



**Joe Larson**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**  
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Location: Bones, Atlanta, GA  
Interviewer: Annemarie Anderson  
Length: Forty-seven minutes  
Project: Career Servers

[*START INTERVIEW*]

[00:00:01.05]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay. We're recording. Today is September 23, 2019. This is Annemarie Anderson, recording for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I am at Bones Restaurant in Atlanta, Georgia, and I am with Mr. Joe Larson. Would you go ahead and introduce yourself for the recorder, tell us your name, and tell us what you do?

[00:00:19.25]

**Joe L.:** My name's Joe Larson, and I'm a waiter and a bartender at Bones. I've worked here for thirty-four years.

[00:00:30.03]

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

[00:00:33.27]

**Joe L.:** I was born March 19, 1956.

[00:00:35.27]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. And where were you born and raised?

[00:00:40.28]

**Joe L.:** I was born in the Bronx, New York City, but I really grew up in Peekskill, which is about forty miles north of New York City. Then my dad was transferred down here when I was fifteen years old, so I've lived in the Atlanta area since then.

[00:01:00.24]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Tell me a little bit about your family. So, you were raised in the New York area?

[00:01:06.01]

**Joe L.:** Yeah. Grew up here. My mom and dad, both from the Bronx. Married in the Bronx, started raisin' their family. Moved out to the suburbs. My dad commuted into New York City on the rail lines. He worked in the Chrysler Building for twenty-five years, and he worked for Texaco. They did a transfer of his department down to Atlanta in 1971. So, took me and my sisters with him. So, I've grown up in two places, really.

[00:01:43.16]

**Annemarie A.:** What was it like to be a fifteen-year-old moving from the Bronx to Atlanta?

[00:01:49.01]

**Joe L.:** Well, I tell ya, it was a little bit of culture shock, to be honest with you. But, looking back, I'm real glad we did. I like the South. I feel at home here now, and, you know, it was a good change, I would say.

[00:02:07.28]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. So, when you were a kid growing up, what kind of food was put on the table? What did your dinners look like?

[00:02:17.00]

**Joe L.:** Yeah, that's kind of funny, is we never ate out when I was a kid. All we had was home-cooked meal. We would go out maybe for pizza or somethin' like that, and now, here I am, workin' in a nice restaurant, and I never went to restaurants when I was a kid. At all. My mom is a good cook; we had five kids growin' up, so we weren't gallivantin' around at the restaurants, we were eatin' at home. Just regular comfort food type-a stuff. What we had for Sunday dinner, we'd have leftovers on Monday. [Laughter] That was pretty much the standard. Maybe on Friday we might get pizza, 'cause I grew up Catholic, so we didn't eat meat on Friday. Maybe we could get, if we were livin' it up, we'd get cheese pizza on Friday.

[00:03:10.26]

**Annemarie A.:** That's nice. What's your mother's name?

[00:03:13.15]

**Joe L.:** My mother's name's Mary. She's still alive. And my dad, his name was Stan, he passed away about three years.

[00:03:22.05]

**Annemarie A.:** Sorry about that.

[00:03:22.05]

**Joe L.:** So, he lived to ninety-two, and my mom is ninety-two right now. I don't know if that means I'm gonna be workin' in this restaurant for another thirty years, but . . . [Laughter]

[00:03:36.10]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, so tell me about your first job in service.

[00:03:41.27]

**Joe L.:** Okay. When I was a teenager, when I was about fifteen, I was washing dishes at a Bonanza Steakhouse. So, I'm still in the steakhouse business all these years later, but I was a dishwasher. Me and another guy in my neighborhood down here, this was down here, we needed to get a little part-time job. So, we went, washed dishes. Then they—I was movin' right up the corporate ladder there. They moved me to fries and rolls within a short time. That was pretty much a summer job, and it became too much once school started back in, so then that was that. And then I didn't work in the restaurant business again till I was in college. And I went to Georgia State. I worked at a Steak & Ale down there. I would work lunches; I would take two classes in the morning, work a lunch shift, and then a late afternoon class. Then I'd pick up nights occasionally, but basically, I was just a lunch waiter trying to make a few bucks while I was in school, and I did that for a few years, I guess. Til that became too much, and I had to concentrate on school a little bit more.

