



Princeton Saunders
Atlanta, Georgia

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Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson
Length: One hour and fourteen minutes
Project: Career Servers

[*START INTERVIEW*]

Annemarie A.: Okay. Today is September 23, 2019. This is Annemarie Anderson recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm at Miller Union in Atlanta, Georgia, with Mr. Princeton Saunders. Mr. Princeton, will you go ahead and introduce yourself for the recorder? Tell us who you are and what you do.

[00:00:19.18]

Princeton S.: Hi, everybody. I'm Princeton Michael Saunders. I work at Miller Union, proudly work at Miller Union. I'm a server here.

[00:00:30.15]

Annemarie A.: That's great. And for the record, could you give us your date of birth?

[00:00:34.16]

Princeton S.: New Year's Day.

[00:00:36.13]

Annemarie A.: Okay, what year?

[00:00:36.13]

Princeton S.: 1969.

[00:00:38.15]

Annemarie A.: Great. So, could you tell us a little bit about growin' up? Where did you grow up?

[00:00:43.09]

Princeton S.: In New Jersey and New York. Born in Princeton. My father worked in Manhattan, so I spent a lot of time in New York, back and forth between New Jersey and New York. Spent a lot of time in Colorado. We had a little place in Aspen. And that's where I pretty much grew up. My grandparents, paternal grandparents, were British and came to the United States and moved to North Carolina, where they had several businesses in homes. So, I spent some time down there. But that was my exposure to the South, but very much a Jersey boy.

[00:01:31.19]

Annemarie A.: Yeah, that's great. Well, tell me a little bit about—well, what were your parents' names?

[00:01:37.02]

Princeton S.: My father was David. My mother, we called her Tommy, Thomasina. Dad was a surgeon. Mom was a dancer, model at the time, did a few different things. Business stuff. But my father's parents owned restaurants, and I've always had an interest in that. We would go out for dinner often. Some of my fondest memories were, we knew on Sunday we were goin' out to dinner. We knew Friday we were goin' out to dinner. We were

always taught, rather formally, about our experiences with meals, having them together, having them seated, no television, no jeans at the table. If you wore it to school, you didn't wear it to the dinner table. You needed to clean up. My father expected you to be sitting at dinner. When we went out to dinner, even as children, we ordered—we didn't ask for, not like a lot of places do now, ask for anything different. We ordered what was there and ate what was there, much like at home. Then, when the bill came, after we had been polite and quiet through our meal, my father would give myself and my brother an opportunity to look at the bill, and we had to figure out an appropriate tip. So, it was kind of a game, too, and a little bit of a challenge, but I always looked forward to going out to eat. I feel really comfortable in a restaurant.

[00:03:22.14]

Annemarie A.: That's great. So, well, I have a couple of follow-up questions for that. What sort of restaurants would your family go out to eat when you went to dine?

[00:03:31.29]

Princeton S.: It would vary. It would be family-oriented at times. The Friday night dinner was usually somewhere where my parents could have something they wanted, but something for the kids. We didn't do a lot of chain dining – just not what we did. With that proximity to New York City, Philadelphia, and Princeton, had not a lot—but nicer, smaller places to eat. We would go to those places. Sometimes, there would be a kid menu. Sometimes, there wouldn't be a kid menu. But it would be us as a family. We could bring our friends, often. If my grandparents were around, they could come with us.

When they were around, it was always that type of thing. My mother's family was very much into having big meals together as well, though they were into spending the time in the house and cooking and doing that type of thing. Just different people. But meals were important. And since my father's background was European, we could drink a little bit of wine here and there, have something with dinner. So, it wasn't a big deal. I always appreciated that part of it as well.

[00:05:01.18]

Annemarie A.: For sure. That sounds like a really interesting early education.

[00:05:04.28]

Princeton S.: I think it's cool. I think it's really cool. And I think it's something that benefited me in a lot of aspects of my life. It made me appreciate things. I think—I mean, I joke about being spoiled, but you know I'm aware of the gifts that I had growing up and opportunities that I had growing up. That's all. I don't want to talk about that too much, but I've always appreciated that.

[00:05:34.27]

Annemarie A.: For sure. That's great. So, your grandparents, what were their names? And tell me a little bit about the restaurants that they owned.

[00:05:41.28]

Princeton S.: I didn't know a lot about their restaurants, but it was Lee and Margaret. In the places I knew of, I knew there was like a kind of an upscale kind of dinner place I kind of remember. I don't have a lot of memories of their places, but because of their experiences and my father's experiences, that appreciation was passed down.

[00:06:13.21]

Annemarie A.: Definitely. Lee, is that, how do you spell that?

[00:06:16.08]

Princeton S.: L-e-e.

[00:06:17.17]

Annemarie A.: Okay.

[00:06:18.29]

Princeton S.: Just Lee Saunders, yeah.

[00:06:19.12]

Annemarie A.: Just making sure. Okay. So, you were talkin' about your mother's family as well.

They were in New Jersey, too?

[00:06:25.14]

Princeton S.: They were in New Jersey. They were educators. My grandmother, my maternal grandmother, taught in the Jersey public school system for many years. My grandfather was a lawyer and taught some at the university and around, as well. I spent most of my time with them, as opposed to my other grandparents, just because of family dynamics.

[00:06:56.26]

Annemarie A.: Yeah.

[00:06:58.06]

Princeton S.: But the love was still there.

[00:07:01.18]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. And what were your mother's parents' names?

[00:07:03.04]

Princeton S.: Thomas and Ellen Caldwell.

[00:07:11.06]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[00:07:13.02]

Princeton S.: Yeah. And they were really, really kind and sweet people. I get sentimental thinkin' about them. Kinda goin' through a family thing right now. A little bit sentimental, I love those guys.

