



Poppy Tooker

New Orleans, Louisiana

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Location: Poppy Tooker's Studio, Southern Food and Beverage Museum, New Orleans, LA

Interviewer: Rien Fertel

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: 1 hour, 17 minutes

Project: Women Cookbook Writers

[Begin Poppy Tooker Interview]

00:00:01

Poppy Tooker: I'm just curious because I've never asked anybody to give me their birth date before in an interview, and I've never actually been asked. Usually I am—

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Rien Fertel: Because it's more of like an academic thing, like this is going in—

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Poppy Tooker: Okay.

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Rien Fertel: All right, this is Rien—

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Poppy Tooker: Whatever you say.

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Rien Fertel: This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm in New Orleans at the Southern Food and Beverage Museum with Poppy Tooker. I'm going to have her introduce herself, please.

00:00:30

Poppy Tooker: I'm Poppy Tooker. I'm Poppy Tooker. I'm the Host of *Louisiana Eats!* I write cookbooks. I talk about food. I teach cooking. My birth date is September 10, 1957. I'm a very old woman.

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Rien Fertel: Thank you. No, no. [*Laughs*] Okay, it's Holy Thursday today, right?

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Poppy Tooker: Yeah.

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Rien Fertel: In the very Catholic city of New Orleans. What do you do for Easter? Do you do anything, and this is a lead into your history because I do think you've come from a Catholic family. I've heard those stories. You've told me those stories. You went to Catholic School but what are your plans for Easter? Do you have Easter plans? Do you do Easter things?

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Poppy Tooker: Uh-uh.

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Rien Fertel: Okay, well, growing up was Easter an important holiday in New Orleans?

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Poppy Tooker: Oh well, growing up, Easter—I'm going to open the door because I can't stand watching you sweat.

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Rien Fertel: I'm sorry. *[Laughs]*

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Poppy Tooker: All right, and if it gets too loud out here we can close it a little bit. But it's really warm in a small place and so I'm sorry, Rien.

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Rien Fertel: That's okay.

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Poppy Tooker: You'll thank me for that little bit of air. And if it gets too noisy just tell me.

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Rien Fertel: Oh no; it's fine.

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Poppy Tooker: My great Easter memories pretty much center around the time when my great-grandmother was alive. Some of her family had this fabulous Easter party we used to go to, so I have a clear memory of baby chicks of various colors and baby bunnies, all of those horrible, inhumane things that we don't see any more today, but it's still a happy memory for the old lady.

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Rien Fertel: What was her name, your great-grandmother?

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Poppy Tooker: My great-grandmother's name was Ethel Lorette Moran and I called her Mamman. I think it was like—she always spelled it like the French word for Mama, or mother, M-a-m-m-a-n is how she spelled it, and we pronounced it *Mam-man*.

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Rien Fertel: Was she born in New Orleans?

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Poppy Tooker: No, she came from the little town of Chauvin.

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Rien Fertel: Okay, so you have roots in—tell us just where Chauvin is and—.

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Poppy Tooker: Well Chauvin is down the bayou, but I don't really know too much about it because Mamman was the only child of some very Catholic—so that was very unusual being the only child—sugarcane folks. And my great-great-grandfather, as I understood it, was one of the first to bottle soft drinks in South Louisiana. But to make a long story short, she was a very, very

young woman when her husband, my great-grandfather, who was Arthur Jay Moran, went to visit his friend, her father, and she was playing the piano.

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And the way I was always told the story: he had to have her. And he quickly divorced his wife and left his family, which is pretty crazy and scandalous considering we're talking 19-teens, and married my great-grandmother. And she put on her little white kid gloves and got behind the wheel of a great big Cadillac and drove up to the big city and I never heard another word about down the bayou again except it now makes sense that that's where the sack of sugar always came from, the great big sack of sugar that she had in her kitchen.

00:04:03

Rien Fertel: [*Laughs*] Was this your mother or your father's side?

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Poppy Tooker: It's my father's mother.

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Rien Fertel: Your father's mother.

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Poppy Tooker: I'm sorry; this is my father's grandmother.

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Rien Fertel: Your father's grandmother, okay. That side of the family, did they identify as Cajun or Creole?

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Poppy Tooker: Oh no, no, no, no, no, no; they were strictly New Orleanians.

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Rien Fertel: New Orleanian?

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Poppy Tooker: Yeah, like, I never heard anybody put the word Creole and certainly not Cajun on anything.

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Rien Fertel: Where did they live?

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Poppy Tooker: On Versailles Boulevard. Later she lived on the Jay Streets. That's the Morans.

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Rien Fertel: And so that was kind of the family gathering place as you remember it?

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Poppy Tooker: Yeah, yeah, until I was ten. That's my big childhood flashback. But I don't have really much Easter for you.

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Rien Fertel: Okay, well, can we talk about your parents? Tell me about your father; what was his name and what did he do?

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Poppy Tooker: Dad is still alive. He's eighty this year and his name is Tom Tooker. And he was a sales executive his whole life. He contracted Catholic mausoleums for the better part of his life for Stewart Enterprises all across the United States.

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Rien Fertel: And your mother?

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Poppy Tooker: Why do we have to do this?

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Rien Fertel: Well, we don't have to talk about family.

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Poppy Tooker: I don't really want to talk about my family.

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Rien Fertel: Okay we don't have to. Can we talk about—?

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Poppy Tooker: I like to pretend they don't exist.

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Rien Fertel: Okay that's fine. [*Laughs*] I feel the same way.

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Poppy Tooker: My daddy and I are very, very close. I haven't laid eyes on my mother in thirty years.

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Rien Fertel: Okay, can you tell me where Poppy comes from? Was it your birth name?

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Poppy Tooker: Oh, well, I'll be happy to tell you that story.

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Rien Fertel: Okay, I'd love to hear that.