[00:05:15.02]

**Annemarie A.:** That makes sense. What did you major in at Georgia State?

[00:05:19.07]

**Joe L.:** Studio Arts. I also minored in Art History, which—pretty much everybody does the same thing there. If you're in Studio Art, you minor in Art History. I was not a very good student. [Laughter]

[00:05:36.02]

**Annemarie A.:** What medium did you work in?

[00:05:39.06]

**Joe L.:** You do it all. Watercolors, acrylic, oils, pastel, charcoal. I was—you know, there was so many people that I thought were way better than me, I tell you what, my strong suit would have been cartooning, that type-a thing. I was very good at doing quick sketches of people. When you're an art major, they tell you, you bring your sketchbook with you everywhere. An artist brings—a musician has his instrument with him; an artist has his sketchbook. So, I would draw people all the time. I loved to draw people. Didn't like landscapes; didn't interest me. I would ride the bus in to school, and I would just sketch people on the bus. This was before—they didn't have the MARTA train here, it was all buses back then. That's what I liked to do, so. Just draw people; quick sketches, quick,

dash 'em off. I always thought maybe, one day, I'd be a courtroom artist. [Laughter] That didn't work out.

[00:06:44.20]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, tell me a little bit—so, after you graduated from, what year did you leave Georgia State?

[00:06:51.28]

**Joe L.:** [19]80. 1980.

[00:06:53.21]

**Annemarie A.:** Okay. What'd you decide to do after that?

[00:06:55.18]

**Joe L.:** Well, I was workin' in the restaurants, and the—just, I worked in another little steak, after I came, I left Steak & Ale. For a couple years, I was just tryin' to do the school thing. Then, I got, picked up another job in a restaurant and then another friend said, "Oh, you should come work over here." It was a little cheapy Italian restaurant. Worked from there. I had one of the guys who I knew who was workin' here, said, "Man, you gotta come to Bones, man. If you're gonna wait tables." I was just kinda treadin' water. Didn't really know what I was gonna do. So, I came here. I was, like, knockin' around in the restaurant business for a while. I was twenty-eight when I started here, so, I really wasn't goin' anywhere. This place was just eye-opening. I didn't know you could really make a

career like you can workin' here, in a restaurant, bein' a waiter. I thought, "Ah. You can get by." But really, they treat you really good here. We get paid vacations, insurance, 401K, all that stuff. I didn't know that was available. So, I kinda latched on here, and that's . . . fit my needs. So, here I am, thirty-four years later.

[00:08:30.06]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, tell me a little bit. Do you remember the first couple days you started at Bones?

[00:08:36.17]

**Joe L.:** Yeah, I do remember it, because my first day here was the day after the bug man came here. So, everything was a mess. We had—everything was draped over. All the, everything was pulled out of the bar. All the liquor was covered up with tablecloths or plastic, everything. I was like, "Wow, they do this every night?" [Laughter] "No, no, the bug man was here." So, that was pretty funny. That was my first day. I had a lot more work to do than I would on a normal opening shift. [Laughter] But, yeah, it was . . . hard work. It's still hard work. But, what job that you're gonna be successful in isn't hard work, really?

[00:09:32.20]

**Annemarie A.:** For sure. What year did you start here?

[00:09:36.17]

**Joe L.:** I guess I started in 1986. I'm thinkin'. Yeah, I guess that—yeah, 1986. The place had been open about six years, and I knew a couple'a guys who worked here. So, I had a little in. I had a couple friends here. But they were very welcoming; a good place to work.

[00:10:06.17]

**Annemarie A.:** For sure. Well, tell me a little bit about somethin'—just completely left my mind. Well, tell me a little bit about, I guess, how it's changed or how your role here has changed over the years.