[00:07:24.10]

Annemarie A.: That's great. What food showed up on your grandmother's table when you all got together?

[00:07:28.23]

Princeton S.: Oh. She enjoyed cooking quite a bit, but they were always home-cooked. I, even as a child, never really appreciated or digested or really liked meat a whole lot. But my father did and my brother did, and most people in my family really wanted—my father wanted meat at every meal. If there was fish and whatever else, there was fish and whatever else, but there was gonna be meat in addition to that. So, she would make great spreads. Whatever it was and something for me. I was the brat, very much still am. Yeah, it would be whatever; lots of veggies, mac and cheese, 'cause that was my thing. She was from the north, so there was her style, and then my grandmother in the South would be a lot richer and a real Southern style. When she came over, she started cooking Southern stuff. But always mac and cheese. Always green beans. Always sweet potato and potatoes. Always at least two different meats, and always way too much food, which I loved. We could have friends over all the time and often did. Even when I went away to school, I would come home and bring friends home. We would just eat and eat and eat. It

was a really nice, big house, and half the house would just be food on food on food. It was awesome.

[00:09:13.21]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[00:09:14.02]

Princeton S.: Yeah.

[00:09:15.10]

Annemarie A.: When you went to school, where did you go?

[00:09:17.10]

Princeton S.: I went away for a couple of different things. I was a tennis player, so I went away for tennis programs. I was doing some stuff in the city. I would travel some with my mom a little bit. I wanted to eventually—I wanted to go away. I wanted to travel. I've always wanted, I wanted to go to college when I was in junior high school. I really wanted to go somewhere. So, I did a couple programs at Princeton. I did a program at Brown, just going for a semester or a summer or whatever, and then, as soon as I could, I went away to go to college. I came down to do part of a program at Morehouse. I left the country for a while, went to school in Spain for a little bit. Came back, went to California. I just liked to go. I've always been independent. My parents were divorced rather early, and then my mother, bein' a dancer and model and doing what she was

doing, often traveled. So, I always felt like, "Well, they're not going to be around a lot." Which is why I ended up spending so much time with my maternal grandparents. I was like, "Well, I want to go away then, too." I remember having a conversation with my mom and her not wanting me to go away. I'm like, "Well, you're not here most of the time anyway. So, this is what I want to do."

[00:11:01.19]

Annemarie A.: That makes sense.

[00:11:03.18]

Princeton S.: Yeah, right.

[00:11:05.12]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. Well, tell me a little bit about your first service job.

[00:11:08.06]

Princeton S.: Hm. My first service job . . . was in Atlanta. I had come down for that program at Morehouse and it would have been, like . . . [19]90. [19]90-ish. It was at a place called, what was it? Damon's Ribs. And I wasn't supposed to be working, I was supposed to be concentrating on school and my tennis, and my parents were very strict on that. Always, always got really good grades. Was never an issue. But I needed to be focused, is what I was told. It was fun, but based in service – it was a rib place. My father came to visit me and I had a great group of friends, really tight, and most of them are my great friends to

this day. As a matter of fact, most of us, that same group, are going away together this coming weekend. Came to visit and found out I had this job. Moreover, he didn't want me working in the restaurant business. [Laughter] Came and found out I was workin' this job and came to the bar while I was at work. So embarrassed. I came out from the kitchen or wherever I was at some point and he was sitting at the bar talking to my manager. I was shocked and afraid, 'cause I didn't think my father would act out in public. He was way too dignified for that. But he had those eyes that darted and . . . [Laughter] If he looked at you, you knew something wasn't right. Whether you could pinpoint it or not, you knew somethin' needed to change. [Laughter] 'Cause he was just like that. To kind of shorten this story, at some point in that conversation, he thanked my manager for all the compliments about my work ethic, my interests, and all that, and for all he had done for me or whatever, but that that would be my last shift. [Laughter] I was done with that job, is what he said. We worked through that a little bit. I got to stay a little bit longer, but that was it. Then I did a job at, like in the same little—it was near underground Atlanta, I guess it was underground Atlanta, a place called Tortilla Flats, a little Mexican place. Groundhog Tavern. And that was all within a short while, but I met really cool people. Really, really cool people that opened up my exposure and opened up my world a lot. A whole lot, to a lot of different things. Not excluding . . . different classes of people, a lot more international people in Atlanta than I expected. In no small way, I was exposed to and positively influenced in regards to my sexuality. I'm a gay man, and that was big, to have that exposure and to meet those friends to help me through that. And, obviously, my friends were a really big part of that, but restaurants in general—the restaurant industry—is so varied and such an amazing melting pot. When you feel, maybe not able to be open,

if you feel isolated or whatever in a restaurant scene, you can find somebody else or someone's gonna find you or recognize that in you or help that out in you. It really helped me come to terms with a lot in my life. So, I got really comfortable with restaurants, you know? Really comfortable and it really helped me a lot. I really wanted to be in it and thrive. I'm highly competitive. I played a lot of tennis. I did a lot of different things competitively, but I really wanted to learn. I really wanted to do well. I wanted to be really good where I was. I wanted to be like those people who were really kind to me and helped me, and do the best that I could do at what I was doing. Like I always was taught. But that was reiterated from those people. So, I wanted to go to better and better places. So, my first real serving job in a fine place was at Veni, Vidi, Vici, which I think is no longer here. I think it was right on . . . somewhere around here, Veni, Vidi, Vici, really cool Italian place. That's where I really got the love for really fine service and wine. Wine service and wine sales and wine knowledge and wine tasting, which has very much continued through my career. Especially here at Miller Union.

