

ARI KOLENDER

Leon's Fine Poultry and Oysters, St. Alban, Charleston, South Carolina

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Interviewers: Kate Medley, Sara Wood

Transcription: Shelley Chance

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[Begin Ari Kolender Interview]

00:00:00

Kate Medley: All right; it's official.

00:00:17

Ari Kolender: It's happening.

00:00:18

KM: Happening; so I'll get you to start out by just telling us who you are and what you do.

00:00:24

AK: My name is Ari Kolender. I'm the Executive Chef of Leon's Oyster Shop and St. Alban Café.

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KM: Okay; great. So the only rule is that you try not to look at the camera or Sara.

00:00:35

AK: Okay; look at you, perfect.

00:00:36

KM: Yeah; and sort of square your shoulders up with me a little bit if you can.

00:00:40

AK: Like this?

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KM: And Sara [Wood] is the background okay? [*Off Mic Conversation*] All right; so I'll get you to tell us that again.

00:01:28

AK: Okay; my name is Ari Kolender and I'm the Executive Chef of Leon's Oyster Shop and St. Alban Café in Charleston.

00:01:34

KM: Perfect; great. And you already checked the audio levels? Okay; good. So will you tell us a little bit about your—well first I should say keep in mind that the audience for this is outside of Charleston and maybe outside of the South, so just sort of keep in mind they might not be familiar with the area. But tell us a little bit about where you come from.

00:01:57

AK: Well I grew up in Charleston and my mother and my dad and my grand—my grandmother, they all grew up here. So you know I grew up just kind of immersed in—in southern culture. And it's funny; you know I—I stayed here until high school and then moved out to the West Coast for 10 years. So growing up here I was a little I guess sheltered in a sense from other parts of the country and I kind of didn't realize that southern cuisine or southern culture was its own unique thing.

00:02:27

And it took me going away and then coming back again to really kind of understand it you know how special this part of the country is.

00:02:35

KM: Uh-hm; okay, good. Can you talk a little bit about if there was a time in your youth that you felt like a burgeoning interest in foodstuff, if there was like a moment where you were first intrigued with that on a deeper level?

00:02:48

AK: Yeah; you know I grew up with my mom and grandmother both cooking most of our meals, you know five nights a week. And you know just kind of as growing up with them I just got an interest in—in helping them out and cooking and as I then went onto live by myself I ended up cooking for myself more and more. And I had always been working in restaurants as you know either a dishwasher or busser or food runner. And you know one day I was kind of looking around and I'm—you know with this person who was a prep cook said hey you know I'm going to culinary school. And I thought to myself, well I can do that; I mean that sounded awesome. I like doing this, like I might as well do it the right way if I'm going to do it. So I moved to Los Angeles by myself and went to culinary school.

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KM: Okay; so that's what took you to the West Coast.

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AK: Yeah.

00:03:36

KM: Interesting. And what was your West Coast experience like?

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AK: It was insane. It was such a rad-time; I mean like I said I moved out there by myself. I didn't know anybody so I just kind of you know it was a huge culture shock. I got to see all these new things, taste all these new things and just experience it from almost like a—you know in a kid sense, you know.

00:03:56

KM: Yeah; for sure. Why did you come back?

00:03:59

AK: Well I came back to just you know—change of pace and get closer to my family. They're all still here. And you know I had heard for years about what's happening back here; you know this had always been a very cool food town. My grandmother was always very-immersed in that taking us out to all the new restaurants which you know at the time was S.N.O.B. you know that was like *the*—the restaurant in town. And so now you know I had heard all these cool things about what's happening here and wanted to check it out, so—. You know it was a very easy transition for me with all the support system I have here.

00:04:25

KM: Okay; how would you describe—so say you're out in California talking to someone who has never been to Charleston—explain to them, what is the food of Charleston?

00:04:37

AK: You know it's—

00:04:39

KM: And they're going to cut me out of this so if you will sort of introduce it and say you know—the food of Charleston or the food of the Lowcountry—.