[00:10:26.13]

**Joe L.:** Well, I tell you what, this restaurant has always been trying to get better, trying to get better. So, you can imagine over a period of thirty-four years, it has changed quite a bit. We still serve steaks, but everything has improved. The quality of the steaks has improved. The cuts of the steak have improved. The restaurant has grown. It's bigger than when I started, by . . . I would say, eighty seats. More. Maybe—say, a hundred seats or more than when I started. So, it's a bigger restaurant. The clientele has changed with the restaurant. We didn't sell much wine. When I first started workin' here, Atlanta was a cocktail town. Now, wine is a big part of it. You really have to have a good knowledge of wine to work the front of the house here, because there's—we have, I believe, thirteen hundred selections on our wine list. That's not thirteen hundred selections, that's thirteen hundred different selections. We have anywhere in our inventory, like, twenty thousand bottles of wine on hand at any time. So, you can imagine, it wasn't like that when I started. We have a wine cellar here, a wine cellar across the street. So, it's grown in any

number of ways. I believe the service has gotten better. We've just gotten better at what we do. When I started here, the place had only been open six years. Now, you've got me, and I don't know how many other guys, that have been here over twenty-five years. You can imagine how much better we are at doin' our job, after you've been doin' it that long. The decor; they've redecorated several times. It looks a whole better'n it used to be. Chairs are more comfortable. The silverware is fancier. The glassware is better. You know. The tablecloth's pretty much the same; white tablecloths.

[00:12:56.17]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, tell me a little bit about—go into it and describe for me kind of a regular day for you at work, from, like, start to finish.

[00:13:07.13]

**Joe L.:** Well, waitin' tables now, I just went back to waitin' tables. I was the downstairs service bartender. So, I'm gonna give you that angle on it as a bartender, 'cause I know you're already gonna interview three other waiters. So, bartender, your typical day is, you want to come in early. And you're probably gonna have to go over to our wine storage next door and bring over anywhere between six, eight cases of wine. 'Cause we go—like I said, it's a wine place now. It didn't used to be that way. So, that's what I would do. I would get in early, check and see how many cases of wine I had. Then I check the book, see if we have any big parties. Now we have a back room; we might have a party of forty, fifty, sixty back there. They're gonna want—they might have wines selected, so I gotta get those wines all set up. So, that's the first couple things I want to do, is, if I have to

move any wine from storage next door, I wanna get that out of the way. Once I get that, then I think about settin' up the bar. I got my ice, I cut my fruit, make sure I got all my mixers ready to go. Make sure my glassware is ready to go. I used to work that bar five or six nights a week, Monday thru Friday, and then work Saturday sometimes. So, I have it pretty much down, because I was the guy there the night before. So, I'm gonna have it pretty much set up. So, that's why I do the wine stuff first, because I know that's the x-factor that I'm not sure what's gonna happen. The rest of it, pretty easy to set up, because I leave myself in good shape. Then, once the shift starts, you just gotta go with the flow. You don't know how it's gonna go. You might have, like I said, a party in the back room. There might be forty people back there, and they may want a cocktail for an hour or so. So, I'm makin' all of their drinks for those forty people, plus whatever's sat down here in this dining room. So, you can get busy right off the get-go some nights. So, you don't want to be . . . bein' behind. You wanna get early. I'm that type person; I'm the type person, I'm always here a little bit early to get things done. As the night goes by, the cocktails have changed, too. You want to know about changes. When I first started ten years ago at the bar, workin' the bar, it was pretty much scotch, rocks, vodka rocks, bourbon rocks. Now, people want special cocktails, so there's a lot more mixing cocktails. They want old fashioned; they want lemon drops. They want Negronis. They want all these more layered cocktails, have more ingredients and things like that. So, it's more stuff to be ready to have on hand. You don't know how the night's gonna go. One time, I had a party of forty in the back room, and thirty-five of them were drinkin' old fashioned. [Laughter] So, you can imagine, you just never know how the night's gonna go. It can be pretty challenging from keepin' up.

[00:16:46.27]

**Annemarie A.:** That sounds like it's quite variable.

[00:16:48.14]

**Joe L.:** Yes, it is. Sometimes, the bar can be the easiest shift in the house. Sometimes, it can be the hardest shift in the house. So, you never know. I guess you could say that with anybody. The boilerman will tell you the same thing, or the fry cook, or the maitre d'. Or the valet. It could be a tough night for anybody. You just never know.

[00:17:13.16]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, so, when did you start bartending here?