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Poppy Tooker: I was christened Patricia Ann after my mother, and they intended to call me Patsy. And almost from the very beginning—well, I began speaking, as I was told, before I was a year old. I was very verbal. And they would sit me down and they would say, “Patsy.” And I'd shake my head no and I'd tell them, “Poppy.” And they'd say “Patsy.” And there was a lot of that going on because I can even remember sitting on the side of my grandfather's bed with him

telling me, “Grandpa.” And me saying to him, “Pawsy.” And so I had my own names for everybody and everything.

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And the way my grandmother always told me the story, one Friday I arrived to spend the weekend with her. By now I’m about two. And I walk in and I said, “Now it’s *Miss Poppy*.” And she called my mother immediately and said, “Pat, for Christ’s sake, can we call this child Poppy and get this over with?” And that was the end of that. I was never called anything but Poppy again, and then by the time I was eighteen I legally changed my name because I was getting checks and such issued to Poppy Tooker and they were a little difficult to negotiate when your legal name is Patricia Ann.

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Rien Fertel: Who was the cook in the family or the cooks in the family? Would your grandmothers, your great-grandmothers—

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Poppy Tooker: My great-grandmothers were the cooks in the family—period. That was sort of where the cooking ended. My mother equated cooking with like the very worst of housework and so we always had a housekeeper for that. And when I was ten my cooking great-grandmothers died. We moved to a much bigger house that was too much for the housekeeper, who had always fed us, I mean everything, she went home and stayed home, and Mama tried to cook for about a year. And it was so dreadful and so horrible, that shortly thereafter—well, I know, by the time I was in seventh grade—I was cooking every single thing that we pretty much ate in the house.

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I went to the grocery and bought groceries and cooked what—at least I had like a complete free rein, and they were happy to acquire cookbooks and I lived for the Thursday *Times Picayune* Food Section with Myriam Guidroz, because I was always learning things out of there. This is the Julia Child period of time, and so that was how I began cooking really out of necessity. But because my, in particular, my Moran great-grandmother had taught me for those first ten years of my life about how you can love people with food, that was my big identifier with food.

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And so that's always what I've been after.

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Rien Fertel: Even at such a young age?

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Poppy Tooker: Oh, yeah.

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Rien Fertel: It was about—

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Poppy Tooker: Always it was about food. It was always about food. Now I also had the same love for theater as I had for food. So despite the fact that, for instance, I had a little catering business throughout high school, I ended up in college at the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles, where I was in the theater program.

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And I had a work study job, and my work study job was running the dorm café, which was called Mom's Café. And Cal Arts is not a normal college in any way. So that was—

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Rien Fertel: What do you mean by that? Was it a—

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Poppy Tooker: It's a—

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Rien Fertel: —liberal, left wing, hippie college?

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Poppy Tooker: It's a very liberal—it's the Walt Disney School in Los Angeles. It's up in the hills of Valencia.

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Rien Fertel: So theater kids.

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Poppy Tooker: There were only sixty kids in the upper and lower schools of the theater department. I mean that's how small it was. And so we're talking—this is the late [19]70s. This is very alternative. And so it was legal to drink when we were eighteen back then. And so one of the first things I did as part of running Mom's Café I instituted the Champagne Sunday Brunch

around the swimming pool, because the Mom's Café was downstairs in part of the dorm that was u-shaped, built around this Olympic swimming pool, where all the action happened at school.

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Rien Fertel: At Mom's, were you cooking identifiably Louisiana dishes?

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Poppy Tooker: Oh, I definitely was. And I have clear memories of big California blonde surfer boys coming through the line, because even though it was a café you still had to go get your own food, and have them looking at things like turnip greens or red beans and rice. And they would say, "If anybody but you had cooked this Poppy I wouldn't eat it." But they would eat it and come back for more.

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Rien Fertel: Did you want to be a stage actress, film—?

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Poppy Tooker: Yeah, I thought I was going to be somehow in theater, and then it was during that time at Cal Arts that I discovered I really got the same thrill from cooking as I got from theater. And I recognized, thank goodness, at that very early age that food was going to be a lot more of a happy and secure life for me. You can do it by yourself. You're pretty guaranteed to make people happy with it. And hmm, that theater thing that's a very tough row to hoe.

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Rien Fertel: Yeah, you mentioned the catering business; how did that work?

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Poppy Tooker: Well, I'm cooking all the food at home. My mother loved to entertain. And so pretty soon her friends figured out who was cooking all that food. And that was when they began to contact me to say, "Well, could you do this for me?" And so before you knew it, I was catering parties, cooking things, bringing them to people who were friends of my mother—it was completely accidental and none of it was by design.

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Rien Fertel: Was it gumbo, was it—?

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Poppy Tooker: Oh no; it was fancy party food.

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Rien Fertel: Fancy party food from the era?

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Poppy Tooker: Yes, fancy party food of the [19]70s. And I can't tell you that I catered these things but my mother is kind of insanely perverse and crazy, and I think you can sum up the whole concept of my mother's 1970s entertaining ideas—this is before Martha Stewart—. I'll never forget one of the things that she really loved to do, or have me do because she didn't love to do any of it, she would make what she called rosebud bushes. We would take an eggplant and

hair pins and cover the eggplant entirely with real rose leaves from a rosebush. And then we would take big green olives and fingernail scissors and we would clip the edges of the pitted green olives so they were in little points and then we would take delicately pink colored, flavored maybe with a little Tabasco and garlic powder-flavored cream cheese, and we would fill those olives with the cream cheese. And it was such a ridiculous ordeal that it was always a piece of paper towel because you would have to wipe to make sure it was all clean and not smudged, and then you would put it on a toothpick. And it would later be served by being put all over this eggplant covered with the rose leaves, with the hair pins, with these just amazing little stuffed green olives poking out all over.

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And because my mother believed that nothing could be eaten unless it came out of the freezer first, I clearly remember doing hundreds of those absurd things and having them frozen on a cookie sheet and put in a Ziploc bag to be used later at these very elegant parties. I'm sure you're impressed.

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Rien Fertel: Well it sounds beautiful. Was that—

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Poppy Tooker: Oh, it's beautiful.

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Rien Fertel: Was it edible?

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Poppy Tooker: Yeah, it was green olives stuffed with slightly flavored cream cheese, but, yuck, I don't want to eat that, do you?