[00:17:26.25]

Annemarie A.: For sure.

[00:17:27.15]

Princeton S.: But that was—I've kind of forgotten my track there, but this interview is bringing back a lot of really fond memories, and I'm kind of going there. [Laughter] It's kind of fun.

[00:17:39.20]

Annemarie A.: I'm really interested in what you're saying.

[00:17:42.01]

Princeton S.: It is interesting, it's weird.

[00:17:46.27]

Annemarie A.: What year did you start at Veni, Vidi, Vici?

[00:17:48.07]

Princeton S.: I'm so not good at years and stuff like that.

[00:17:51.07]

Annemarie A.: That's okay.

[00:17:53.06]

Princeton S.: But it would have been . . . I don't know. [19]92, [19]93?

[00:18:00.25]

Annemarie A.: Okay, great. So, I hear what you're saying, I think, what you've said—there are a lot of people who kind of mentored you and led you, not only in your career path, but also in your personal life. Could you talk a little bit, or kind of share who some of those

people were and what were maybe some of those specific lessons as far as your career in dining? If that makes sense.

[00:18:30.15]

Princeton S.: Yeah. I mean, if I think about, there were a couple of people at Veni, Vidi, Vici, like servers that were above me, older guys, but they were so good and detailed. Had these regulars, and I would just watch them orchestrate their sections and sell good wine. I was doing real well for a new guy, but with those guys, Jeff Galfond was a server there who was just . . . he was the shnit. There was a guy, Mike . . . trying to think about Veni, Vidi, Vici, but that's where those people really started to get me. There was Michael Weiman who's now a great lawyer, I think, for Koch. When I left here in [19]96, right after the Olympics, I went to Aspen. That's where it really got me. Charles Dale, James Beard-nominated chef from the Quilted Giraffe owned Renaissance Restaurant & Bistro. I worked there with him, and he's been a great influence. Amazingly detailed. Charles—well, he goes by Barclay Dodge—who was his chef de cuisine, who's a great friend of mine. Pamela McClain was general manager there. Those guys really steered me and guided me and taught me so much, and so much detail and inspiration about it. Bobby Stuckey, who I didn't have a lot of time with, but his influence on me was really huge. He's a master sommelier now, one of the few in the world, and owns his own place in Boulder. The work that those guys did there, and then—I mean, it continues. Just to watch what people do, I've been a huge fan and follower of Thomas Keller. I really love what he does. I've worked at some really, really cool, high-end and high-volume places in New York City with Sam Hazen at Tao. He was really, really cool. Just the way he put

out really good food in that scene, at that volume, was stunning to me. Paul Goldstein, general managing partner at Tower Group taught me a lot about maître d'ing and seeing the whole picture, and gave me a lot of confidence and inspiration as manager. I've done management quite a bit. In really big ways, some of the servers I've worked alongside, who all worked really well together, who kept me motivated, whether it was just as people who were ahead of me who maybe brought me up and taught me things or kept me motivated through competition, you know, friendly competition, it's always been, and friendship. I'm pretty self-motivated, but I'm always looking around and checking out what's going on. I'm very much—I don't always say anything, but I'm always looking around seeing what's going on. Before I sit down somewhere, I do a loop. [Laughter] I look to see who's around, I look at decor. I look to see where exits are, restrooms are, but I'm looking around and checking it out. It's always . . . it's always that . . . that for me, looking around. It's whether I'm working and having to work the whole room or just being me, I feel like I'm working the whole room. I just want to know my surroundings and I want to see what's going on. I like to see how people interact with each other. I like to see how people interact with service. You can tell a lot about a person by the way they address someone who's helping them. You know? It's little things that people do tell you a lot about themselves. I very much check out human behavior. And that's something that keeps me interested in this industry and this business. I'm not that type—I can't sit down behind a desk. I can't. I just don't have that in me. I would love to wear a suit and do that thing, but sitting doesn't suit me. I'm active. I want to be playin' tennis, I want to get my steps in, but I want to be social when I'm doing it. It can be exhausting, but I couldn't do

anything else. I don't know if it's A.D.D., I don't know what it is. [Laughter] But just interest in people. Feel like I'm babbling.

[00:23:59.10]

Annemarie A.: No, that's great. You're not. So, just to get a little bit, all this detail is wonderful, but to get kind of a picture of . . . your career trajectory. So, you were in Atlanta until [19]96, and then you went to . . .

[00:24:15.00]

Princeton S.: Aspen.

[00:24:15.00]

Annemarie A.: Okay, and how long were you there?

[00:24:19.16]

Princeton S.: I was in Aspen from then until early 2000s, 2002-ish. I went back to Princeton for a short while, and then to New York. New York City. Where I worked at Tao for a while, and became head server there. Became maître d' there. I was maître d' there for a couple years, when we were in the top three grossing restaurants in the nation. That's where I worked with Paul. I learned a lot, and got to a lot of restaurants in New York City. I went to a lot of restaurants in New York City and checked out a lot of different things. Then, came down here in 2011, and started at Soto Soto, which is a really great Italian restaurant in Inman Park. And a year and a half later, came here. Neal, who owns Miller

Union, was the manager there for a long time at Soto Soto. His general manager here, Julie Steele, was a manager at Soto Soto. Neal left, opened this, eventually brought Julie over. Julie had hired me at Soto Soto, and offered me a job here. I resisted for a while because I was new in town, I didn't want to get a job that—loyalty's really important to me, and I think about that a lot. I didn't want to start at a place that was great, and it was really good money, and everyone said it was the best Italian place in town at the time. I didn't want to do that to them or come here and seem fickle and start at a place and then leave. So, I stayed there for another year and a half or so. Did really well there, too. I enjoyed Soto Soto and still do. Still one of my favorite places to go. But, I finally came over here, and couldn't be happier. I couldn't work anywhere else in Atlanta. It's the best food. It's such a great time. Neal and Steven are . . . by far the best people I've ever worked for. Couldn't do it for anybody else.