[00:17:18.27]

**Joe L.:** I switched to the service. I started out as a waiter assistant 'cause, back, that's how everyone did it. You started out as a waiter assistant. Then, you got voted up to be a waiter. When a slot, you were hired as an assistant, waiter assistant. Then, when a slot became available, all the waiters would vote. Out of all the waiter assistants, say, "Who's doin' the best job? This guy, okay. Let's move him up to waiter." That's how it worked back then. It's changed now. Now, they just hire waiters. Back then, you had to—so, first, I was a waiter assistant. And I got, after nine months, there was a slot available; I got it. I was a waiter for twenty years. They put this new bar in down here, we used to have a really small, tiny little service bar that I would be—I'd feel like a caged animal back

there. But they put this one in, which was nice. I used to kid with the waiters, "You know what? One day, I'm gonna be workin' that bar. I like that bar." And turns out, they needed a bartender. I told 'em, "Let me work just the service bar." 'Cause back then, they were just different guys would be workin' back there every night. In my opinion, it needed a steady hand back there. So, that was about twelve or thirteen years ago. After they did a renovation. It was one year after they renovated the downstairs, and they moved where that service bar is. It used to be a fireplace. They did, like I say, they're always tryin' to make Bones better. After that shift, I said, "Yeah, you know what? I'm gonna talk to the bartenders." They were like, "Yeah. Come on." They were happy with somebody to take care of that, because now, they had somebody who's gonna take care of that downstairs bar and keep a good eye on all the wine, which is what they needed; another person helpin' with the wine. And that's what I did. I did that for twelve years now. I'm gonna be sixty-four in March. I'm thinkin', "You know, I'm cuttin' my hours back." I'm not gonna be haulin' cases of wine all the time. Plus, on Wednesdays is liquor delivery day here. So, you're here, you're really doin' a lot of heavy work on that, as far as moving cases and cases and cases of wine. So, I said, "Yeah. I'm gonna see if I can cut back on my shifts." Then I said, "Yeah, if I'm gonna cut back on my shifts, maybe I want to go back to waitin' tables. That way, I can be a waiter or a bartender. I can always pick up shifts here and there when I want." Which is a great thing about this business. You got an extra bill this month? You can make more money. You're not—you know, you're not tied to a paycheck every two weeks. That's not gonna change. In this business, you got flexibility. So, you got a car repair, you pick up a couple shifts, maybe help get that paid for. So, that's kinda what I'm doing now. I'm scheduled three shifts a week as a waiter. Saturday night, I

picked up a bar shift. Week before that, I picked up an extra waiter shift. So, that's—I got all the flexibility now, 'cause I can work as a waiter front, or a back man waiter, or downstairs service bar. I got options.

[00:21:00.25]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, I'm kinda—this goes a little bit back to your observational skills, drawing people in art school, but what kind of, I mean, what interests you in, kind of, I think waiting tables? What draws you to that work, I guess?

[00:21:20.16]

**Joe L.:** I just kinda fell into it, to be honest with you. I like—when you're younger, it's a good job. It's good time people, goin' in there . . . it's just the way it is. Bartenders and waiters are generally people who like to have a good time, especially when they're young. Now, we're older, maybe not so much. Slowed down considerably. But, when you're young, it's fun. You go in, you make money, and you got cash. Now, you can go out and hit one of the bars with your buddies. So, that's what kinda draws you in there. As far as what I do, what I studied in school, really has nothin' to do with waitin' tables. I will say, though, I keep my hand in art in a very small way is, I make greeting cards and I make cards for anybody who's leavin' the restaurants. I make them a goin' away card and every signs it, and that kinda thing. I still have my hand in art in just a little way. One thing we do, and I'm gonna tell you, they got—when you've been here ten years, I don't know if the other guys mentioned this—you work at Bones for ten years, whether you're a dishwasher, cook, whatever, if you're in this building for ten years, the owners give you a Rolex. They

bring all the employees in and we have a roast, and I'm the emcee. I do the roasts. So, I will draw pictures of them or funny stuff like that. I generally write a song and play it. So, that's—my artwork lives on through that, I guess.

[00:23:21.01]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. I knew about the Rolex, but I didn't know about the roasts. That's wonderful.