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Rien Fertel: No. *[Laughs]*

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Poppy Tooker: No. Okay, thank you. Everybody is going to want this recipe. You should include it on the website. *[Laughs]*

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Rien Fertel: I might find a space.

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Poppy Tooker: When I write the memoir it could be on the cover. *[Laughs]*

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Rien Fertel: I think you should. All right one more question about before you left to L.A. What restaurant would you go to as a family for celebrations, for birthdays, for holidays? What was like the restaurant back then growing up?

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Poppy Tooker: I have to tell you that because so much of my childhood dining memories revolve around my great-grandmother's table, and my parents were sort of the children should be

seen and not heard and most definitely not taken out to dinner. The Southern Yacht Club; loved, loved the shrimp regatta at the Southern Yacht Club. And places like—my earliest, earliest childhood food memories I can remember sitting in a high chair at the Maple Inn rolling green peas around on the tray of the high chair. I remember that. So that's my very elegant dining out memories.

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But dining in was pretty elegant particularly at my great-grandmother's house.

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Rien Fertel: And would either you or your great-grandmother or your grandmother would they make gumbo? Was gumbo on the table?

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Poppy Tooker: I'm really not sure. I don't remember gumbo. The dishes of Mamman's that I really remember tend to be the things that my daddy loved the most, and I ended up recreating from his memory. So things like, oh my goodness, peas in a roux, she made the most delicious green peas in a roux. At holiday time her dressings—we didn't have oyster dressing like other people do. We had meat dressing, which is basically like ground beef that is very similar to stuffed bell peppers. Now, in fact, I use that meat dressing recipe to make my stuffed bell peppers. But the other thing that I always thought was very interesting about her food that I remember regularly having—besides her chicken stew and dumplings. Chicken stew and dumplings is so nasty everywhere else in the world where it's like *white*. It's—

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Rien Fertel: Pasty.

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Poppy Tooker: Yeah, pallid, white, pasty, nasty. Mamman's chicken stew and dumplings, and the one that I make today, starts off with a dark, dark roux and then the chicken cooks in that dark, dark roux, and then the dumplings are like snow white pillows that pop up in it, not like that whatever that other yucky stuff is that people cook. But instead of the oyster dressing, because everybody thinks of oyster dressing as oyster French bread dressing, Mamman made her oyster dressing with rice. It was really similar to an oyster jambalaya in essence but that was never what it was called. And she just called it rice dressing. And I always found that interesting because I thought that's very indicative of where she came from, that they would have made a dressing with rice instead of bread.

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Rien Fertel: So you're in L.A., you're in Los Angeles, at school. You are thinking of cooking rather than going into acting. What happens from there? Do you continue that track.

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Poppy Tooker: I ran away, um-hmm. I didn't run away from school but I just did a little bit more running and I went to Santa Cruz, California. And I lived in Santa Cruz, California for a couple of years and that's where I first started working in restaurants. And I worked at a place called The Old Theater Café where I learned how to cook German food from the owner's mother who would come from Germany who spoke no English. But the language of food is

international. And started making soups and things like that and learned how to be a line cook, learned how to be a breakfast cook, did all that stuff.

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Rien Fertel: Did you like it?

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Poppy Tooker: Oh, I always loved working in restaurants from the first day.

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Rien Fertel: Why? Was there something about the community? I always think of restaurant kitchens as a close-knit family.

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Poppy Tooker: It was the food.

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Rien Fertel: It was all about food?

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Poppy Tooker: I was just so fascinated to just be up in there with all that food. And I enjoyed the pace and the action.

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Rien Fertel: Okay, so where did you go from there?

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Poppy Tooker: Brief and unfortunate first marriage, lived in New Haven, worked in restaurants, ran a place called Annie's Firehouse Café with the manager there. Then after the brief and unfortunate first marriage I came back to New Orleans and started working in restaurants here. And I worked at Flamingos Café. That was the place I kept going back to. I'd go get a serious restaurant job and then I'd end up back at Flamingos because it was just so much fun.

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Rien Fertel: What was Flamingos?

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Poppy Tooker: Oh, oh, Rien, it was the most special place on St. Charles Avenue, it's where that nasty bar Lucky's is today, but it was at its time, it was the first openly gay business on the uptown side of Canal Street. So we're talking like way before AIDS, way before all that, and it was absolutely—it was titillating. They served things like quiches and salads and crepes. I was for much of the time the only straight woman who worked there. I worked in the kitchen with a drag queen named Mina who would throw open the kitchen doors and at the top of her lungs sing, "*Oh, my man, I love you so.*" [*Laughs*] I loved Mina. Sadly she passed away of a heart attack. She's not around. And nobody is around from those days: Paul Doll and Tom Struve. But I would periodically get these notions that I would be serious about food, and one of my most serious treks into food was getting a job working for Chris Ansel, who was one of the Galatoire's who had opened up Christian's with one of the Galatoire's chefs. And I really wanted to work at

Christian's, and Mr. Ansel did not think it was going to be nice for a white woman to work in the kitchen.

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I mean we're talking about the time when Susan Spicer working in the kitchen was kind of shocking to people, because there just weren't women chefs. They just weren't. And Mr. Ansel told me, "Oh no, you're not going to work in the kitchen. I'm going to give you a job in the front of the house. It'll be much nicer. And you'll really make a lot more money." He was friends with Daddy from the yacht club, and so he was very you know concerned about his friend's daughter doing something nice at his restaurant. And I said, "I really just want to work in the kitchen." Because I knew that was going to be as close to learning the Galatoire's recipes as I was going to ever—I was never going to get a job at Galatoire's. And so Mr. Ansel finally, under great protest, put me to work and I worked for them for a while.

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Rien Fertel: What year was this or what years?

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Poppy Tooker: I want to say maybe [19]78, [19]79.

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Rien Fertel: Okay, and what year did you move back to New Orleans?

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Poppy Tooker: It was around that time.

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Rien Fertel: Okay.

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Poppy Tooker: It was around that time. I was in—it was [19]75, [19]76, [19]77, [19]78, [19]79—yeah, [19]79, 1980.

