finishing.

[00:04:37.02]

Justin N.: Oh, okay.

[00:04:38.20]

Patricia C.: Interior decorative painting. I've done photography work all throughout the years, just different things.

[00:04:45.10]

Justin N.: When did you start picking up that, as a . . . ?

[00:04:49.14]

Patricia C.: As a teenager, with the photography. When I moved to New Orleans, I really got interested in the interior decorative painting, because there was so much historic renovation going on, and I loved the architecture. I loved all of it. So, I just kinda taught myself. [Laughter]

[00:05:07.22]

Justin N.: That's great. Well, a lot of people—as you know—working in food are artistic.

[00:05:12.23]

Patricia C.: Um-hm. It's the perfect thing. Your days are free, and you don't . . . you're not having to live the life of this certain business. When you go home, it's done, until you come back the next time.

[00:05:25.29]

Justin N.: So, what brought you to Los Angeles?

[00:05:27.12]

Patricia C.: I had a friend whose sister lived out there, high school friend, and we just wanted to leave Buffalo. We knew someone. We would have gone anywhere where we knew someone. [Laughter] But we ended up there.

[00:05:39.21]

Justin N.: Yeah. And it wasn't Buffalo, I guess.

[00:05:41.25]

Patricia C.: Yeah. It was California. The beach. [Laughter] Hollywood.

[00:05:47.00]

Justin N.: Did you go work in restaurants when you were in California?

[00:05:50.21]

Patricia C.: Both of us did. We did bartending and waiting tables. I also did production still photography, and it was the beginning of the M.T.V. years, early [19]80s, so I did a lot of stuff like that, production stills for that. Then, it's changed so much now. I don't do any of the—I don't have any digital cameras or anything. I used to develop black and white in my own darkroom, and it was different. It was 8x10 glossies.

[00:06:25.03]

Justin N.: Yeah, I grew up with that. [Laughter]

[00:06:26.24]

Patricia C.: Yeah.

[00:06:31.23]

Justin N.: Well, cool. So, what were some of the—tell me a little bit about some of the things maybe you learned as a server during that time.

[00:06:36.05]

Patricia C.: Oh. Well, my first job in L.A. was a cocktail waitress at Hilton Hotel. So, I learned not to gawk at celebrities. [Laughter] And it was corporate hotel system, so I learned that. Before, I was just working in private, smaller restaurants and bars.

[00:07:01.29]

Justin N.: Did they have benefits as a corporate hotel?

[00:07:02.29]

Patricia C.: They did. They had a union back then. I don't know if they still do, and benefits and a union. So, I guess I worked for them for about two years or so.

[00:07:12.01]

Justin N.: Back then, that was all cash.

[00:07:14.15]

Patricia C.: A lotta cash, yeah. I think the credits card back then were, like, Diner's Club. You know? Or MasterCard. Those were the early ones that I remember. It was pretty much all cash, yeah.

[00:07:29.28]

Justin N.: Did you go home every day with money, you said?

[00:07:32.24]

Patricia C.: Yeah. You did. Now, it's all on checks.

[00:07:38.13]

Justin N.: Was that—I mean, kinda day-to-day, do you feel you live differently when you take home cash every day, or were you disciplined? Did you stick it in a drawer?

[00:07:51.00]

Patricia C.: I did stick it in a drawer, but I was also undisciplined, too. 'Cause I was nineteen, I was runnin' up and down the Sunset Strip, goin' to the Whiskey a Go-go, the Roxy, doin' all that stuff. So, yeah, I was always broke. [Laughter]

[00:08:07.20]

Justin N.: So you cocktail waitressed for a while. You were doing your art, sounds like your art thrived.

[00:08:14.29]

Patricia C.: Uh-huh. I did all kinds of different things, but sometimes, I wouldn't work in a restaurant at all. I'd just kinda quit for a while, and then I'd go back to it, because it was always your steady thing that you could do.

[00:08:24.27]

Justin N.: And you had a resume to build off of, I guess.

[00:08:28.16]

Patricia C.: Yeah. And you could do it anywhere, so.

[00:08:31.05]

Justin N.: How long did you stay in L.A.?

[00:08:32.24]

Patricia C.: Twenty years.

[00:08:33.29]

Justin N.: Oh, wow. So you were there through the [19]90s, then.

[00:08:39.29]

Patricia C.: Actually, I moved here in [19]93, but from 1976 up until [19]93, I was up in Los Angeles, but I would take these little excursions. But I'd always come back to L.A.

[00:08:54.04]

Justin N.: Is that freedom of movement, is that what attracted you to the food business? Is the foods business a means to an end?

[00:09:04.01]

Patricia C.: It was something you do in the meantime. [Laughter] Now, this is what I do full-time.

[00:09:11.14]

Justin N.: Yeah. What was it like as a woman in the field? You'd been doin' this a while, right? How is it different to be a woman working in this business when you started?

[00:09:24.02]

Patricia C.: Wow. It was very—okay, if you're a cocktail waitress, you wore a little, short little frilly outfit, so when you bend over, they can see the matching panties under there. You know? You're young and you're cute, and yeah, it was more sexist.

[00:09:44.29]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Did you see a lot of women waiters at that time?

[00:09:50.16]

Patricia C.: Not really.

[00:09:53.29]

Justin N.: Like a place like Gabrielle, where it's fine dining, you know?

[00:09:57.09]

Patricia C.: Yeah. I would imagine, back then, the fine dining places were mostly men. They wanted men, and then other, more casual places would use the women.