[00:27:09.00]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[00:27:11.10]

Princeton S.: Yeah, it's really great. It's really great with all that goes on, as emotional as people can be, servers can be divas and all that, myself included in that for sure. But it's nice to go somewhere where you know you're workin' for good people who are doin' really good things, and who really care about the people that come in here and do this every day. And let you be yourself.

[00:27:46.12]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[00:27:46.29]

Princeton S.: Yeah, it's really great.

[00:27:48.13]

Annemarie A.: I kinda want to go back—I want to come back and talk about your time here in Atlanta. But your time in New York, you were talkin' about bein' a maître d' and you had experience in management. Talk a little bit about, or tell me a little bit about, kind of the evolution of your responsibilities and the way that being a server, how that's different from being a maître d'.

[00:28:15.00]

Princeton S.: Well, bein' a server, you just deal with what you're dealt with. Bein' that chameleon, having to—in a lot of cases—almost change your personality per group, per table. Have to read your table. Some people might be here for one thing, some might be here for another. Some people may want to engage you and have you stand and talk for fifteen minutes, which I don't think you can do. You're really trying to work, you don't have that much time. But some people look for that type of server. Some people don't want to be engaged. Some people are here to have business or have time with whoever they've brought. My line is always, you know, they're glad to see you, you're glad to see them, but they didn't come to have dinner with you. They came here to have dinner, and

you're to work that out for them, however they need to work it out at the time. The maître d' is, you're dealin' the cards, but you're dealing with everybody. Everybody comes through, trying to make an arrangement for all those requests at the door, because people like one room versus another room, or they want a specific table. Or a two-top wants a table big enough for four people and you don't have it. You want a quiet table at eight o'clock on a Friday. [Laughter] You have to work that out. And help out and manage. Management is just another server, you just have a larger station. You need to be able to work with everybody and get around, is my personal opinion. Managers should get down and get in there like everybody else. Neither can do it without the other, really. There needs to be some organization in it. There needs to be some flow to it, some pacing to it, for the server side of it and for the kitchen side of it. I mean, there's a strategy and idea to it. People think that when they walk in, and they want a table without a reservation sometimes, or they want a larger table and they only see the dining room spotted with a few tables, they're not thinking about the reservations. And ideally, in a restaurant, for it to survive and take care of its needs, you want to use every table in the restaurant. And ideally, more than once. [Laughter] People don't necessarily think about that, but we've got to work it out without ostracizing or putting somebody off. But you need to do what's best for the business, which in most cases, is doing what's best for the guest. You know what I mean? But there's a strategy to it. A server needs to bring the energy that that table requires, and you have to figure that out sometimes. Sometimes they'll straight up tell you, "Hey, yeah, we're lookin' for this." Or, "It's a birthday." But you need to make them feel that you're excited that it's Annemarie's birthday when I don't know Annemarie. But they came here to celebrate Annemarie's birthday, so I need to make—the decision maker

who brought her here feel good about that. And, obviously, I want Annemarie to feel good, 'cause it's their birthday and they came here. I have other things to do, as well. I've got Mr. So-and-So sitting here, trying to make a deal right next to you, so I need to manage that, as well. And the energy I bring over here I need to bring over here, but stifle it a little bit at the table next to you. You have to think about that type of thing. But I want to bring the same level of service, but manage expectations as well, you know. That means anticipating, you know. He's not going to want me to stand there and chat about whatever; he's going to want me to tone it down a little bit. He's going to want me to get him a drink, maybe leave him alone for a minute, and be looking for non-verbal cues as to how they want it to go. And think about, "If I was sitting here having a meeting, how would I want this to go?" But Annemarie's family over here is hangin' out and wantin' to celebrate, maybe laughin' and doing whatever, I've got to work it all out. That's challenging sometimes, but that's half the fun sometimes, too. That's what keeps this thing interesting. It's not going to be the same job every day. In a really great place like this, the menu changes often. A lot of places, it doesn't. I think you need something to keep it interesting, and the guest relationship certainly does, does that. A maître d' has to do . . . a lot of planning in the night, for the night, and there's a lot of detail. And they can't do it alone. Again, it's everything from the lights on in the front to, did someone sweep up front? Are the glasses clean up front? Have we checked the bathroom in the last fifteen minutes? When you're busy, every two or three guys going to the bathroom, ideally, you want to go in and wipe up. At least wipe down the counters. You always want the ladies' room to be presentable. Another thing I do—and it's not just me, a lot of people do—I check out a restroom when I go to a nice place. If it's not clean, it's likely

that the kitchen's not clean. You know what I mean? Just things to look for. I want my server to be clean, well-manicured, have clean shoes, smell clean. Shouldn't be wearing cologne, but I don't want to necessarily smell them, you know? I mean, you don't want scented candles in a dining room. You want it to smell like food. I'm just thinking at this point, throwing things out, but those are things that maître d' needs to think about.

Because those are things that the diner is going to think about. You know? You want to . . . I want to create an experience, anticipate what they need beyond what they expect. I want to do a little bit, probably more than a little bit, but a little bit better than what they expect. And better than the other server that they had at the last thing, you know what I mean? It's important for people who are having a meal that's important for them to have someone care about those things and do those things. And it starts from answering the phone, that's the first contact. You know? To make the reservation or to talk to or confirm, however, to the service, to them leaving. It takes everybody.

[00:36:01.24]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[00:36:03.25]

Princeton S.: I think that's what it's about.