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Rien Fertel: Okay, so I'm guessing, or at least I hope that you were right that you thrived in that kitchen. How'd that kitchen go?

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Poppy Tooker: Well, I really, really, really thrived in the kitchen with the drag queen, okay. That was like my spot. I was not very comfortable working in that situation because restaurant kitchens were such an incredibly racist environment. It was extremely difficult for me.

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Rien Fertel: And misogynistic, I'm guessing.

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Poppy Tooker: Yeah, I didn't feel that. I really felt the racism, because I was white. Although I had zero qualifications, I was the sous chef. I was put in line in a spot that was way over my ability. I was really there to learn. And it became my job to manage the pantry ladies, and the

pantry ladies were ladies who had been with him for years and years and years. And they were teaching me what they knew, and yet I was supposed to be their supervisor. So that was a very uncomfortable position. And the one thing that I can tell you that I—so I basically learned those recipes and got out, because I was really not comfortable with that. But I did do one really nice thing for the ladies on my way out the door. And that was they used to come to work and the very first thing they had to do was make huge vats of mayonnaise by hand that went into all the various dressings and sauces. And I talked Mr. Ansel into buying Robot Coupe so they didn't start off every day exhausted from all the whisking.

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Rien Fertel: So was there another restaurant kitchen after that?

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Poppy Tooker: Oh, Rien, let me see. No, it was right around that time that I started being a teaching assistant at Lee Barnes Cooking School. And very shortly after that Lee hooked me up with a job as a product demonstrator—I was working for Robot Coupe interestingly enough. It was when they separated from Cuisinart, and the original food processor tried to have it stay in the home kitchen. And so I worked for them doing product demonstrations in a department store and sold more Robot Coupes than anybody had ever done, during a promotional period in August before, and that caught these people's attention. And so I very quickly became a housewares rep.

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And people didn't really know; it was very interesting. It was almost like my side gig even though it was my primary gig. It was the perfect time because it was when there were gourmet shops springing up on every corner everywhere. And—

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Rien Fertel: So not just Maison Blanche, or whoever—

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Poppy Tooker: Oh, this was when the gourmet shop craze happened. And, I mean, in every small town across America there was a gourmet shop, most of them with a cooking school. And so what I began doing around that time—and I always sold really lovely things. I mean, I never could have been a shoe salesman. I couldn't have ever been a crypt salesman like my father. I only sold very fine, high-end kitchen housewares, gourmet housewares and tabletop. I mean I was the Calphalon cookware rep. I was the Baccarat Crystal rep. I spent a great deal of my time telling people, “Oh really, you've got that \$30,000 to open the account? How's your Waterford business? Oh you don't have Waterford? I couldn't possibly sell to you.”

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And it's like really a great sales job where most of the time you say no.

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Rien Fertel: Were you traveling too or was it just local?

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Poppy Tooker: And so, yeah; no, no, no, no, no, this was a big travel—I worked for showrooms out of Dallas and Atlanta. I traveled three states. And I did that for over twenty-five years. But I would plan my traveling—I worked completely for myself, by myself. I was an independent contractor—this always fits my lifestyle really well. And so I would plan my traveling so that we would be scheduling cooking classes in the towns that I was going to be traveling to. And so I was like the perfect gourmet housewares rep because I would sell the things that I was selling during the day, and then I would sell them through at retail that night in the cooking class using them in my classes.

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And the shop owners were my friends. Nine times out of ten I'd stay at their house. So it was not like your typical road job at all, plus I was the only sales rep I knew who was coming home with cash in hand instead of bills from being on the road.

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Rien Fertel: Right. And it was genius. You're hitting them up twice.

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Poppy Tooker: Yeah.

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Rien Fertel: You're selling them on the instrument and then telling them how to use it, or teaching them how to use—

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Poppy Tooker: And doing them the greatest favor of selling it at retail. I mean it's one thing to have them buy it at wholesale but to them help sell it through that was the best part for my customers that I was able to accomplish.

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Rien Fertel: Okay, and were you doing cooking classes here?

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Poppy Tooker: I was teaching with Lee Barnes, and I was the very first sales rep, and then one of the very first teachers at the Everyday Gourmet in Jackson, Mississippi, Carol Daily's place. I mean I could just name off places that—the Walk and the Whisk in Baton Rouge, and I would drive to Baton Rouge and teach classes regularly. I would drive to Jackson and teach classes regularly. I would drive to Monroe and teach classes at the Muffin Tin owned by a couple of ladies that I would sometimes refer to as the Muffin Twins. They were twin sisters, identical twins.

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Rien Fertel: When did these stores start to close or be consumed by whatever came next?

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Poppy Tooker: Well, that all went away—it really started to go away in the mid-[19]90s. The department stores, the buying off, consolidated, and that sort of thing, and so luckily by that time I really had my cooking school gig going and I was really—

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Rien Fertel: At Lee Barnes?

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Poppy Tooker: Yeah; no, no, no, no, Lee closed her shop and and, no, just anywhere. Lee closed her shop and handed her customer list over to me and I renovated a house and I was teaching out of my house for a very brief while but I found I didn't like that to have everything so perfect for strangers. And I did a huge convention business for many, many, many years. I've done cooking demos complete with a gumbo tasting for 500 people at the Convention Center before. I used to do classes for 100 people at a time in the Grand Ballroom, the Count's Ballroom at Arnaud's. There were places that I just hooked up with that when people were coming to town. So that was a very good business I did for a long time.

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Rien Fertel: And you were freelance? People just knew your name and number, knew to call you if they needed a demo?

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Poppy Tooker: All the convention planners knew me from Lee.

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Rien Fertel: Okay. I think the name Lee Barnes has kind of disappeared, can you just give a quick kind of overview of who she was?