[00:10:10.07]

Justin N.: So, you came to New Orleans in the [19]90s. Early [19]90s. What brought you here in the first place?

[00:10:18.00]

Patricia C.: Yeah. It was . . . I always had a fascination with New Orleans.

[00:10:21.21]

Justin N.: Had you been?

[00:10:23.04]

Patricia C.: I had been once, years and years ago.

[00:10:25.06]

Justin N.: How did you come to—

[00:10:28.01]

Patricia C.: It was just, I don't know. I was drawn to it. I had a boyfriend at the time, and he wanted to do it, too. He was a musician, so it just seemed like a good idea at the time.

[Laughter] We came in a camper van, so we were kinda traveling around, goin' to the Grand Canyon, just making stops until we finally got here. And then we broke up.

[Laughter]

[00:10:54.23]

Justin N.: You got out of the van and it was—maybe it was your van.

[00:11:00.10]

Patricia C.: I did buy the van, but I signed it over to him since he was the one who took care of it. I didn't want any more to do with it.

[00:11:06.15]

Justin N.: No more vans.

[00:11:06.15]

Patricia C.: [Laughter] Yeah.

[00:11:08.03]

Justin N.: So you got here in the early [19]90s. Now, New Orleans is a very different place in the early [19]90s. Where did you live?

[00:11:17.20]

Patricia C.: The first place was on St. Peter in the Quarter, and then Pauger in the Marigny Triangle, Pauger and North Rampart. And then, I discovered Bywater. I lived in Bywater for many years, and I worked right over here at Feelings Cafe for eighteen years.

[00:11:37.07]

Justin N.: Okay. Is that where you knew Maggie?

[00:11:39.04]

Patricia C.: Yes. And the Marigny Brasserie, too.

[00:11:44.28]

Justin N.: Yeah. So, where did you first find work here in New Orleans?

[00:11:47.25]

Patricia C.: At the DoubleTree Hotel on Canal.

[00:11:48.29]

Justin N.: Okay.

[00:11:50.16]

Patricia C.: I was a breakfast waitress because I needed to take whatever job I could get, and then I eventually became a bartender.

[00:11:59.02]

Justin N.: What was being a breakfast waitress like?

[00:11:59.29]

Patricia C.: Oh, it's horrible, 'cause living in the Quarter, I rode a bike. I'd have to be there at 6 a.m., so I'd take off on my bike and I'd have drunks throwing beer bottles at me on my way to work. "I want to kill you!" You know, that kinda stuff. [Laughter] It was like goin' through a gauntlet just to get to work. I did my 6 a.m. shift.

[00:12:27.22]

Justin N.: Was it like a buffet?

[00:12:29.15]

Patricia C.: No. It was breakfast and lunch. It was a double kind of thing, and it was horrible. I hated it. 'Cause all the hotel people come for breakfast all at once, and they all leave. It was every convention, every event, every thing that came to town. So, getting switched over to bartender was so much better. You made better money, and it wasn't at 6 a.m. [Laughter]

[00:12:53.25]

Justin N.: That's a very bread-and-butter part of the service industry here in New Orleans, is hotel work.

[00:13:01.18]

Patricia C.: Yes, yeah.

[00:13:03.07]

Justin N.: Who were some of your coworkers at the time? I mean, what did your average coworker look like at your breakfast place? Did you have people do that their whole career?

[00:13:12.12]

Patricia C.: Yeah. We had some long-time breakfast people working. And older people, you know? I just couldn't get out of there fast enough. [Laughter] But I ended up working at the DoubleTree for six years.

[00:13:25.04]

Justin N.: Okay, and ultimately in the bar.

[00:13:27.12]

Patricia C.: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. But it was total burnout. Every convention, every Mardi Gras, everything. I did it for six years. It was pretty good. [Laughter] Then I discovered, a friend of mine who had worked there, he got a job over at Feelings. I discovered, "Oh, there's an actual neighborhood over here." I had never even been into this area.

[00:13:52.25]

Justin N.: So, this is gettin' to be the late [19]90s?

[00:13:55.04]

Patricia C.: This is . . . yeah. Oh, I started at Feelings in 2000.

[00:14:01.07]

Justin N.: Okay. Was this the first time you'd worked in a kinda little fancier of a restaurant? Or . . . ?

[00:14:08.20]

Patricia C.: No. Other smaller places along the way that had been—like in L.A. . . .

[00:14:15.23]

Justin N.: Yeah. Can you tell me about sort of your first experience, kind of learning dining service? Where did you learn a little higher level of service?

[00:14:23.20]

Patricia C.: Just from doing it. Just from—probably at the Hilton. And bartending, also. It's like somebody doesn't show up and they stick you in there. You know? And you just kinda wing it. That's how it used to be. [Laughter]

[00:14:36.13]

Justin N.: Did you ever see a training manual in your life?

[00:14:39.29]

Patricia C.: Yeah. At the hotels, they had that.

[00:14:43.17]

Justin N.: Yeah.

[00:14:44.22]

Patricia C.: But it's like, okay. You look at it once and it's different when you're actually doing it than reading it.

[00:14:51.08]

Justin N.: Yeah. I'm curious, one of the things I'm interested in a little bit is technology. When did you first use a point-of-sale system?

[00:14:59.27]

Patricia C.: Oh, wow. Huh . . . probably . . . at the DoubleTree. Probably.

[00:15:09.17]

Justin N.: In the [19]90s.

[00:15:10.02]

Patricia C.: Yeah. Yeah, like [19]93.