[00:36:06.27]

Annemarie A.: Yeah. Well, I hear you—I mean, you just described in great detail the intense human relationship and observational skills that you have to do this job. But I was

wondering if you could kind of also talk about developing rapport with diners and how you—maybe some regulars that you've established here at Miller Union.

[00:36:32.10]

Princeton S.: That's on a person by person by person basis. Some people, like I was saying earlier, will engage you and want to talk to you about that. I would hope, with regularity, if you see someone regularly, I would think the onus is then on the employee, the server, to make an effort to make them feel comfortable and bring them in and introduce yourself. Making friends, I don't think is a difficult thing. And it's not about me. I generally, if people are open-minded and even relatively warm and open, you're gonna make more friends than you're not. I will not get political because I will not stop if I do. The shit that's going on, I'm not gonna do it. But just be kind. You're gonna make friends. And people who are coming out, especially to a place like Miller Union, which is one reason I want to watch the level of the place I work, so I make sure that's the way, but they're gonna be glad to be there. It's not hard once they're already there and excited to be there, to be not let them down. Just build it up and step it up. Build an experience. Greet them. Have a plan. Maybe lay that plan out for them, which is what I do. When I greet you, ask how I can get you started, and literally ask you, "How can I help you best enjoy tonight?" This is how I think you should do it. Not necessarily using that verbiage, but make a suggestion. "I'd love to see you get started with a little charcuterie. Some of our hummus and feta, some nosh and stuff with some bubbles or dry white while we settle in. While you look through it. Then, let me work with chef and go deep into the menu with some family-style appetizers for you. You order what you want for your entree, so

everyone gets what they want, but it's an easy way to get a nice sampler of things on the table so you have a little something for everybody and make everyone feel comfortable." And consider that on a table, more than four people, you're likely gonna have some kind of dietary challenge, for lack of a better word—restriction or something. So, think about that when you're talking about what you're gonna do. Then, identify your host and see what it is they're there for, what they're looking for. If you even have a chance, with a large group, I like to pull my host aside and say, "Hey, who'd you bring to dinner tonight? What is the occasion? What is it that you're here for? I can help you do this, let's do this. I can get help you get some nice wine, I can do this for this. So you can do what you need to do with your clients, your team, whomever. Let me do this for you, and when you love it at the end, you take care of me." And now I know what they're there for, and I do that. I build that. So you brought your best client? Okay. So, now I'm gonna work the client, 'cause that's what he wants me to do, or work the room so he can work the client. That's what's gonna make him happy. Identify what your host needs and work your host. Typically, that's gonna make everyone else alright. 'Cause he's working for them already, you know what I mean? He's bringin' them here. He wants it to be nice. My job is to make it nice. Then, the rapport is there, once I've gotten the trust and I've started it. The rapport is there, and they're gonna appreciate it, I'm gonna be appreciated, we're gonna be friendly. They're gonna have a great night, gonna take care of it, and then they're gonna come back and be like, "Yeah, can you do that for me again?" It's not necessarily about the size of the group. You can do that with a deuce. "Hey, what are you—are you celebrating? Well, let's start with a glass of bubbles while we do your whatever, make suggestions." Help bring them out of it. If they don't engage you, if they're not in the

mood, you're gonna feel it. But people can go anywhere to get a meal. There's so many options now. You can get most of that brought to you now. So, to make the effort to come out and put on some—as I say, closed-toe shoes and come out to dinner. [Laughter] Then I want to help you do it right.

[00:41:47.11]

Annemarie A.: I'm kind of curious about this, because I've heard peoples' perspectives since I started doing these interviews. But how have you seen, if you have, how have you seen dining—either people who are coming to dine, their expectations or the experience kind of changed as you started doing this?

[00:42:10.23]

Princeton S.: They've heightened, I guess, in different places. I mean, the standards in the places I've worked, on purpose, I want to stay somewhere where they are high. Though, nowadays, it's . . . some people don't appreciate it as much. You see fewer and fewer people really dress up for dinner, I think particularly in the South. I like dressing up for dinner still. People love to hold on to the menu and the cocktail list and not do anything, which is not ideal for the kitchen or for a restaurant. You typically want, like I said, use a table more than once in a night. Some people want to just get—they want to sit and sit and sit and sit. That's part of what going out is, I get that. But without necessarily considering the whole picture. And then, they just want to—because of . . . I think Oprah said on her show, like years ago, something about, "If you get a table, you can hang onto a table. If you are concerned about being rushed, then just order your apps. Don't order

your entrees until you're ready for it." Which people do, and it's become this big thing. I'm not blaming it on her by any means, it's just kind of a joke. But it just takes so much longer at that point. And then people get bothered. If you come here and order an entree, because everything's done à la minute here, which means it's done fresh and it's that day, we prep it that day. We don't keep our food in freezers. We don't have freezers here for that. That's the quality of food you get here. But if you just ordered the duck and it's the only thing in the kitchen, it's gonna take twenty-five minutes. That's a long time to sit with nothing in front of you, and you're going to expect it faster. You're, at close to half an hour, you're going to be like, "Where's my food?" And be bothered that it's not happening. If you're on a date or something or a business meeting or whatever or have somewhere to go, or you're just hungry at that point, that's not gonna happen that that duck's gonna go in with nothing else. So, you're looking now at likely forty minutes, depending on where you are, for the food to come. That's a challenge to manage, I think. I don't want to, by any means, get down on people having higher expectations about different things, but . . . I think the silliest example is people bringing into a really nice place a Publix birthday cake. [Laughter] How often do you see that now? Come to a world-class restaurant with world-class chef, top five wine lists in the country, pastry chef nominated for James Beard as well, and then bring Publix cake in. It's your prerogative, but I don't think that went down a lot before. [Laughter] I don't recall it. I never saw it. It's a silly example, but it's just something to think about. Then, everybody wants to eat at the same time. Everybody wants to stop in at 7:30. Of course. But no one plans for that. And it's tough to do everyone in a restaurant where you're seating a

hundred and twenty people in a fifteen- to thirty-minute timespan. We're a small kitchen. I don't typically eat in really big places on purpose, which is tough to do. It's tough to do.