00:30:29

Poppy Tooker: Lee Barnes was a Natchez native who went to school at Newcomb and loved to cook, and after her college education went and studied at the Cordon Bleu in France, and came back to New Orleans and opened up a cooking school. And this was in the late [19]70s up into the early [19]80s, and she was married to a man who was in the service, and they eventually moved away and that's when she closed the shop. That must have been hmm about 1984, [19]85. Lee closed her shop, and that's when—I was really kind of the cooking teacher. There was me and the New Orleans School of Cooking and—

00:31:18

Rien Fertel: Where was Lee Barnes' school?

00:31:20

Poppy Tooker: Originally it was on Maple Street and then the last four or five years she had the business opened it was on Oak Street. She renovated a house on Oak Street and it was in there.

00:31:34

Rien Fertel: Okay. In doing research for this interview I looked on Amazon and made sure I had all your books. And I saw something for sale that I hadn't seen before and I'm guessing it dates from this period. It's a VHS cassette—

00:31:51

Poppy Tooker: [*Laughs*]

00:31:51

Rien Fertel: —there was two for sale called *Cooking Creole with Poppy*. Was that a television show or was it—?

00:31:58

Poppy Tooker: Well, I was in these gourmet shops and VHS was like a brand new thing; everybody was buying a recorder. And so I decided based on the interest that I knew from people who came to New Orleans from out of town, the people were very interested in our food. And so I made that cooking video. That's so funny; I haven't thought of that in years. I made that before Paul Prudhomme had a cooking video.

00:32:29

Rien Fertel: Really?

00:32:30

Poppy Tooker: Yeah. I was on the countertop in the gourmet shops and then later joined by Paul Prudhomme and Julia Child and Jacques Pepin, and there were other ones that came out, but yeah. Isn't that something?

00:32:45

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Okay so you have a name as the person to go to for doing cooking demonstrations, for teaching people how to cook. At some point you joined Slow Food or you become aligned with Slow—?

00:33:02

Poppy Tooker: Well, by that time you know I just was like the cooking teacher. I loved it and it was so important to me that when people came to New Orleans you could get a lot of really bad food information from some of the people who were just—God bless Joe Cahn. I mean I know he did something that was very successful but he—

00:33:24

Rien Fertel: I don't know who that is.

00:33:26

Poppy Tooker: He was the guy who started the New Orleans School of Cooking and his style of teaching was—he was just kind of whackadoodle, and so he would teach people to make peanut butter and jelly bread pudding and put cayenne pepper in it to give them something to talk about. And it was just not very genuine. It was just like showmanship. And I was just really not into that. And so I was very much into—I was fascinated by our historic foodways. And so anyway,—by about—I'm trying to think what year, so this was twenty—Susan Spicer opened up Spice Incorporated and that was ten—so that was twenty years ago, twenty-one years ago, and so when Susan—Susan was far before her time when she opened up Spice, Inc. in the Warehouse District. And she didn't want to call it a cooking school; she called it a food school. And so she knew that she needed to have regular Louisiana classes. And so I became Louisiana Spice, which was really thrilling to me to be one of the Spice Girls, me and Susan Spicer and Michelle Nugent who was working for Susan at that time before she became the Queen of the Jazz Fest food scene.

00:34:48

And so it was during that period of time—Susan was just very supportive of any food, anything I was interested in. I read a newspaper article that was actually written by Sumi Hahn who I think preceded Brett Anderson in the job at [the *Times-Picayune*]—I’m certain of that as a matter of fact. She was the food critic before Brett and she went by S.M. Hahn. But her name was Sumi and she was completely anonymous, of course. And she wrote an article about Slow Food. And there wasn’t even Slow Food USA yet. So I read this article and I discovered that there was this big international organization out there who was ready to help me with my food preservation work because that’s what entranced me about Slow Food was the idea of preserving historical foodways.

00:35:47

And so I started the local chapter, which were called Convivias then. And so Susan said, “Oh, of course, Poppy, just use Spice for your meetings.” And so we got rolling at Spice and 100 people would show up.

00:36:05

Rien Fertel: Was this one of the first chapters in America?

00:36:06

Poppy Tooker: One of the first ten chapters in America.

00:36:08

Rien Fertel: So I think it was 1999—

00:36:13

Poppy Tooker: Yeah; it was 1999.

00:36:15

Rien Fertel: So did you see things disappearing in New Orleans?

00:36:18

Poppy Tooker: Oh, yeah! Well that's why I got involved with Slow Food. I gathered the people together—and what was really interesting, as soon as I put out some sort of notice about starting the chapter and inviting people to join, Sumi Hahn got in touch with me, and she said the reason I write is that I'm always hoping there's someone like you out there reading what I write. And I am so thrilled with what you've decided to do. I want you to know I'm going to promote anything you do. You just send it my way and I'm going to promote it for you.

00:36:59

So I had that in with the *Times-Picayune* right off the bat and so I started to hold these meetings, and because the Ark of Taste was the thing that really fascinated me—

00:37:12

Rien Fertel: And can you say what that is?

00:37:15

Poppy Tooker: The Ark of Taste is the virtual Noah's Ark where endangered foods that have important ties to a specific region, that are endangered and taste good—they have to taste good—get nominated and then accepted onto this virtual Noah's Ark, where they are then promoted internationally. And that was when my little great-grandmother who had been dead for so many

years, she would never tell me to clean my plate like Americans do. She would say Poppy, “Eat it to save it.” And all of the sudden, *eat it to save it* took on a whole new meaning for me.

00:37:53

And I discovered—and I think that’s why Slow Food got so popular in New Orleans because I think a lot of people besides me feel this way. And the very first food that we focused in on was Creole cream cheese. And we saved it.

00:38:10

Rien Fertel: And this was right when I moved to New Orleans and I remember vividly about reading about you and about Creole cream cheese and then seeing it for the first time in my life. I didn’t know what it was at—having grown up here, living here. So tell us what was Creole cream cheese and what happened.

00:38:28

Poppy Tooker: Creole cream cheese is the original native cheese of New Orleans. It was what the Creoles, in the days before refrigeration, would do with clabbering milk. They would put it in cheese cloth and hang it in the shade of oak trees to drip. And then after about twenty-four hours they’d have this beautiful single-curd, soft cheese that the French Creoles would eat with sugar with a little heavy cream on it for breakfast, and the German dairy farmers, who were the ones who began making it commercially very early on, they would eat theirs savory style with salt and pepper.