[00:15:13.20]

Justin N.: So, when you were in L.A.—when you got to L.A. in the [19]70s, you were working
a hotel, cocktail gig—

[00:15:19.00]

Patricia C.: But I didn't—

[00:15:21.03]

Justin N.: With paper tickets.

[00:15:21.12]

Patricia C.: Paper tickets, and the bartender would be your cashier. I wasn't handling—yeah.

You'd write everything by hand. Even at Feeling's, too, for the longest time we did
everything by hand.

[00:15:33.23]

Justin N.: Yeah. What was the ticket control system like? Did they control the tickets?

[00:15:40.01]

Patricia C.: Yeah. They were numbered and you got, like, so many. And . . . they were, like, hard cardboard and then the carbon thing on top. Yeah, it was by the ticket numbers.

[00:15:52.19]

Justin N.: Yeah. And you were issued them at the beginning of a shift, or—

[00:15:55.15]

Patricia C.: Yeah. You'd get, maybe, six, and if you needed more, you'd have to ask for more, if it was busy.

[00:16:03.11]

Justin N.: Yeah. 'Cause, you know, that was kinda one of the avenues where people would engage in—have a side gig, if you will, selling drinks on their own. [Laughter]

[00:16:12.29]

Patricia C.: Yeah, there was a lot of that, I guess.

[00:16:14.28]

Justin N.: Yeah. Did you see that when you were in L.A., or . . . ?

[00:16:16.14]

Patricia C.: Well, I heard. I didn't see it as much as somebody would be fired and I'd hear the reason why, you know.

[00:16:22.05]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah.

[00:16:22.05]

Patricia C.: I didn't really see it happening.

[00:16:24.17]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah. So, the first point of sale system, what were those like at the DoubleTree? I guess much more primitive than what we have today, huh?

[00:16:34.24]

Patricia C.: Yeah . . . it was basically just a thing that would print something for the guest. No, it wasn't that bad. No, it was, they had the buttons for the drinks, like gin and then you go to soda, that kind of thing. They had that at the DoubleTree.

[00:16:59.11]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah. So, big leap, I guess.

[00:17:00.11]

Patricia C.: I did—in L.A., in Venice Beach where I worked, I was a bartender at a sushi bar.

And it was tiny, it was like six stools, and I had just an adding machine that the drawer would pop out. That was it. [Laughter] And a credit card, chuh-chuh, hand-done thing.

[00:17:19.27]

Justin N.: Yeah. Very different now.

[00:17:21.08]

Patricia C.: Yeah.

[00:17:22.20]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, what was—you said you described riding a bicycle down and getting bottles thrown at you, which I would put in the category of a New Orleans moment.

[00:17:34.07]

Patricia C.: Yeah.

[00:17:36.25]

Justin N.: What other kind of New Orleans moments did you encounter in those early years here?

[00:17:40.10]

Patricia C.: Oh, everything was a first for me. My first Mardi Gras, my first everything, and how the tourists did it and how the locals did it. All the music. Then, my current boyfriend, who I'm still with, he's a musician, so I got to meet some of the greats—the New Orleans greats. A lot of them have passed away, like Johnny Adams and he worked with Eddie Bo for thirty-five years, so I got to be friends with Eddie Bo. Just a lot of inside music stuff.

[00:18:12.01]

Justin N.: When did you feel, really, that became a New Orleanian?

[00:18:18.06]

Patricia C.: Hm. Probably when I moved to the Bywater, and working at Feelings, because then you knew your whole neighborhood. Everyone came to Feelings at one time or another. We just knew the whole neighborhood. You'd see everybody on the street, "Hey!" Yeah. It was . . . real neighborhood feeling.

[00:18:40.07]

Justin N.: Now, the DoubleTree. Was that single service or did you work in a team? Did you tip out at the DoubleTree?

[00:18:46.18]

Patricia C.: We had a busser. I think that was the only one I tipped out. And it wasn't a pool. It was tip out your busser and your bartender. But in the morning, you weren't using a bartender. [Laughter]

[00:19:00.09]

Justin N.: You could . . .

[00:19:02.22]

Patricia C.: Yeah.

[00:19:03.22]

Justin N.: So, your tips were your tips.

[00:19:05.12]

Patricia C.: Yeah.

[00:19:06.17]

Justin N.: Did you find you were making good money doing that? Or . . .

[00:19:10.04]

Patricia C.: Yes. At the DoubleTree—well, once I became a bartender, I had a drawer full of cash at all times. Just—checks went into the bank, I never even bothered, they were so small compared to your cash. I traveled and wasted money. [Laughter]

[00:19:28.28]

Justin N.: So, New Orleans was much cheaper when you got here in 1993?

[00:19:33.04]

Patricia C.: Yes.

[00:19:34.13]

Justin N.: Can you tell me about some of the evolution of what it's like to get by in New Orleans over that time?

[00:19:40.12]

Patricia C.: Well, rent. Rent was super cheap. It was, like, three hundred dollars in the Marigny and in the Bywater. And then, maybe if it went up a couple years later, it was four hundred dollars. It was still all—everything was manageable. You could buy a house, which we did, a musician and a restaurant server could buy a house back then. Now, you can't. [Laughter]

[00:20:04.09]

Justin N.: Yeah, that's amazing. Did you buy in the Marigny?

[00:20:06.10]

Patricia C.: We're in Musicians Village in the Ninth Ward.

[00:20:08.22]

Justin N.: Oh, wow.

[00:20:10.15]

Patricia C.: So, that was the best thing I ever did, was get into that.

[00:20:16.14]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah.