[00:23:27.13]

**Joe L.:** Yeah. I been doin' the roasts now for thirty years. I'm the guy—at first, it started out, we did the very first roast and it was just kinda haphazard. But I knew . . . of course you know the guy really good, you been workin' with him for, he'd been here ten years, I'd been here four years. I had some good jokes about him. Then it just kinda snowballed. So, the next guy, I did a little bit more. Then, after about the third roast, I was in charge. [Laughter] And I have been since.

[00:24:04.10]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. That's great.

[00:24:07.09]

**Joe L.:** I know.

[00:24:07.24]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, I'm curious, too, you were kinda talkin' about the shift you've seen in cocktails and this becoming more of a wine restaurant. How have you educated yourself with wine and with alcohol?

[00:24:26.03]

**Joe L.:** Okay. Now, they have wine tastings regularly. Not every night, but I'm gonna say, four nights a week, the waiters are all tastin' wine. You either have a wine rep come in with a bottle or two of wine and everybody gets a taste and they talk about the wine. Or, we have a couple'a guys who order the wine. I was the wine stocker; I was not the wine taster and orderer and that kinda thing. That was not what I did. I was the laborer, you know. But they have a couple guys who do the tasting and ordering of the wine, and they also do wine education here. Before every shift, we open at 5:30. Everybody's down here, sittin' down here at 5 o'clock. For half an hour, we will have a shift meeting. We will either have a wine rep come in or one of the other fellows that does the wine ordering for us, and we'll spend a few minutes talkin' about wine. You get an education that way. When I first started, you had to go to wine school. It was . . . I still remember the lady's name, Anita Larue. I had to go complete a wine course. That's the way they did it back then. They don't do that now. So, I had to go take a wine course. It was basic stuff; just general knowledge, foundation for wine. And you had to take her class, and you got tests and you were graded and you passed. You had to come back with the completed thing. [Laughter] Otherwise, they'd send you back. That's how we started there. Things have changed now. Now, I tell you what, to keep up with wine—then I got *Wine Spectator*, I got that for a year or so. Now, I keep up on, honestly, on YouTube. I look up wine. I got

the people that I like and people I don't really particularly like this guy, hell, I don't know. So, I'll keep up with it on YouTube a lot. Then, as I say, the two fellas, David and Peter who do the wine ordering, they keep us up to date. They let us know when they've tasted a new wine that they're addin' to the list and things like that. Wine is constantly changing, because what was a good wine this year may not be the same wine the next year. This winemaker, he left. This winery was bought out by somebody else. Things change all the time. So, you have to kinda keep up with it. Some things don't change much, but most things do.

[00:27:10.26]

**Annemarie A.:** That's really fascinating.

[00:27:11.28]

**Joe L.:** Yeah, it's . . . the more you know about wine, the less you know, because it's just so much to know. Like I say, we have thirteen hundred different bottles of wine, just here. You can imagine, in the world, how much there is. It just boggles your mind. It just boggles your mind.

[00:27:33.06]

**Annemarie A.:** That's a lot of knowledge to have to put in your brain. [Laughter]

[00:27:38.17]

**Joe L.:** Yeah. Luckily, we got a good wine list. Now, when I started, there was a wine list. It was a small book. It had, maybe, I'll say fifteen pages to it. The wine's listed might have California wine, French wine, and they would have the vintage and the price. Our wine list now is on an iPad. They have all kinds of different ways of lookin' up your wine. You can do it by region. You can do it by price. You can do it by grape variety, just by pressin' all that stuff. Now, you're scrolling through the wines, and you see, "Oh, wait a minute. Look at this one. Jordan wine." And you just touch it, boom! Screen comes up, shows you the label, gives you two or three little paragraphs describing the wine, blah, blah, blah. Technology. Always movin' forward. We were the first restaurant in the United States to have their wine listed on an iPad. That's somethin' to hang your hat on. Like I say, the owners have just always been pushing the envelope, trying to get better, trying to get better.