00:04:48

AK: Okay; you know the food of the Lowcountry is—it's very—it's hyper-seasonal in a sense, unlike a place like California on the West Coast where everything is always in season. You can get everything. It's always delicious. It's always perfect. You know here in Charleston we have to work with these various volatile seasons and so we have to kind of—we have to be able to preserve food in a sense to—to make all these delicious things.

00:05:12

One of the most interesting things I saw coming back to the South and working in restaurants here with Mike Lata is just seeing how they you know and all the chefs here use all the ingredients and try to just maximize the potential for the coming seasons so they have you know—and that's building a larder with pickles with you know as a—as a baseline but with so many other things as well, so—.

00:05:33

KM: Okay; so when you came back you came back into Mike Lata's—?

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AK: Right; yeah.

00:05:40

KM: Kitchen?

00:05:40

AK: I helped up in The Ordinary, sous chef there.

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KM: Okay; tell us a little bit about that.

00:05:45

AK: Beautiful restaurant, insanely awesome food; like I said like a very hyper-seasonal restaurant, we're using you know the best of the best from all the farms around the State working with all the farmers you know Celeste Albers and you know Mark Marhefka for fish and you know Ambrose Farms for—for vegetables and things like that and just getting the best of the best every—every week. It's insane; it was really cool to see how it happens here.

00:06:12

You know as opposed to my experience out in the West Coast you know we would go to the Farmers' Market every week, huge giant Farmers' Market. You can pre-order with the farmers and you go and you pick out exactly what you want. Here it doesn't work that way. You

have to contact every farmer. You have to have a personal relationship like a very you know founded one to get the product you want and it's—that's such a cool experience. And that I believe is part of the cuisine of the Lowcountry as well because you know all these farmers are that much more just kind of identified with their product in what you know they're giving to restaurants.

00:06:45

KM: Uh-hm; okay. There seems to me to be sort of this burgeoning and I don't know greater attention and awareness around the food culture of Charleston in the last I don't know five or ten years. Can you talk a little bit about that scene coming back and dipping in this space?

00:07:07

AK: You know it's—that's an interesting question. I don't really know if I know how to answer that properly. I mean I definitely eat out a good bit around town and I certainly you know, know a lot of chefs around town. I think that you know there's—it's kind of a change in the guard right now as far as what's happening here. You know there's a lot of old restaurants that are you know doing what they do very well still but that's what they do. You know they're—they're not really conforming very much.

00:07:34

You know you have these southern staples that are great for what they are, you know. And then there's kind of new wave of restaurants that are opening up. They're you know using new techniques, new ingredients, things that are becoming available here that you could not get before and so there's kind of this—this new craft kind of developing in food.

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And that's you know it has to do a lot with—with—with vegetables in a sense, too. I mean I think that kind of—what Leon says very well is we kind of take a lighter approach to—to all the fare that we do. Yes; we serve fried chicken but we also serve all these great light sides and salads that are very clean and very fresh, very bright. That's kind of just the—the path that I see happening.

00:08:16

KM: That's why Leon's is like my dream restaurant, like I need for you guys to open a Leon's in Durham. It's like that's the menu that I love.

00:08:26

AK: It's—you know it's funny; that's the food that I love to eat. That's why it's on there you know. I mean that's—I created the Leon's menu to be if I were cooking for myself at home basically.

00:08:35

KM: Yeah; yeah. You do great things with vegetables. Can you talk a little bit more about in a place like Charleston that's so steep in tradition, how you pay homage to that tradition and yet try new things and—and be creative in the kitchen?

00:08:57

AK: I think as—as far as paying homage, like you know I think that you know it was—people thought it was a very ballsy concept to try and open up a fried chicken place with a place that

already has all these fried chicken restaurants. And I think the most important thing was to you know to—for everyone to understand that we're not competing with anybody, like we—I love Martha Lou's. I love Bertha's. I love all these places that do fried chicken. We're going to do it a different style of chicken. We're going to introduce something that isn't here. So you know I kind of took a cue from my trips to Nashville and other parts of the South and just you know what I saw as far as you know how other fried chicken was served. And that's what the influence is for my fried chicken.