[00:20:17.27]

Patricia C.: 'Cause now, I can't afford to live in my old neighborhood. It's sixteen hundred dollars a month for half of a shotgun double. You know? How do people do it? I have no idea.

[00:20:29.15]

Justin N.: Do you find younger servers have a hard time getting by, or, who aren't maybe **homeowners?**

[00:20:33.29]

Patricia C.: Yeah. I think they just have roommates. They can't do it alone. I'm looking at all these people in this neighborhood in the Marigny who are buying houses and renting

here, what do they do? How do they make their money? How is this possible? I can't even think about how they're doin' it.

[00:20:52.08]

Justin N.: Who buys the six hundred thousand-dollar house.

[00:20:57.04]

Patricia C.: Yeah. And you're thirty. [Laughter]

[00:20:59.05]

Justin N.: And here two months of the year, yeah. Yeah. It's definitely changed a lot. Do you think this is really—is it hard for restaurants, do you think, to staff because of it?

[00:21:12.09]

Patricia C.: Well, when Feeling—old Feelings, our staff stayed. They were so steady. They stayed there, one guy, the bartender was there for thirty-two years. Another one is twenty-eight years. Everybody was there for years. Then, when they sold it, the original owner sold it and a new guy came in and he hired all these young kids. They were in and out of there. It was a revolving door. So, I feel that that's what's going on with the—everybody wants to be young and hip, and you gotta hire us old ones. [Laughter] We're the ones who stay. The food itself, it's all these small plates and nobody's doing appetizer, entree, dessert kind of old-school menu anymore. They all do these small plate things. They're all the same. Everywhere you go, it's the same kinda—there's a scallop dish.

There's something with goat cheese. It's all the same stuff. [Laughter] And everyone wants to be the next Top Chef. You know? All these young and hungry chefs. It's like, "Okay." I'm so glad to be at Gabrielle, where it's old-school. There's not that kind of pressure, you know? No one's tryin' to be the next Top Chef. You got Greg Sonnier, he's been a top chef his whole life. He doesn't care about that. [Laughter]

[00:22:42.04]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah. Greg and Mary are definitely solid.

[00:22:45.03]

Patricia C.: Yeah.

[00:22:47.15]

Justin N.: So, the diners have changed a lot over that time, too, right?

[00:22:52.03]

Patricia C.: Yeah. Well, when the new Feelings guy came in, he took out all of the patio seating, which is what people came to Feelings for. And he put in these awful, god-awful couches, that could be at, I don't know, some Holiday Inn somewhere. And these end tables. People would sit there with a bowl of fries and their computer like they were sitting at a coffee shop. And it just killed the business. He killed it. And then he blamed it on the guy who had bought it before him, he was a horrible guy. Greg Trentacosta. Horrible guy. [Laughter]

[00:23:30.07]

Justin N.: Well . . .

[00:23:30.07]

Patricia C.: He killed that restaurant.

[00:23:32.19]

Justin N.: Doesn't sound like he made effective business decisions.

[00:23:34.25]

Patricia C.: Oh, no. And then he had rules, where if they want to order the dinner menu, they have to sit in the dining room. They can only have apps in the patio. People, for almost forty years, people came to have dinner in the patio. And he just trashed it all up. Then he got out of the business—he still owns the building—and now this new guy, Marlon Alexander, he has Cru. And I don't know how they're doing, because—hopefully better than what Trentacosta did to that place. Trentacosta put the final nail in the coffin.

[00:24:07.28]

Justin N.: Yeah. Do you think—'cause, who are the customers at . . . I mean you had, that was a regulars kind of place, right?

[00:24:17.03]

Patricia C.: Yeah, yeah. It was. Then as AirBnB came in and more tourists were finding out more about these neighborhoods, it became kinda half and half. Half locals, half visitor.

[00:24:29.15]

Justin N.: Was that a challenge for the restaurant?

[00:24:32.13]

Patricia C.: No. I don't think so.

[00:24:33.29]

Justin N.: So, the AirBnBers went away happy with a more traditional New Orleans dining experience.

[00:24:40.12]

Patricia C.: Well, that—the AirBnBers, since it's become the new Feelings, and I think over at Gabrielle, AirBnBers are loving what they're getting. Their menu is so Cajun Creole, so it's very traditional. I think they like that.

[00:25:00.16]

Justin N.: Yeah. You can see that Paul Prudhomme influence in the past.

[00:25:03.10]

Patricia C.: Yeah. Of course, with all the wild game, the quail, the duck, the rabbit, all that kind of stuff—

[00:25:10.11]

Justin N.: The punny *Hamilton* Menu. [Laughter]

[00:25:16.27]

Patricia C.: Yeah.

[00:25:16.27]

Justin N.: We went for that. [Laughter] It's funny, our niece who really loves *Hamilton*—

[00:25:17.27]

Patricia C.: Then we had the Duck Fest.

[00:25:21.06]

Justin N.: Right.

[00:25:21.06]

Patricia C.: Which was in the month of July. Now, we're doin' Coolinary.

[00:25:24.13]

Justin N.: Hm. There are restaurants in New Orleans like Clancy's, for instance, that is an institution and it's in a neighborhood that people live in houses, maybe they grew up in. And this neighborhood's very different.

[00:25:38.05]

Patricia C.: Yeah. It didn't used to be, but it is now.

[00:25:41.03]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah. Do you think that . . . AirBnB is changing the nature of New Orleans food?

[00:25:50.27]

Patricia C.: Yeah, because everyone wants to appeal to—it's just the same. It's generic. It's becoming generic. You know? In my eyes.