[00:28:59.00]

**Annemarie A.:** Sure. That sounds like it's a really thoughtful way of presenting such a robust list.

[00:29:03.25]

**Joe L.:** Yeah. And it's very helpful, it's very helpful, because I can't memorize—people ask me, "Oh, how is this wine?" I'm goin', "We have thirteen hundred wines." You know? I couldn't—if I drank four wines a day, I'd maybe get through that wine list in a year, and then, by that time, I can't remember . . . so, we taste a lot of wines here. But there's no way we can taste 'em all. We're certainly not gonna taste the wines—we have wines that

are ten thousand dollars a bottle. [Laughter] So, we're not gonna be tastin' those. You're on your own there, buddy. I can tell ya, it was rated very highly. [Laughter]

[00:29:44.09]

**Annemarie A.:** That's crazy. Well, so tell me, too, I'm interested in developing relationships or rapport with the people who you serve. Not only people who come—

[00:29:57.23]

**Joe L.:** Okay. Did Dave tell you about Wyman, Diamond, and Saul?

[00:30:00.20]

**Annemarie A.:** No.

[00:30:02.02]

**Joe L.:** Me and Dave waited on the same three guys every Friday for twenty years. Dave did it for over twenty years, because he was waitin' on them before we became partners. Those guys came in every Friday. They only called when they weren't comin' in. They had a standing reservation, Table 14, and they would only call when they're not comin' in or they would call when they were gonna bring their wives, because then we had to set up a bigger table. But generally, I would say, 90% of the time, it was just those three guys. They pretty much—they didn't branch out too much on their orders, either. We kinda knew their orders. So, you establish a rapport with them, waitin' on them every Friday for twenty years. [Laughter] I went to the man's funeral when he died. I've played tennis with

his sons, gone to Georgia Tech football games together. These people, they're not your customers, they're your friends, after a while. Certain people, anyway. Especially somebody like that. They're down to—only Mr. Saul still comes in. Mr. Diamond and Mr. Wyman have since passed away. But he still comes in. Mr. Saul. I know his salad. [Laughter] He likes it heart of lettuce, chopped, with chopped tomatoes and balsamic vinaigrette. [Laughter] That's the Saul salad. [Laughter]

[00:31:52.05]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, tell me a little bit about how you—what's your kind of personal philosophy, what works for you in kind of managing and waiting a table?

[00:32:02.16]

**Joe L.:** Just treat people like you would want to be treated yourself. You know? Rush people, do you want to be rushed? No, I don't want to be rushed. I want to be taken care of like I would take care of myself. How I want to be waited on. One thing I don't—I will chat up people that I know. I don't chat up people I don't know, because I'm waitin' tables like I would want to be waited on. To me, I hate goin' in to some place and the waiter tries to become my new best friend. I'm goin', "Really? I'm here with my friends, buddy." You know? So, that's just the way I look at it. Now, some people I do chat up because I know 'em. [Laughter] I've been waitin' on 'em. I have some kind of, you know, rapport with them. I've waited on, maybe, their kids when they've come in. "How are the kids?" Somethin' like that. But generally, I'm tryin'—stay professional, always with the thought

in mind, "How would I want to be treated?" That's pretty easy, when you think about it. It's hard to do when you're really busy. [Laughter] But that's the bottom line.

[00:33:15.09]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. I think another thing, too, it's somethin' that I've realized is a good dining experience, is a collaborative effort between the dining room and the kitchen. Could you talk a little bit about the relationship that you, as somebody who's in the front of the house, has with the kitchen?

[00:33:31.22]

**Joe L.:** Oh. Listen. The kitchen can make or break you. You have to have a good rapport with the people in the kitchen. I think they work way harder than the waiters or the bartenders. They're in a hot kitchen, they got orders comin' in. Oh, my god, I don't know how they—honestly, I don't know how they do it. You have to give them the utmost respect for what they do. If there's anything you can do to make their job easier, well, you do it. Somebody says they want a special order; they want this, this, or this, somethin' that's not on the menu. I always say, "Folks, let me just check with the kitchen." I'm not gonna put that on the kitchen without talkin' to them first. I treat the people in the kitchen how I would want to be treated if I was in their kitchen. That's pretty basic. You gotta show them respect. They . . . how they can put out the food that they do is amazing. I tell ya, the line, the hot line where all the sauté and broiler and all this stuff, has not gotten any bigger. This restaurant's gotten bigger; that area of the kitchen has not gotten bigger. You know? They've improved the kitchen, for sure, but that's a small space to be workin' in.

With hot skilletts and everything else . . . my hats off to those guys. Make their job easier if you can, don't make it harder. That's my rule of thumb.