[00:46:53.24]

Annemarie A.: For sure. That's great. Well, I think too, what I've realized is, creating this experience is a collaborative effort between front of house and back of house.

[00:47:03.17]

Princeton S.: Absolutely.

[00:47:03.17]

Annemarie A.: Could you talk a little bit about the relationship that you and your team here have with the kitchen?

[00:47:13.05]

Princeton S.: Here specifically? It's really great. There's front of the house and there's back of the house, but we are all friendly with each other. We hang out. I mean, Steven, the chef, is one of the owners. It's the other owner in the front of the house. They're tight. We're all tight. We do things together. We can't do what we do out here without the kitchen. They come here because of the food. So, we're beholden to the kitchen at all times. I always believe that as a server. They came here for the kitchen. It's their place. We present it as nicely as we can. We add on all that we can to make a show, but the light's on the food. We're just the dancers around it. We're doing all that we can do around it, but the light is

on the food. To do what we do, having to do it well, you have to have confidence in that. I won't work somewhere where the food is gonna be an issue. I can't. It's just not in my plan to wow the guest. And that's, I think, what I was referring to, so much subtly what I'm saying is, you can't do all that food between fifteen and thirty minutes. They just can't get it out, and it's stressful on our staff. But the kitchen here's really great. I mean, we have challenges and moments, like everywhere will have, but kitchen here gets it done with stunning results. The food's always clean. It's always beautiful. They are far more patient with us than we are with them, I think, most times, and with . . . fewer accolades on a nightly basis. But yeah, we know this is Steven Satterfield's kitchen. We know that. And I hope and expect that they're super proud to be part of that, but they don't get the glory like we get out here. They're not walkin' around with glasses of Barolo at the end of the night like we are. They're not seein' the people that we see and bein' able to engage. Even when they're being challenged and busy, at some point, we'll have some fun, and or take a minute and breathe. You don't get that in the kitchen until it's over, and that dishwasher—dishwashers and teachers need to be paid so much more than they are paid. I mean, I couldn't do either. Couldn't do either. The thought that chefs and cooks put into their preparation of the food, the prep that they put into the food, I mean, I need to come in here looking cute, bein' fresh, bein' able to elevate my mood before I get guests in and whatever. I can manipulate that, and to think of it, I can even switch a chef if I need to. If I'm not feelin' it. Back there, you gotta turn that on and keep it on, all night. You don't get to just—let me take it back for a second. If you're on that line, you don't get that. You don't get that privilege. [Laughter] And if you don't take a pee break before five o'clock,

you're stuck till eleven o'clock with all that goin' on. You don't get that back there.
Couldn't do it. Kudos to back of the house at all times.

[00:51:41.05]

Annemarie A.: That's really great. I think this is kind of tied to that idea, but—and this is somethin' that you've talked a little about—but I want to know about your experiences of educating yourself with food and wine. I know that Miller Union has a great wine program and you were talkin' about bein' in Aspen and your relationships with the chef and master sommelier in Boulder, but could you talk a little bit about educating yourself?

[00:52:07.00]

Princeton S.: That comes with experience and having an interest in what you do. And just takin' an interest in the places where I work, we're given—we're expected to have a certain base knowledge anyway. Before you even, places I've worked, Renaissance, Tao, Soto, before you even get to the interview, you're takin' a written test on just general service knowledge and food knowledge. "Name five types of mushrooms. What are the predominant grapes in Burgundy?" Stuff like that, you need to know. You're only gonna know that from exposure and directly studying. So, my favorite friends are bartenders and chefs. Livin' their best life with great ingredients. They both put love into what they do. Chefs don't cook because they just cook; they love to cook and create that. That's a gift. Spending time with them, watching them, reading, taking the classes that are available nowadays, just to any restaurant employee—including the Master Court sommelier exam, and taking those courses, and having the certification of sommelier. At

some point, I mean, there's a great conversation that Bobby Stuckey's having right now with people about whether the certification is important or not, but the education you still get. You still do the reading, you still do the work. You still do the tastings. You still pay attention to what's around you. Here, specifically, since we're talking about this place—and it's such a great restaurant—we taste everything. If it goes on the menu, we taste it first. We get to give input on it and feedback on it and then it comes out again, with those tweaks, necessarily, and then we talk about that. In most cases, with Neal's wine list, also super high-end, we've tasted most of the bottles on the list. I, perhaps more than others, have been here a long time and tend to get into the sale of wine almost obsessively.