[00:26:02.09]

Justin N.: Have you ever read online reviews of where you work?

[00:26:05.12]

Patricia C.: Yeah, but I don't even have a Yelp! thing on my phone. Yelp! is an excuse just for people to bitch about anything. You know? There was times—I didn't do it, but Feelings, somebody was mad 'cause, oh, we didn't have bread pudding. It was gone. The man was so mad. He took out his phone and I felt like saying, "This restaurant has been successful

before Yelp! ever existed, and it will continue to be." You know? But I didn't. But you want to say stuff. [Laughter] Said, "Go ahead, buddy."

[00:26:41.00]

Justin N.: When Feelings was working really well, do you feel kind of like a devotion to the place?

[00:26:46.23]

Patricia C.: Yeah. We were all friends. We all hung—we were younger, too. We all hung out together. We were friends with our bosses, you know. We still keep in touch, all of us.

[00:27:00.25]

Justin N.: What's the most important element in a restaurant's smooth operation?

[00:27:10.22]

Patricia C.: Having things be a certain way and everyone does them that way, which is what Gabrielle does, too. That cuts down on a lot of bitching. "Oh, this isn't where it's supposed to be!" You know. [Laughter] That kind of thing. Just having your bosses stand up for you, not always take the customer's side. If there are mistakes made, they're from—but okay with you, they're not screamin' at you. Just treating you like a regular human being. [Laughter] You know.

[00:27:52.22]

Justin N.: So, Katrina came along, and I always hate asking people about Katrina stories. If you don't feel like talking about Katrina, that's fine. But it affected this city, and it definitely changed how things functioned here a little bit. How did the storm and its effects change the way you worked here in New Orleans?

[00:28:14.25]

Patricia C.: Well, I was lucky, 'cause in Bywater, we didn't lose anything. So I just went back to my apartment, once I got back from being away for three months, and went back to work at Feelings. And I know they were open pretty early, because they wanted to get a pulse of what was going on in the neighborhood. It was kind of like a little meeting place, more than them trying to make a buck, because they didn't have gas for the longest time. So, one of the waitresses would make a big pot of something—'cause she lived on the West Bank, she had gas. She would bring red beans or whatever. And serve 'em on paper plates for five bucks, just so that people could hang out, talk to each other, see what was going on. There was a lot of the National Guard guys coming in there, service-type people at the time. It was basically—it wasn't even a profit thing, it was more like, let's just do this and see where we're at.

[00:29:16.00]

Justin N.: It was kind of a suspended reality type of time.

[00:29:20.03]

Patricia C.: Yeah. Yeah. And when the gas finally got going, we did have the plastic tablecloths—and not the paper, but the paper napkins and the plastic tablecloths—for a long time. But then we had guests and we had hot water, we could use dishes. [Laughter]

[00:29:39.20]

Justin N.: Yeah. How long did that take?

[00:29:42.16]

Patricia C.: A few months. I can't remember! I came back in November. I was in Buffalo, New York with my sister, about three months. I don't know. It kept slowly progressing to normalcy a little bit. I can't really remember. Ha!

[00:30:05.21]

Justin N.: So, Feelings became this sort of neighborhood touchstone where you kept coming back.

[00:30:11.02]

Patricia C.: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:30:12.23]

Justin N.: How long did you stay at Feelings after Katrina?

[00:30:16.00]

Patricia C.: Until they sold it to the first guy that bought it. God, what year was that? Today's the ninth—8, 9. Okay, Tony Marino bought it first. He had it for a year. Then Trentacosta bought it. I didn't work for Tony Marino for that year. I did come back to Trentacosta. I said, "Oh, my God, they sold Feelings again?" It was my thing. And I went back and I worked for him for two years. Then—

[00:30:46.22]

Justin N.: What did you do in that other interval?

[00:30:49.05]

Patricia C.: I did . . . let's see. I worked for a short time at Mondo, which I hated. [Laughter]
Couldn't stand it.

[00:30:57.21]

Justin N.: What was bad about Mondo?

[00:31:01.05]

Patricia C.: I think it was the coldest, bitchiest workplace I have ever been in, in my life. And I've been in a lot of places. [Laughter] I know this is going on the record, but eh. I don't even put it on my resume. I didn't even tell Mary and Gabrielle that I worked there. I didn't even mention it. You know? It's like, phew. I was there eight months. It was just . . . management was weird. It was just cold and weird.

[00:31:27.24]

Justin N.: And they just announced that they closed it.

[00:31:31.18]

Patricia C.: Yeah, yeah. I'm sure they had devoted people and they had some longtime servers there that fit. I didn't fit. Maybe it's me. I just don't fit, you know?

[00:31:41.07]

Justin N.: Yeah. Have you ever worked at a restaurant where somebody says—you were this person at Mondo—but somebody comes in who just upsets the whole apple cart?

[00:31:50.00]

Patricia C.: Yeah, there's people like that. There's a girl they just fired over at Gabrielle that, she was just odd. I don't think she had a clue, you know, what to do. So, she didn't work out. That happens.

[00:32:06.23]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. It disrupts the rest of the restaurant, especially when you're working. Now, where was the first place you worked where it was kinda like team service?

[00:32:16.21]

Patricia C.: Hm. I would say the Double . . . well, God. Even in L.A. Let's . . . the Sushi Bar in L.A. That was one. We were all friends there, too, with the owners and everyone. Even the bar crew at DoubleTree, we were a good team.

[00:32:37.11]

Justin N.: But I mean in terms of, like, pooling tips and . . .

[00:32:40.20]

Patricia C.: Feelings.