[00:35:23.28]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great, that's great. Well, tell me a little bit, too. Let's see. What are the most challenging and the most rewarding parts of your job?

[00:35:36.12]

**Joe L.:** Well . . . challenging is when you're super busy. You know? You can't be in two places at once. I mean, you can have just too much goin' on. Really, you're just hangin' by a thread, as far as gettin', hittin' all the points of service. What's rewarding is seein' people leave and they had a really good time. You know they really had a good time, whether it was Grandma's birthday or somebody's anniversary or somebody's first time. That can be challenging, when somebody brings somebody in, who, oh, they've heard about this restaurant and have been dyin' to come here. You know? The bar's set pretty high here. You want to make sure they leave goin', "Wow. That was really good." You know? You don't want to disappoint people.

[00:36:38.04]

**Annemarie A.:** For sure, yeah. Let's see, I'm tryin' to think of . . . might have asked you all the questions I have as far as your job. But I'm kind of interested too, in kind of your personal philosophy in hospitality. So, how you've thought more deeply over it as you've been in this job and you've made this your career. I was wonderin' if you—and I've asked

everybody this question, but—I was wonderin' if you could talk about your personal definitions of service and hospitality?

[00:37:23.05]

**Joe L.:** Well, I think the . . . service . . . is hitting the points of service. Hospitality is doin' it with your heart, really carin' about it. You know, doin' it with a smile. Hospitality's, you're welcome, makin' people feel welcome and makin' 'em feel important, that's hospitality. Service points are speed, gettin' the order, gettin' the drinks out to the table. Gettin' that wine, makin' sure you've got the proper glasses. That's service. Makin' sure all the silverware is clean, the glasses are polished, is everything—but that's service, points of service. Then, hospitality is doin' it to where the people feel like they're really bein', felt special. That's what hospitality is to me.

[00:38:34.21]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great, that's great. And do you have a—I'm sure this is kind of an informal thing—teaching, in whatever way that might be, younger people who are have come in?

[00:38:49.09]

**Joe L.:** Here's what I say. Here's what I say. I say the same thing—I see them doin' somethin' wrong, even when I was a bartender. I watched the new guys. And if I saw them do something . . . that wasn't the way we do it here at Bones, I would always say, "Wow. Don't do that when you're waitin' on the owners." "Oh, the owners! I gotta wait on the owners." "Oh, don't do that if you're waitin' on the owners." I don't want to tell 'em, "Hey,

that's not the way you do it. When I was waiter, I did it this way." I don't ever say that. I say, "Wow, don't do that when you're waitin' on the owners." That sinks in, and that's how I tell 'em to do somethin', 'cause they will remember that. They don't want to have trouble waitin' on the owners. Not that the—the owners are great, but . . . [Laughter] They will make anybody nervous, waitin' on them, because they're the owners. You know? That's how I would coach a younger person if I saw them do something that wasn't up to the Bones way. I would say, "Oh, man, don't do that when you're waitin' on Richard and Susan." Or, "Susan won't let that, hm-mm." They tend to remember it better.

[00:40:07.13]

**Annemarie A.:** That's good reinforcement.

[00:40:10.16]

**Joe L.:** Yeah.

[00:40:10.16]

**Annemarie A.:** Well, another thing, too, is, were there any kind of mentors or people who you watched who influenced your learning?

[00:40:18.08]

**Joe L.:** Oh, yeah. Sure. We had a guy here, we called him the Old Man, Phil. We called him the Old Man, because he was the oldest waiter on the staff, and he was forty-five. I'm gonna be sixty-four in a couple of months. [Laughter] But Phil was a really good guy. He'd been

around. He'd come from California. He'd waited tables in New Orleans, he'd waited tables in New York. The guy had been around. And he, if he told you something, you remembered. One thing I remember him tellin' me was, "When you get busy, worry about the party of two before. Take care of them first before you take care of the big table, 'cause big tables, they'll entertain themselves. Party of two, they may not be entertaining themselves." I always remember that. I tell that to other people, too. That was good advice. And different things; you just keep your eye open. You hear somethin', a waiter say somethin', a good catchphrase here or there. "Oh, that's a good one. I'm gonna remember that." You know? One I still use, I heard one of the waiters say they wanted their—"Can you wrap up that bone for my dog?" The waiter said, "Well, I'll do it, but you gotta be careful. Your dog has this bone, he'll be callin' up here and makin' reservations." The people laughed, and I still throw that one out there every once in a while. So, you learn from everybody, really. Everybody can have somethin' that you didn't think of that's a good idea. If you . . . are aware, or a new guy. New guy could have a different angle, and you go, "Yeah! I never thought of that, 'cause I've been doin' it this way so long." You know? You can learn from old guys, you can learn from the new guys.