00:39:08

So the whole time I was growing up you didn't even have to go out to the store and buy your Creole cream cheese. The milkman came and there would be Creole cream cheese for breakfast in the milk boxes.

00:39:20

Rien Fertel: Spread on bread?

00:39:21

Poppy Tooker: No, no, no; eaten with a spoon, with a piece of toast.

00:39:25

Rien Fertel: Okay.

00:39:24

Poppy Tooker: No; it's the consistency of a flan and it's almost like eating flan; it's really similar to that. And so anyway what happened was that as the small dairies and even the larger local dairies got gobbled up by the big dairy conglomerates—for instance one of the last to go was Borden's, and when Borden's went and they moved their operation to Jackson, Mississippi they claimed that the Creole cream cheese broke in the containers between Jackson and New Orleans and that it was just not feasible. But they didn't understand it. And so it got line itemed off. And so in 1999 the only place where you could get Creole cream cheese was Dorignac's. And the Dorignac's Creole cream cheese was not the Creole cream cheese of my childhood. It's kind of watery. They cook it to get it to form up like that and so often it would have like a fizzy taste on my tongue when I'd get it—something was just not right.

00:40:30

And so how do you save something? Well I taught people how to make it, and quickly I could name a dozen or more people who were making Creole cream cheese at home, on their kitchen counters every week. Now if you tell your average American that there's something that you want them to make that involves bringing home a gallon of fresh milk, mixing it with a little buttermilk and some vegetable rennet and letting it sit covered on your counter, covered with a towel for twenty-four hours, before you even think about eating it, your average American is going to run screaming. But your average New Orleanian is just going to say, "Yum! Is that how you make Creole cream cheese? It's that easy?"

00:41:16

And so at first that was how we saved it. People started making it at home. But during that same time period I did an event at the Crescent City Farmers Market and that's when Henry Mauthe was there, and the Mauthes were about to lose their dairy at that point. And because you can't make a living as a dairyman because the commodity milk prices don't match your actual costs. And so he went home and told his son Kenny, "Son, I've seen the future of the family dairy farm and it's Creole cream cheese." And so it took them a year—because there was a bigger crowd. When he was at that market that day, Richard McCarthy always said that there was a bigger crowd on that hot August day than there had ever been at the market before because that's how much New Orleanians want their Creole cream cheese.

00:42:10

And so within a year—by then Sumi had left; Brett had become the food writer. And up until that whole scandal with the waiter at Galatoire's, the biggest piece he ever did was the Creole cream cheese piece.

00:42:31

Rien Fertel: And when did it come out do you remember?

00:42:32

Poppy Tooker: It came out in I believe it was June or July of 1999, and it was the Thursday before the Mauthes were going to market with their first commercially prepared Creole cream cheese. And so he printed that article, and that Saturday morning there were people who started lining up at six o'clock in the morning and the line stretched around the block, and they were completely sold out of the 600 units they had brought to market by ten o'clock that day.

00:43:09

And it began a Creole cream cheese crave that effectively brought Creole cream cheese back from the brink of extinction. So when you see Creole cream cheese cake or a Creole cream cheese sauce or the many, many ways that chefs now have worked that on to restaurant menus, it all goes back to the Slow Food Movement in 1999, when New Orleans recognized that we were about to lose our Creole cream cheese.

00:43:41

Rien Fertel: I love hearing the story because when I think of you or see you that is my earliest memory. I didn't know who you were. I didn't meet you for another decade. I didn't know Brett Anderson. But I moved here right at that time to go to college and it is my earliest New Orleans memory that—

00:44:02

Poppy Tooker: That is so funny.

00:44:03

Rien Fertel: —in my moving-here period.

00:44:05

Poppy Tooker: Thank you.

00:44:06

Rien Fertel: It's a love—

00:44:06

Poppy Tooker: It's very rewarding.

00:44:07

Rien Fertel: Now I know the background, yeah, yeah, yeah.

00:44:08

Poppy Tooker: It's very rewarding to me whenever I see Creole cream cheese on—well, Creole cream cheese and probably the other thing that—it still needs a little support, but the reason I believe that you see savory rice calas on restaurant menus also has to do with the Slow Food Movement and the commotion I made about the calas. And to my knowledge I was—we're talking again like 1999, 2000, when I was working with Susan at Spice, Inc.—I had been making and promoting sweet calas, made the traditional way, for probably a decade before I went to work for Susan, and I was making a little inroads with teaching people about it, but I believe that

I may have been one of the very first people to take the sugar and vanilla out and put the savory ingredients in, which I think it's really that savory calas that has helped save the calas. That's why you see it served with—

00:45:11

Rien Fertel: On menus.

00:45:12

Poppy Tooker: —shrimp remoulade at Brigtsen's and sometimes you see it at Cochon.

00:45:19

Rien Fertel: Do you have calas memories from growing up?

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Poppy Tooker: No, absolutely not.

00:45:22

Rien Fertel: It was gone.

00:45:23

Poppy Tooker: No. *[Laughs]* No, no, no, nobody had—no. See, I think what happened, and I'm sure of this because of Lolis. Once upon a time Lolis wrote an article—we're talking back in that long period of time ago—he wrote an article for the *New York Times*. And he and I had met through Slow Food. And I'll never forget, he called me when he was working on the article and

he said, “I got something to ask you. Do you remember calas growing up?” And I said, “No, I never had calas growing up.” And he said, “Your friends’ mothers didn’t make it?” “No, Lolis, learned it from Leon Soniat at Lee Barnes Cooking School.” And I knew they were delicious but the reason that the calas got my attention was because I was doing calas—I was asked to participate at the first ever Swamp Festival at the zoo. And they wanted me to do something very traditionally New Orleans in my booth.