[00:32:42.07]

Justin N.: The way you would serve a table, so everybody is kinda responsible for all the tables. In the way that Gabrielle is, in a way.

[00:32:47.24]

Patricia C.: Feelings. Gabrielle reminds me a lot of Feelings. We pooled at Feelings; we pool at Gabrielle. We don't have bussers, but we had a busser or two at Feelings. And a bar. You take care of your bar, too. A lot of times, if you're slammed, the bartender will come and deliver your drinks to you, to your table, and chat the people up so that they're a little distracted that you're not at their table yet. Yeah. You just kinda can look at a room and you know what needs to be done. You can see it; you don't have to ask anybody.

[00:33:25.00]

Justin N.: What is . . . can you do a type of service like that well with these young, with younger, less-experienced servers? Does that work?

[00:33:38.23]

Patricia C.: Hm. Well, when we had at the new Feelings, we did drop pooling after a while. We did. I was only workin' a couple of days over there, 'cause I retired early. 'Cause I'm sixty-three, so I retired at sixty-two, 'cause I didn't think I could do it anymore. You know? But then, here I am doin' it at Gabrielle. [Laughter] The right situation makes it better. The young ones . . . ah, there was a lot of slacking, a lot of looking at the phone constantly. Standing there, looking at their phones. Tons of that.

[00:34:14.12]

Justin N.: When did you first start seeing phones in restaurants? From the customer's standpoint?

[00:34:22.15]

Patricia C.: Oh, from the customers. At the end of old Feelings. I'm tryin' to think of the year. After Katrina, 'cause people—then, they needed to have a phone. They were livin' all over the place. I think, after Katrina, so 2005 onwards.

[00:34:43.10]

Justin N.: Yeah. Has it affected your ability to serve tables?

[00:34:47.10]

Patricia C.: Well, if they got it laying right where you need to put the plate or if they're on it.

One person's on it and you're takin' the order, then you just walk away. If someone's on their phone, I'm just gonna walk away. "You ready?" [Laughter] Yeah. Then, your coworkers. I'm fine with the young ones. They won't go the extra mile for someone. Like if you see someone standing at the door, you go speak to them. A lot of times they wouldn't. They'd just ignore 'em and wait for someone else to do that, you know?

[00:35:22.10]

Justin N.: Yeah. Do you feel yourself a professional server?

[00:35:25.04]

Patricia C.: Yeah, I think because I have a lot of the old ways. You just take . . . if I go somewhere and I'm thinking, "Wow, I'm a good server, how come I can't get good service?" I'm not complaining to the management or anything, but I notice it. It's like, "Wow."

[00:35:44.08]

Justin N.: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. I mean, well, you know Rick [Hughes] —

[00:35:51.07]

Patricia C.: Yeah.

[00:35:52.09]

Justin N.: They've got kind of a worldview, this is what they do. What's your approach? What's your style as a server?

[00:35:58.29]

Patricia C.: Well, I'm there, I'm going to do the best I can. I'm not like Rick or Scott [Harrington] —that's my *metier*. [Laughter] It was always a means to an end.

[00:36:13.20]

Justin N.: Yeah.

[00:36:14.24]

Patricia C.: You know? But while I'm there, I'm gonna do the best I can. And I'm from an era where that mattered. [Laughter]

[00:36:24.12]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Do you feel that there's still hope for good service? Where do you see it being done well? Do you go out enough to—

[00:36:36.10]

Patricia C.: I really don't go out enough. It's like I hardly ever go out. I don't know, I went to a couple new places on St. Claude. It was just kinda blah. I went to sit at the bar at the Artisan Cafe. Somebody told me, "Oh, it's good over there." It was horrible. Food was

bad and the service was—the bartender was just ignoring you. You know? It's bad. But I haven't been anywhere good in a long time, 'cause my boyfriend, he's not well. So I cook a lot at home, or else I go to work.

[00:37:16.23]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:37:18.19]

Patricia C.: But our service is good over at Gabrielle. We're allowed to be ourselves, too.

[00:37:22.27]

Justin N.: Yeah. I was gonna ask you that. How much of your personality do you put in to serving the table?

[00:37:29.15]

Patricia C.: We're allowed to be ourselves. It was the same with Feelings, too. I think a lot of the people there came to see us. And we would always . . . 'cause we'd joke with each other, and the tables would hear us. It was like a little comedy routine half the time. They would even say things like, "You guys really like each other, don't you?" Like as a staff. And we'd laugh and say, "Oh, no we hate we him." [Laughter] That kind of thing. We're allowed to be ourselves. We don't have to say, "Hello, my name is Patty. I'll be your server tonight." We don't have to wear a nametag. Just your own style.

[00:38:06.00]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah. Do you find yourself—does it depend on the customer, do you just try to read the table? Or do you just—'cause some servers engage in more conversation than others.

[00:38:19.07]

Patricia C.: Um-hm. I read the table. A lot of times, they don't want to have their waiter talking to them. [Laughter] You know? They want you to explain everything and answer their questions, but they don't really want you hovering. Unless they do, unless they're crackin' jokes with you, then you know.

[00:38:35.21]

Justin N.: What have been some of the biggest challenges of your decision to be a career server? Or was it a decision? Was it something that just happened?

[00:38:47.25]

Patricia C.: It just happened. It wasn't a decision. It's not something I was looking for.