[00:42:31.19]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. Well, what are some of the most important lessons you've learned over the last, you know, thirty-plus years you've been doin' this job?

[00:42:41.10]

**Joe L.:** Number one, get here early. All the good guys, they get in early, 'cause you never know what's gonna happen. You can't just assume you know what's gonna be goin' on that night, because things can happen. We could be short staffed; somebody's called in sick. We could have a big table comin' in that you didn't know about. All these kinda things. So, get in early. That's your first thing. 'Cause you don't want to get behind the 8 ball. It's gonna be hard enough even if you get in here early. At crunch time, it's always gonna be tough, but don't make it worse on yourself by not bein' ready.

[00:43:27.27]

**Annemarie A.:** That makes sense. Well, I don't have any more questions for you, but is there anything that we haven't talked about that you want to share?

[00:43:33.13]

**Joe L.:** What, about workin' in a restaurant?

[00:43:35.11]

**Annemarie A.:** Yeah.

[00:43:37.00]

**Joe L.:** Ah . . . you know, I tell you what. This—one of the reasons I think people work in the restaurant business is, they don't like to get woken up by an alarm clock in the morning. I never have to set my alarm clock, 'cause I don't have to be here till 3:30. [Laughter] So, I just wake up when I want to wake up. I don't have to get up and deal with the morning

traffic. That is . . . I just thank my lucky stars that I don't have to do that, because I don't think I could do that part of the rat race myself. When the people are comin' home, I'm goin' in. [Laughter] So, I don't ever have to deal with the traffic. I have . . . what I tell people, Dave, like my old partner, we were talkin' about how we work nights. Him goin', "Yeah, we work nights. So are all these businessmen we're all waitin' on. They're still workin', Dave. They were in at the office at nine o'clock, they did all their office work, now they're comin' out to dinner with clients. They're still workin'. While they were at the office, we were out playin' tennis." [Laughter] So, you know, we don't . . . we have a different schedule, but this particular restaurant, we're usually home by 11. The way things are now. We used to stay open till midnight on Fridays and Saturdays, whole new ballgame. But now, the way it works now, this job for people comin' in to Bones, we have—as far as employees go—we, I tell Dave, these people are minin' gold. We dug the shaft. [Laughter] Workin' here for thirty years, doin' all the things, gettin' Bones famous. Stayin' open till midnight. Now we only stay open till ten. "You know, all those days that we were here till one and two in the morning, makin' a reputation for Bones." Now, we've smoothed the path considerably for these other people comin' in. They may not realize it or appreciate it, but we've made this restaurant a well-oiled machine, even though we still complain. Don't get me wrong; we all complain. I think that's human nature. But, there's a lot of . . . it's like a band that's been together for thirty years. You know, the Rolling Stones. They know the songs backward and forward. They don't have to rehearse too much, I don't think. That's the way it is in here. We've got all the waiters, been here for twenty-five and thirty years, bartender's been here for twenty-five or thirty years. Up until recently, we had a guy who was a dishwasher here for thirty years.

[00:46:42.14]

**Annemarie A.:** Wow.

[00:46:42.14]

**Joe L.:** Up until recently, the main guy, the main valet parker was here for . . . twenty years. So, it's not somethin' you're gonna find too many places, I don't think. That's all I have to say about this place: it's a well-oiled machine. And if you don't try and rock the boat too much, you'll make a good living in this place, with benefits to boot.

[00:47:18.01]

**Annemarie A.:** That's great. That's great. Well, thank you so much for talkin' to me.

[00:47:18.14]

**Joe L.:** All right. Now, do I get my headshot—

[*End of interview*]