00:46:18

So we had calas and café au lait. And the very first day that I was there this old gentleman bought some calas, took a few steps away, took a bite, and came back to the booth with tears in his eyes. And he said, “Lady, my mama used to make these for me all the time when I was a little boy, and I had forgotten all about that until just now. Could you tell me how did you do this?” And that was my great life changing food moment because it was so clear to me in that moment that the taste of the calas had brought this man’s mother back alive to him. And so it was a visceral experience where I suddenly got to see that it doesn’t matter what race or religion or nationality we are; we all have to eat to live. It’s the thing that makes us human. And the place where we all come together is around the table.

00:47:13

And so I did a little research about the calas because I didn’t know anything about them, except that they were easier than beignet and I thought they were more interesting. And so then once I learned the story about how they came from Africa with the slaves and they kept their own name, because today still in Ghana and Liberia the women are making calas and they’re calling them *calas*. That’s their original name. This was so significant to me that that was when I really set out to save the calas. And so anyway that was another one of Poppy-manias that just had to get done.

00:47:50

Rien Fertel: Where did you find the recipe?

00:47:53

Poppy Tooker: I learned it from Leon Soniat and I didn't finish tell you about Lolis because—so Lolis calls me up. Now Lolis does his with yeast. I learned it the modern way with the baking powder, but I always say baking powder was invented around the time of the Civil War, so if this is too modern for you all I can do is say I'm sorry. But anyway, after Lolis did his thorough examination of my background with the calas he said to me, "I think if you have the calas in your family, and you think y'all are all white folks, you better look harder in your family tree.

[Laughs]

00:48:31

Rien Fertel: All right, **[Laughs]** so moving towards the books—

00:48:35

Poppy Tooker: Is that like a shocking thing to say?

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Rien Fertel: No; I think it—

00:48:37

Poppy Tooker: I mean occasionally Lolis tries to back off from that remark, but I promise you he said that.

00:48:44

Rien Fertel: That first iteration of Slow Food New Orleans chapter, how long was it healthy and vibrant and—?

00:48:52

Poppy Tooker: Right up until the BP oil spill.

00:48:54

Rien Fertel: Oh, so 2010, okay.

00:48:55

Poppy Tooker: Yeah.

00:48:55

Rien Fertel: So it went through Katrina?

00:48:57

Poppy Tooker: Oh, yeah! Oh it not only went through Katrina, Slow Food helped save the food producers of the city.

00:49:04

Rien Fertel: Can you give a short history of that, or how that—?

00:49:06

Poppy Tooker: Of course. By that time I was very involved, because when Slow Food started that's how I met Richard McCarthy and became involved with the Crescent City Farmers Market because that's part of the mission of Slow Food is to support our food producers. And so I don't even think I was—maybe I was on the Board then. I don't know. I just know that I was like Richard's sort of right-hand girl, me and Darlene Wolnik, and when Katrina happened they both left the city and were living outside the city. Darlene was in Cleveland or Cincinnati and Richard was in Houston.

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And so I was the one who was back here immediately and—

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Rien Fertel: How long were you away after the 29th of August?

00:49:49

Poppy Tooker: I was living back in the city again by October 1st. Immediately after Hurricane Katrina I was here. So I began to reach out to the food producers from the Market to find out their needs and what their condition was. And before I got back, like September—the letter's actually printed as it was on my computer in the *Crescent City Farmers Market Cookbook*, the letter from Kay Brandhurst describing what had happened to she and Ray.

00:50:23

And I was in Baton Rouge at my sister-in-law's house and I started getting emails from my Slow Food friends all across the country asking how they could help. Well, I couldn't tell

anybody how they could help. But what I did was I just flipped Kay's email to them and said you tell me how you can help this. And I don't know what to say.

00:50:44

Rien Fertel: And she was the shrimp lady right?

00:50:45

Poppy Tooker: The shrimp lady.

00:50:46

Rien Fertel: Known as the shrimp lady.

00:50:46

Poppy Tooker: Yeah, I mean she even—

00:50:47

Rien Fertel: At the Farmers' Market.

00:50:46

Poppy Tooker: —signed it *aka the Shrimp Lady*. “We will be back,” she said. I mean the boat was sunk, Ray was trying to get the boat lifted, she and the kids are living first in Shreveport and then in a one-bedroom apartment out in Metairie with four children. I mean it was just terrible times. And so what ended up happening was we created a fund that was called Terra Madre Fund that was committed to getting the money that people raised quickly into the hand of the food

producers who could get back into business again. And so a lot of that money went to Crescent City Farmers Market people, but there were also really genius things that we did with the money that makes me so happy to this day.

00:51:34

Of course some of that money went to finance the promotion and getting Leah Chase's first fund-raiser to get the restaurant reopened, and that was on Holy Thursday in 2006 at Muriel's Restaurant. And across the country people couldn't believe somebody would give another restaurateur their restaurant, but that's what we do here in New Orleans. The other part of the money probably the one I love the most is I did not know the Brocatos at the time of the hurricane, personally. But I knew Dana Logsdon and her mother Mary from the Market. And they had La Spiga Bakery down in the Marigny, which was fine, but their houses had flooded. They were in Baton Rouge; they were only running the bakery part-time. The Brocato's flooded, everything; they were wiped out.

00:52:27

Rien Fertel: Were wiped out.

00:52:28

Poppy Tooker: They're in Houston and they're thinking about not coming back. They were actively thinking of opening a Brocato's in Houston. And Dana got in touch with me and she said we cannot let this happen. And so we tracked down the Brocatos the next time they came to New Orleans. We sat down and met with them—this was probably January of 2006—and we worked out a deal so that when Dana couldn't be at La Spiga having it open, the Brocatos had use of their bakery, and that was how on St. Joseph's Day in 2006 the Brocatos cookies were

back on the shelf, because they were at La Spiga. And the wonderful thing was that that meant that Slow Food money, that dollar, helped two businesses, because the Brocatos paid rent that was paid by Slow Food to Dana and her mother, so it got the Brocatos back in business and it kept La Spiga in business.

00:53:33

Rien Fertel: Wow. And helped Leah Chase also.