[Laughter] But I know this wine list, and that's because that's what he expects. To that end, just like we tasted everything in the back, every Friday when they change the wine lists—when new wines come on, we're tasting wine at the bar. Almost every Saturday, we do a blind test where we come in and we get our side work done, and then we sit with Neal and we talk about wine all day, every day. All night, we talk about it. We taste wine. But Saturday is really special because we come in and do these blind tastings, which most people would never do or have the opportunity to do. Add some great wines to my list and some phenomenal wines from Neal's cellar, and we have to sit for fifteen minutes each, a white and a red. We don't know what it is in the glass. We have to taste and talk about it, do the extrapolation of the varietal. We go all the way, try to figure out the vintages and varietals and where it's from, the climate. We talk about everything from the color of the wine, rim variation, alcohol level, all that, and that is immeasurable in helping someone gain knowledge and foresight into wine, which can be translated into wine sales, which helps everybody. But most importantly, makes the team stronger. The

success I have here with the wine sales and the parties and all that, I can't do without everybody else on the floor. It's exactly that; it's a team. We, in this restaurant—and most restaurants where I end up working, by design, are tip pool houses. Smaller places. More intimate. Detailed service. More of a family atmosphere. And we share the tips. All of our money goes into a pool, because again, not good in just a finite space. I like to move around, I like to see everything. When I see an opportunity, I want to be able to pounce on it and help for the team, and that, in this tip pool, ideal. People are gonna have their strengths, just like on any team, but I can't go do that if my back's not covered over here in my own section for a minute. And everyone's gonna have a different strength and a different focus, you know? I may not, in a night, run as much food as server X, but I'm gonna do something else that makes me more valuable over there. And the newer server's not gonna have any expectation of selling wine like I do. That's not gonna be expected, of course, but that person can find value for the team by doing something else. That's what it is. I love that idea at work.

[00:58:05.06]

Annemarie A.: That's great. That's really interesting. So, for you, the benefits are, it kind of creates a more equal environment?

[00:58:12.01]

Princeton S.: Well, I think for most people, I've thrived in places where I work on my own and make my own money, but it's different. The camaraderie is not as tight. People get caught up in doin' their own thing. The competition isn't necessarily friendly. It's . . . you know.

There are far more politics at the door. There's a lot of benefit to working in both, I guess, depending on your personality type and what you want to do. I've done really well in most places, but I prefer for my mental health at work, to work in this type of place. I can get really competitive. [Laughter] I can get really . . . detailed, and I will always want to be that person to help out, but I've seen some ugliness go on. I just really like the feel of working in a pool environment. There are more times that it's good than not.

[00:59:36.14]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[00:59:37.29]

Princeton S.: And I think it's better for the business, as well. Everyone is helping to get it all done. Everyone's taking care of everyone. You're not gonna walk by—I would think no professional server would, but you're gonna walk by a table where someone asks you for something and say, "I'll get your server." That should be the last thing you say, meaning, it should be the last thing you say. You're, "What can I do for you?" You should be fired if you say that, 'cause you're not helping. Just find out what it is. Delegate it. Let them know, instead of having them wait to get a server, their server, to come back to find out what it is. You could at least already be on the way to correcting it. If it's food-related, take it off the table. Get it started, at least. If it's something that can be corrected. If it's not, at least you're already getting a manager, 'cause you don't know how long they've waited already. You don't. What would you want if you were sitting there? Is what I really try to think all the time. My mood, whatever, it's not what I'm dealing with. What

would I want if I were sitting at that spot? That's what I would want if I were sitting at that spot. I'd want somebody to be like, "What is that you need? What can I do for you? I'll get on it." I can clearly see you need water. I'm gonna pour some water at the table. You're clearly finished. And I'm walking back. I'm gonna clear the table, because that's gonna allow that person to maybe catch up and do something else. I don't know what's going on with that server at that moment; they may be havin' a challenge somewhere else. It's the team, I'm gonna help it out. Likewise, when I get back from running food in here and clearing server x's table, hopefully, someone else had a moment and saw that in my section and is doing that in my section, too.

[01:01:33.19]

Annemarie A.: That makes perfect sense.

[01:01:33.19]

Princeton S.: I mean, it makes perfect sense. That's the team mentality. I mean, you watch your spot, and in a room, there's someone in there with you. You guys will team out and help each other. But it's everyone's job to get it done. When those people leave here, we've all won or we've all failed.

[01:01:55.29]

Annemarie A.: That's great.

[01:01:57.14]

Princeton S.: Yeah.

[01:01:57.14]

Annemarie A.: Well, tell me a little, too. You kind of mentioned this, just about choosing where you work for your own mental health, but you've done this for quite a bit of time. Since 1992 for fine dining. What kind of support does it take for you to be able to do this as a long-term career?

[01:02:19.00]

Princeton S.: From my management? Some autonomy. Trust that I know what I'm doing, and the ability to make a call. Absolute support of the kitchen. I need to have a general idea of how that's gonna go. There can be variables. I look to see who's cooking in a night, 'cause some changes—can make some changes. But that. And sometimes, literally just the support of my team. The servers around me, and that includes my server assistants. They're servers as well. If everyone's doing what they're supposed to be doing, then everyone can do a little bit extra. I try to tell people, "Do what you know you're supposed to do for your side work and your setup, and look for one more thing you can do." You know? "Look for—make a goal, to do something in everyone's section in a night." Just like I set goals for my sales, just like I set goals for—targets for, I want to sell these two bottles of wine tonight. I want to set a goal to help out and do something. I want to impact the team. I want to make sure I'm not the last one here today. I'm never gonna be the first one out, ever. But have I done my share fair? My fair share of work. For the setup, throughout service, and at the end of it. I, 95% of the time, want to make sure I'm

the one that did more. And it's not to tell anybody I did more, or not for the show, it's just 'cause that's what I want to do. That makes me proud, that's what I was taught. And from a young age, I'm at home and the examples I was given through those people that brought me up and taught me and helped me along the way. I think that's what we should all do with everything.

[01:04:55.14]

Annemarie A.: For sure. Well, so, this is a little bit more of a, like, routine question, but could you walk me through a typical workday or worknight here?

[01:05:07.03]

Princeton S.: The whole day or just the work, when I get to work?

[01:05:10.27]

Annemarie A.: Whatever you want.