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You know I kind of took a very scientific approach to—to making it, as far as you know just the—the step-by-step process. You know it takes a day and a half from start to finish to serve our fried chicken in the restaurant. So you know between brining it and flouring it and letting it form overnight and all these other things, you know we're doing something that other restaurants aren't.

00:10:01

KM: Okay; so on that note, introduce someone who has never been here—introduce us to—paint a portrait of Leon's and then introduce us specifically to your fried chicken.

00:10:11

AK: I'm not sure if I necessarily—paint a portrait as far as what we do at Leon's?

00:10:15

KM: Yeah; like if you're talking with somebody from Michigan, tell them, what is Leon's—

00:10:19

AK: Gotcha.

00:10:19

KM: —and then tell them what is—why fried chicken and what is your fried chicken.

00:10:23

AK: Gotcha. So Leon's is a—it's a fast casual restaurant. You know we are trying to—to really just make a very comfortable atmosphere with some awesome food. You know we—we take beautiful vegetables and fish and we just cook it very simply, very approachable, very easy-eating stuff.

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You know we love to—to do grill—a lot of grilled vegetables and kind of keep the lighter side of things in mind. So you know with that we only serve chicken and fish. We don't do any pork. We don't do any beef. So we—you know we're doing grilled fish, we're doing fried shrimp, we're doing fried chicken as kind of our staple. We do oysters and chicken as our bookends of our menu and then in the middle we try and just create this lighter fare with fish and vegetables.

00:11:10

KM: Okay; and then—and then speak to your fried chicken. That seems to be sort of where y'all hang your hat in some respects.

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AK: Yeah; you know our fried chicken is—is very simple. We just—we just take the product and—and just elevate it. So you know we—we found out a great brine recipe that we—we use and it just—it's very—it's four ingredients. It's very simple and it's not—it's not bogged down with a bunch of spices and all this other stuff. It's just sugar, salt, and hot sauce; that's it. And then our flour mixer is just flour and Old Bay; that's a primary flavor in our fried chicken. I love Old Bay. I love it in anything I can put it on. So you know that goes into the flour and also on the chicken when we're done, so—. You know we—we do almost a Nashville hot style but it's not as hot as—as Nashville has it, so—.

00:11:56

KM: And so why fried chicken? Like who cares about fried chicken; why is fried chicken something that you gravitated to?

00:12:01

AK: You know honestly fried chicken is something that I absolutely love to eat. You know I—I—it wasn't my idea to put fried chicken on the menu to be honest but that was kind of the—the general consensus was to have this—this really cool restaurant where it's you know you're eating with your hands and it's communal you know between oysters and chicken—are the things that you both—everyone has to kind of share and eat with their hands. And that was kind of the point of the restaurant was to create this communal convivial atmosphere that had you know simple delicious food and delicious drinks.

00:12:37

KM: I think that's really translated into the space. I don't know who—who designed your space but—

00:12:41

AK: The space was curated by Tim Mink and Brooks Reitz, the owners.

00:12:45

KM: Okay.

00:12:45

AK: So they—you know they scoured New Orleans and Chicago and the Northeast for all these you know cool pieces that just kind of blended into what Leon's is.

00:12:56

KM: Okay; where else do you draw your greatest inspiration from in the kitchen? Is it like from something growing up or from a certain chef or—?

00:13:03

AK: You know most of my inspiration comes from—from just a love of eating healthy food you know and following what other chefs are doing in the country, following just you know just the patterns that I saw in Los Angeles when I was living out there. You know I certainly used a lot of Asian inspired products and you know used a lot of Asian flavors out there. It was very easy to get all that stuff and then that's just kind of the food that I like to eat. So I try and bring those flavors into Leon's as—as smoothly as possible.