[Laughter] But it's something I always went back to, 'cause doing the faux finishing and stuff like that, if you kept a restaurant gig, you didn't have to be desperate as a freelancer. You know? I don't want to feel like, "Oh, I have to go out and start some new job. I have to hustle up some work." I don't want to hustle. So, it would come; word of mouth or whatever, and I liked it like that. A lot of times, I'd do a job from eight in the morning till

two, knock off, go home, change, and then do my restaurant shift. But I don't want to work like that anymore. You know? That's a long day, I'm too old for that. [Laughter]

[00:39:36.11]

Justin N.: Have you had health insurance?

[00:39:38.06]

Patricia C.: I have at times. From the hotel gigs. Now, I just have my own, Obamacare.

[00:39:48.12]

Justin N.: Yeah. Was Obamacare a big change for a lot of servers, do you think?

[00:39:52.10]

Patricia C.: Yeah. It was affordable. 'Cause before that came along, I had Blue Cross, and it got up to be three hundred a month. You know? And I wasn't even using it. Then I went and got a plan that was catastrophic, with a six thousand dollar deductible or something, and I said, "The hell with it." Then Obamacare came around and it was more affordable.

[00:40:17.10]

Justin N.: Do you think that's helped servers?

[00:40:18.07]

Patricia C.: I think so, yeah. Yeah.

[00:40:20.22]

Justin N.: Have you ever had an injury where you couldn't work?

[00:40:22.13]

Patricia C.: Actually . . . I had an injury. I fell in a hole. I backed up into a hole at new Feelings, and I thought I had broken my foot. Went to the Emergency Room—and it was during Jazz Fest. I was finishing up at Mondo and starting New Feelings, so I had to do both. I did it. I didn't not work. I worked with limping around. It was awful, for like two weeks.

[Laughter]

[00:40:52.03]

Justin N.: But you felt pressure to do it.

[00:40:52.12]

Patricia C.: Yeah. 'Cause it was Jazz Fest. You can't just drop out.

[00:40:58.11]

Justin N.: Yeah. Is Jazz Fest a good time?

[00:41:00.15]

Patricia C.: Um-hm.

[00:41:02.07]

Justin N.: When is the best time here?

[00:41:03.15]

Patricia C.: I'd say Jazz Fest. I'd say, from . . . like November all the way through . . . till after
Jazz Fest.

[00:41:13.25]

Justin N.: How about Mardi Gras? What's Mardi Gras like?

[00:41:16.09]

Patricia C.: Mardi Gras, I find it to be hit or miss. You might get a lot of reservations and then
they can't get to you, or they're somewhere else and they don't cancel the reservation. A
lot of that.

[00:41:27.26]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. How about all these festivals that there are now? Do they bring
people to restaurants, or are they bringing people out to the festivals? Especially where
there's a lot of food featured at a festival.

[00:41:41.12]

Patricia C.: Well, Jazz Fest, they come late. They come after, they go to back to their hotels; they shower. Then they come out around 8:30. So, it's usually a late crowd, but they come. We do a couple turns with them.

[00:41:55.20]

Justin N.: Oh, wow. So after 8:30 you would do—do you stay open later for Jazz Fest?

[00:42:00.23]

Patricia C.: Actually, we didn't at Gabrielle. We kept our ten o'clock thing and pack 'em in. Then you're so exhausted, you're glad that it's ten o'clock.

[00:42:09.26]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah. You're glad they all went home. [Laughter]

[00:42:12.20]

Patricia C.: Yeah. And Feelings, anything that was—like French Quarter fast and that kind of thing, then we'd be busy over here, 'cause it's closer to the neighborhood.

[00:42:23.05]

Justin N.: Can you tell a problem customer when they sit at the table? The minute they sit at the table?

[00:42:26.07]

Patricia C.: Yeah. You kinda . . .

[00:42:28.14]

Justin N.: What's the sign that somebody's gonna be trouble?

[00:42:31.09]

Patricia C.: Oh . . . hm.

[00:42:37.03]

Justin N.: Not trouble, but . . .

[00:42:38.03]

Patricia C.: It would be if their, like, first line of questioning when they—or if they say something, things like, "You know what I like?" It's like, "No, lady. I don't know what you like." [Laughter] You know, that kind of time-eating kind of people. The time-eaters. Or if everyone else . . . here's one, the control freak of the table. There's always one. It's like everyone's ordering. "Why don't you get that? Why don't you get this?" You know, it's like, "Let the man order what he wants." "No, you should get that. You should get . . . And then, we're gonna get . . ." The control freak. Then there's the needy one. [Laughter] That every two seconds, every time you walk by, it's like, "Ah!"

[00:43:33.21]

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

[00:43:36.29]

Patricia C.: Oh, like 100%. You know? Just like somebody bein' totally . . . and it's not even maybe, I'm not even that great, they're in that mood. They're in a very generous, gregarious mood and they're loving life. [Laughter] You know? Those are the ones.

[00:43:55.24]

Justin N.: Yeah. Was it a regular, or was it just a random?

[00:43:58.19]

Patricia C.: There's been times when it was a regular. Oh, I remember when I was a kid in L.A. doing cocktail waitressing, I got a hundred dollars from kind of a regular. And his girlfriend was mad at me. She was sayin' to me, "You just better keep your hands off that." I'm like, "No!" [Laughter] I don't want that. She took me aside.

[00:44:24.19]

Justin N.: All yours. [Laughter]

[00:44:24.19]

Patricia C.: Yeah. She took me aside and told me, and I was shocked.

[00:44:29.03]

Justin N.: Wow.

[00:44:30.04]

Patricia C.: Like, "No, I don't want that man."