[01:05:14.21]

Princeton S.: After—I'll start when I get to work. Get to work, look around, say hi. Always. I'm chatting with management, say hello, 'cause I want to know who's here. I want them to know I've come to work because part of management is knowing who's here, and if they're busy, in the office or whatever, I would imagine they're taking at least a mental note of who they hear, who they see, so they know who's here. I usually do a little walk around, just to see how the place looks from the shift before, so I can see how busy it was

and anticipate if any extra work needs to be done. We sign up for side work. We have a list, and based on who arrives in what order, you choose what you want to do for that shift for side work. And you get it done. I'm gonna look at the computer to see about reservations, 'cause I have a great interest in that. See where parties are, how busy we are. I will scroll through the names of reservations to look for V.I.P.s or people I know, and groups. Get my side work done. See who else needs help. Then do my—I have a litany of things I do that are extra. I like to water the plants, do dusting, just whatever. We have family meal. Steven and his staff make breakfast and dinner for us. They feed us every day. We get to sit down and eat before work, which is really cool. We usually have a pre-shift meeting. We sit at the bar, which is where we talk about what's gonna go on that night. Perhaps things management's noticed nights before that they want us to work on. Any changes, probably taste a little of the wine and talk about it with Neal or Julie. Get dressed. Service starts. Depending on the day, I may not have a table for an hour after we open, but to keep busy, I'm gonna do some dusting, look over the wine lists, try to make a plan for my night. We finish up. We sign up for closing side work. We check with each other, ideally, before we leave that. Then we close the place down. That usually also includes going back to the bar and having a little wine, having a little wine at the end of the night. That's without detailed service, obviously, but that's just how it goes. It would be a lot more of a day for the kitchen guys, 'cause they get here and have their list of prep to do. Get it done, whatever time schedule they have. They don't always get to sit down and eat the food they prepared for us. They usually eat standing up, in the back, and then have to run back to the line and get it done. Then, like I said, hopefully they get that pee break, and then they go back on the line. And they have to be ready at five o'clock. 'Cause

I may not have a table at five o'clock. I could still be getting dressed at 4:58. At ten to five, five to five, they need to be on that line ready to go, 'cause they should expect a ticket at 5:01. You know? I can look at my station and know what time my first table is. Like I know tonight. I have one table at seven o'clock, eighteen people. It's gonna be a great table, but that's what I do, the parties. But until seven o'clock, I can detail my station, I can hang out. I can help other servers. But I can come into it pretty mellow. I'm gonna start it mellow. By the time seven o'clock comes, I will have digested my food. [Laughter] Had a few glasses of water, had a couple cups of coffee, I'll be ready to go. Those guys, by then, will already be at it with the rest of the dining room. Difference is, at the end of the night while I'm finishing up and laughing it up with my friends at the bar—with a Negroni, likely—they have to break down and mop that shit and to clean that kitchen spotlessly, because Neal is a clean freak. Love that. Love that. Love it. You don't want to work for a chef or restaurant owner who's not a clean freak. You don't. But that kitchen's gotta be—when they leave here, 'cause we do not have issues with rodents and stuff like that because we keep this place clean. I mean, during service, there are people walking around mopping, sweepin' that kitchen when we're tryin' to get around, but that's what we expect. They also have to open the restaurant in the morning, and they don't want to have to come in and clean. This is what we do. So, yeah, another reason I'm a front of the house guy. I make the joke, "Do these nails look like they do that type of work? They don't. I know they don't, 'cause I don't." Yeah. Those guys'll be here cleaning and—I mean, we close at ten o'clock. They hope to be out of here by 12:30, one o'clock.

[01:11:06.17]

Annemarie A.: Yeah, it's a lot of work.

[01:11:06.23]

Princeton S.: They hope to be. By then, I'm at my neighborhood bar or having bubbles with my boyfriend at home. For an hour already, after having had a glass here. Yeah, that's tough. Again, kudos to the kitchen at all times.

[01:11:28.00]

Annemarie A.: That's great. And now, I don't have much more questions for you, but I've asked everybody this. Could you give me your definitions for service and your definition for hospitality?

[01:11:38.16]

Princeton S.: Service is the work. Service is the technical part. Hospitality is the psychology of it, the personality of it, the energy of it. There can be technique without hospitality, but nobody wants that, really. I mean, there are places for that. Those aren't my places. Hospitality is the lifeblood, that's the warmth. That's the energy. That's what brings you back. That's what gets you there. That's what we should be proud of. The technique is, I think, easily defined; not always easily taught, but it's teachable. Hospitality, I think hospitality people get it or they don't. You can't teach the warmth. You can't teach the detail of it, the anticipation of it. Those are things that people have. You know? I can put a plate down in front of you. Anybody can put a plate down in front of you. To present it properly, you need to have the meat at six o'clock. That's a thing that restaurant people

will know. To bring it with a smile, with eye contact, with humility. You know, to place it gently. The hug technique instead of elbowing your face. Those are details that are hospitality, I think.

[01:13:47.14]

Annemarie A.: That's great. Well, I don't have any more questions for you. Do you have anything that you want to add that we haven't talked about?

[01:13:55.14]

Princeton S.: I don't think so. I think it was an interesting conversation. It was kind of a walk down memory lane for me. I'm gonna call and email a couple people I haven't talked to in a little while after this. Put me in a good mood, a really good mood. Many people disagree with me. I don't really like talking about myself. [Laughter] In this format, so I'm good.

[01:14:26.22]

Annemarie A.: Okay. Thank you so much!

[01:14:28.16]

Princeton S.: Thank you very much.

[01:14:28.22]

Annemarie A.: I really appreciated talking with you.

[01:14:29.16]

Princeton S.: Thanks.

[End of interview]