00:13:39

KM: Okay; and the full name of Leon's is Leon's Oyster—

00:13:44

AK: Fine Poultry and Oyster Shop.

00:13:46

KM: —Fine Poultry and Oyster Shop. Do you want to speak at all to like the culture of oyster houses around here or oysters in general?

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AK: You know there's—I guess the really only big oyster house, I mean Bowens Island has like the oyster roasts and stuff like that and I've actually never been out there. So I don't know if I can really talk about that.

00:14:03

KM: You got to go out there.

00:14:04

AK: Yeah; I know it's true.

00:14:06

KM: Sara what other questions do you have?

00:14:09

KM: Well if you don't mind could we go back to—and when you answer this like look at Kate—I'm kind of just in the drapes here. Could you talk about—you talked about your mother and your grandmother's cooking and you also talked a lot about vegetables a little bit. I'm wondering can you talk about some specific food memories you have growing up like specific dishes that either one of them prepared that you still kind of like when you think of it or maybe when you were out in LA that kind of felt—you felt a sense of home just thinking about?

00:14:37

AK: Sure; yeah absolutely. Do you just want me to start off by going—just dive into that or—?

00:14:43

KM: Yeah.

00:14:44

AK: Yeah; I mean I think that being out in Los Angeles my grandmother especially she would actually send me care packages of pecan pie and you know like she'd prepackage like squash casseroles and things like that and just send out big care packages. And it was you know for a couple—for a couple years until—until the postal prices went a little bit higher and through the roof. But you know just opening up those packages and getting a pecan pie was just like the best thing in the world. I'd always try and you know as a young cook try and make it and it would never turn out the same, but I finally got it down.

00:15:18

KM: That's amazing. Who is your grandmother?

00:15:21

AK: She—Cheryl Lynn Rosenbloom, yeah.

00:15:23

KM: Okay; are there any other—like did you learn to cook originally from your—from who, like anybody in your family?

00:15:32

AK: Yeah; I mean I kind of basically called my mom when I was [*Laughs*]—when I had my first year of college and just asked her hey, how do you cook chicken again? I don't—you know chicken kind of freaks you out if you don't really know what you're doing. So and my brother did the same thing, too; he still does the same thing to me now you know. He calls me for all the—for all the recipes. [*Laughs*]

00:15:52

KM: And is there anything from like the kitchen of your youth that you still draw on today that you learned from your mom or grandma?

00:16:02

AK: I can't say that there really is.

00:16:04

KM: Okay; would you say that there—or what would you say is the—the defining characteristic of Lowcountry food?

00:16:15

AK: Hmm; I think the defining characteristic would just be a sense of—how do I say this?

00:16:27

KM: Like a lot of people have never heard of the Lowcountry and their food traditions, so I'm trying to sort of get at not what is it in a grandiose sense but just sort of like what's a slice of it that you think—?

00:16:40

AK: Like when I think of Lowcountry—Lowcountry table?

00:16:43

KM: Yeah; like what's unique about it. Yeah; describe—what is a Lowcountry table?

00:16:46

AK: I mean when I think of a Lowcountry table I think of shrimp and grits. I think of you know taking things like cornmeal and you know collard greens which we have year-round and so you get all these—these stewed dishes of you know beans or collard greens or cornbread and things like that—those are all the sides. You know you get red beans and rice; that kind of stuff is—is very traditional here.

00:17:08

And then you know it's very just simply a—a kind of a feast of the waters, you know. Like I said, shrimp and grits before but you know just kind of easily steamed or—or grilled fish with you know just on top of like I said rice or beans. That's what I think of when I think of Lowcountry cuisine.

00:17:27

KM: You guys are big on your rice.

00:17:28

AK: Yeah; that's true. Rice is a big deal. It's actually funny you bring rice up. So you know one thing that I learned here was Anson Mills and when I went to the West Coast like I didn't realize how big of a deal it was and you know I saw my buddies in other restaurants using Anson Mills and I was like wow. You know I didn't realize how far of a reach they were kind of getting and now they're—they're even on a whole other scale.