[00:44:33.08]

Justin N.: Wow, wow, wow. Do you feel like you've gotten your due respect as a woman in the food business? Have you ever felt that that's a barrier at times?

[00:44:45.14]

Patricia C.: Hm . . . you know, working in a French place, I find it to be more . . .

[00:44:55.13]

Justin N.: Did you wait in Paris?

[00:44:55.13]

Patricia C.: No. In L.A. But it was a place called the Mustache Cafe. [Laughter] And it was owned by two French guys. They were real . . . and it was the [19]70s. They were just very sexist. I didn't stay there long. They were always yellin' at everybody, and . . . but actually, no. Oh, at Feelings. Depends on the place. If they appreciate someone who's working hard and who's not calling in sick or at the last minute or whatever, then they know that you work hard, they appreciate you. I've been appreciated, yeah.

[00:45:38.13]

Justin N.: It sounds like you've felt comfortable enough being mobile that if something was not tolerable, you'd move on.

[00:45:44.15]

Patricia C.: Yeah. Or I could talk to my boss, you know? And say, "Hey, this is what's goin' on."

[00:45:51.22]

Justin N.: Yeah. And you felt like they were receptive to that.

[00:45:54.16]

Patricia C.: At Old Feelings, I actually left and went to work at the Marigny Brasserie because I was kinda tired of it, you know. And Maggie [Marx] was over there. She says, "Hey, if you're lookin' for somethin', they're lookin' for someone." Then I went and I stayed there a couple years. Then I went back to Feelings. Yeah, the Marigny Brasserie was not fun. The owner was—I'm sure you've talked to Victor [Pizarro], so you know, I don't have to talk about it. But at the time, we were all working together. We had a decent manager and the staff was pretty steady. Then, when that manager left, he was one of the guys that opened Three Muses. The whole thing fell apart. Then they would have turnover, turnover, turnover, turnover, and it's oh, my God. I was always going to visit everyone at Feelings and having drinks, and I said, "Can I come back?" They said, "Yeah, sure."

[00:46:52.20]

Justin N.: Is bad service a direct reflection of management mostly?

[00:46:58.25]

Patricia C.: Hm. No. I don't think so. I think . . . no. It's the person, it's the server. If they're either lazy or they don't know, they could be corrected. It depends if they want to be corrected. I've had—you know how you have your table number and your seat numbers. At New Feelings with the young ones, I'd say, "Okay, here's our seat numbers." So whoever picks up the food knows where it goes. They deliberately didn't care about that. They never used seat numbers, and even after you tell them, they just decided they weren't gonna do it. So, that was something.

[00:47:40.19]

Justin N.: So, they bring the food out, and said, "Who had the spaghetti and meatballs?"

[00:47:42.16]

Patricia C.: Yeah. Yeah. They did it all the time.

[00:47:48.13]

Justin N.: [Laughter]

[00:47:50.08]

Patricia C.: So I said, "I give up."

[00:47:51.21]

Justin N.: Yeah. I've noticed, actually, seat number is a divider in service, between the people who do that and the people—'cause there's restaurants, a number of restaurants where I eat, and that's . . .

[00:48:05.00]

Patricia C.: They don't have the seat number.

[00:48:06.06]

Justin N.: But some servers do it.

[00:48:07.20]

Patricia C.: Uh-huh. Yeah. You don't have to auction off—they call it auctioning off the food. You don't have to do it. You could just put the plates down, and you could continue the conversation. You're not so obtrusive, you know? To them.

[00:48:23.01]

Justin N.: Um-hm. There's a reason for it.

[00:48:25.01]

Patricia C.: Yeah, yeah. So you don't bother them. [Laughter]

[00:48:27.13]

Justin N.: Imagine!

Patricia C.: Yeah. And a lot of times, people forget what they've ordered. They're talking and . . . "Did you have the steak?" They go, "Did I?" [Laughter] "Oh, no. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I did." It stops the flow of whatever they're doing.

[00:48:45.12]

Justin N.: Yeah, cool. Cool. So, closing in on an hour, and I know your time is valuable. What would—if you had any kind of broader observations about your life as a server, what would they be?

[00:49:03.05]

Patricia C.: Hm. Broader observations . . . maybe I wish I didn't rely on it, fall back on it, as often as I have. Where now, for years, it was the only thing I was doing. And maybe pushed more towards my faux finishing. But at the same—I don't really believe that, because I'm more artisanal. I don't want to be a business person running a faux finishing company and hiring people. I just want to do it. You know? So, it worked well for me, just being an artisan. You know?

[00:49:49.16]

Justin N.: Would you do it all over the same way?

[00:49:52.23]

Patricia C.: I don't know. Maybe I'd . . . who knows. I might not even have come to New Orleans. I might have stayed in L.A. and become a film editor or something. [Laughter] Who knows? But I was, like, a gypsy. I was traveling around and going here, going there, spending money. I should have bought a house years and years and years ago, but I didn't. Yeah, I guess I could've done a lot of things different. [Laughter]

[00:50:22.23]

Justin N.: Yeah, yeah. Well, this has been great. It's been really gratifying to speak to so many different people to talk about their experiences.

[00:50:31.28]

Patricia C.: All us old ones. You know, Maggie's was interesting, 'cause she came up in Greenwich Village. She had a boat restaurant.

[00:50:39.12]

Justin N.: Yeah! We talked all about that. Oh, my goodness, yeah. What a neat interview she was. Great. Well, thank you very much.

[00:50:47.22]

Patricia C.: Well, thank you for talkin' to me.

[00:50:49.09]

Justin N.: I'm gonna hit . . . stop.

[End of interview]