00:17:50

KM: Sure; they really are.

00:17:51

AK: Yeah.

00:17:52

KM: Is your job any fun, like I don't know—

00:17:56

AK: No; it's terrible.

00:17:56

KM: Is it terrible? I mean it seems terrible.

00:17:58

AK: No; it's—my job is great. It's—it's a pretty awesome thing to be able to go in and—and just create these—these fun little dishes and you know have—I have a staff that's interested in frying chicken all day. Like that's—I couldn't ask for anything more than that.

00:18:16

KM: Really; yeah. What is—what does one look like after they spend all day frying chicken like—?

00:18:22

AK: Kind of like this, a little sweaty and certainly smelling like fryer and it's nothing—.

[Laughs]

00:18:27

KM: Do you have like a fried chicken closet?

00:18:29

AK: Nothing fashionable.

00:18:29

KM: Of your fried chicken clothes and then—?

00:18:31

AK: Oh it's—it goes straight into the garage before I go into the house for sure. [*Laughs*]

00:18:37

KM: What else you got Sara?

00:18:37

KM: Well I wanted to ask you just about you know you were—you're at The Ordinary. And then you went over to Leon's?

00:18:46

AK: Uh-hm.

00:18:47

KM: Can you talk about how you changed as a chef from going from The Ordinary to Leon's like or any changes you noticed in yourself or—or just what the difference—like the difference? Have you noticed any differences in how you work or how you think just doing this—these things?

00:19:05

KM: You're the boss. I mean you're—you're sort of in charge of the kitchen.

00:19:08

AK: Right.

00:19:08

KM: How does that change your approach and your—?

00:19:11

AK: You know it's something that I heard a long time ago from my mentor and you know in LA and that was that you know in opening up a restaurant the food is the easy part. And it's—it's very true. You know getting the recipes down and—and making the food was the easiest part of this. It's creating this culture that you have for your kitchen and keeping good staff and you know keeping people you know involved and motivated and you know enjoying what they do you know. It's—it's more important to me than—than you know me enjoying what I do because they are the baseline for—for you know—for the whole restaurant, so—.

00:19:49

You know I think that moving into Leon's from The Ordinary that was kind of the biggest focus. I mean I knew that—that was going to be a challenge and that's you know still a daily task, so—.

00:20:01

KM: Sure; all right. You want to talk about your cat?

00:20:05

AK: The cat is an asshole. I do not want to talk about my cat. *[Laughs]*

00:20:09

KM: All right; are we good?

00:20:11

Sara Wood: Yeah; I actually have one more question, because you mentioned—I keep going back to your mother and grandmother and their cooking, but I'm wondering in terms of like—like if there is something particular that you remember growing up, if there is something—we're talking all about Lowcountry traditions and cooking—if there's something like specific to like Jewish cooking traditions in Charleston that most people wouldn't know about?

00:20:35

AK: Um—

00:20:35

SW: If there's something like that's different about it in Charleston or if there's—?

00:20:38

AK: Yeah; no, not really.

00:20:41

SW: Okay; I was just curious because of the—.

00:20:46

KM: No matzoh ball gumbo?

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AK: No matzoh ball gumbo; that sounds delicious though. I might have to try that.

00:20:51

KM: Right; a friend of ours has a book called *Matzoh Ball Gumbo* that explores Southern Jewish cooking.

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AK: That's awesome.

00:20:56

KM: Is there anything that you want to add that we didn't ask you that you think is important?

00:21:02

AK: Um, no; I don't think so.

00:21:06

KM: Okay; good job. You're a star.

00:21:09

AK: Definitely the hot seat for sure.

00:21:11

KM: Definitely the hot seat.

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KM: I'm going to turn the lights—

00:21:15

KM: We'll dim the lights on you.

00:21:18

[End Ari Kolender Interview]