00:53:35

Poppy Tooker: And helped Leah Chase, and helped Ray and Kay get the boat lifted, and helped, oh my goodness, the citrus people, the L'Hostes. I ran their whole Christmas in—at Christmas 2005, they had oranges, they had citrus, but they had no way to sell them except the Market and so Slow Food people across the United States, for \$25, bought a box of citrus that got shipped and made it in time for Christmas, and the L'Hostes had no way of taking payment except a check in the mail. And the mailman didn't come on a regular basis in those days.

00:54:18

And to me that was a further illustration of how good those Slow Food people were because Linda L'Hoste shipped every one of those boxes on the promise that the checks were in the mail and she got every single check.

00:54:34

Rien Fertel: Wow. So—

00:54:36

Poppy Tooker: And every order went through me on my computer. I almost lost my mind. I would print them out and bring them to her at the Market. I took all the orders. That was an insane thing.

00:54:45

Rien Fertel: Was this—

00:54:48

Poppy Tooker: Slow Food USA advertised it and that's how they got the word out. And then all the Slow Food members across the United States.

00:54:57

Rien Fertel: So what happened in 2010 with Slow Food?

00:54:59

Poppy Tooker: Um—

00:55:01

Rien Fertel: And we don't need the whole history, but—

00:55:01

Poppy Tooker: No, no, no, no, but the then President Josh Viertel—this was like a Katrina-like blow, and so I thought Slow Food was going to respond in some sort of way to help this and instead what happened—

00:55:19

Rien Fertel: To the oil spill?

00:55:20

Poppy Tooker: —to the oil spill because the seafood producers were really back in terrible trouble again. And so instead of helping us, they asked me to write a piece that they published on some sort of a blog that then they didn't monitor. And so what happened was people across the country wrote things on the blog that said things like—I remember the one—"I would as soon as put petroleum oil in my baby's bottle and feed it to them directly as soon as I would feed them seafood out of the Gulf of Mexico again."

00:56:03

So this was like really counterproductive to my efforts. And so I had a big event that I planned at the Market and I begged Slow Food to send somebody and make things right here in New Orleans, and they didn't. And so I just shut it down.

00:56:23

Rien Fertel: So was that the impetus for starting your radio show, *Louisiana Eats!*?

00:56:26

Poppy Tooker: Oh, no, no, no.

00:56:28

Rien Fertel: Because it's the same time. I went back to find the first episode and—

00:56:33

Poppy Tooker: Yeah, you're right, but no.

00:56:35

Rien Fertel: —six weeks after the oil spill and then—which is—

00:56:36

Poppy Tooker: That's very interesting.

00:56:37

Rien Fertel: —which is about the oil spill.

00:56:38

Poppy Tooker: Yeah, it had to be.

00:56:39

Rien Fertel: Doing research last night, I was like I wonder what the first episode was about.

And I just thought I'm sure it's about a restaurant.

00:56:48

Poppy Tooker: Something happy.

00:56:49

Rien Fertel: Something happy, exactly. I thought it would be a joyous occasion. It was—

00:56:53

Poppy Tooker: It was a real bummer.

00:56:55

Rien Fertel: It was a real bummer episode.

00:56:55

Poppy Tooker: Frank Brigtsen cried.

00:56:57

Rien Fertel: Right.

00:56:58

Poppy Tooker: [*Laughs*]

00:56:59

Rien Fertel: And so it's on public radio here in the city. So was there a connection, or was—

00:57:05

Poppy Tooker: No, there was absolutely—the Farmers Market and me just being fortunate is how all that—Diana Pinckley, who had worked on the Board with me. One day I'm at the Tuesday Farmers Market and Diana says to me—this is right at the time when WWNO was making their changeover from all classical, and she was on the Board at WWNO, and she said

“Would you like to do a radio show?” And I said, “I can do a radio show.” And she said, “Great, I just pitched that idea for you. And I think you’re going to hear from them.”

00:57:39

Rien Fertel: So it had already happened.

00:57:41

Poppy Tooker: It had already happened, and I just made it up as I went along. I just made it up, just like I’ve done—that’s what I do.

00:57:49

Rien Fertel: So you’ve been doing the radio show for almost eight years.

00:57:51

Poppy Tooker: Almost eight years.

00:57:53

Rien Fertel: Has it changed, or how do you think it’s changed?

00:57:56

Poppy Tooker: The radio show has changed a great deal. We went from thirty minutes to an hour. We actually moved out of WWNO and produce it independently. We I think surprised a lot of people because a very thin food thread runs through our programming. Sometimes you might be listening for ten or fifteen minutes and think, “Wait this is a food show?” But it’s about

humanity, it's about—and so consequently we've done shows on serious topics like addiction and recovery and the hospitality industry. We won a national—that's one of my favorite awards—we won a Taste Award—there you go, it's right here—we won a Taste Award for that show and we won in the drinks and beverage category. So our competition were like “Notes from Wine Country,” so I thought that was particularly fascinating that the sobriety show out of New Orleans trumps all the liquor laden programming in the country and wins first prize.

00:59:06

Who would expect that? So yeah, the show has changed a lot, and now, this year, the show has changed yet again in a particular way and that is because I am living through the definite major change in radio programming, just like what happened with TV, because nobody is watching TV in realtime. Everybody is DVRing it or something, and very few people are listening to live radio in time.

00:59:41

Rien Fertel: So podcasts.

00:59:42

Poppy Tooker: So podcasts have become the future of my business, and this has caught my attention because I just got the numbers yesterday. We had 110,000 people download and listen to *Louisiana Eats!* via podcast and webcast last month—110,000 people. Are we sure that many is really listening? And so consequently what we began doing at the start of this year is we are rewarding our podcast listeners. They're already devoted because an hour is a long time to devote to a podcast; the sweet spot is like twenty to thirty minutes. So we began producing podcasts, standalone, short podcasts, that later become broadcasts. So if you're a podcast listener

you're going to hear the newest, you're going to hear the unexpurgated version—

[REDACTED]?

01:00:51

Rien Fertel: No, I didn't know this—I still listen on the radio. I didn't know.

01:00:54

Poppy Tooker: This is going to be edited?

01:00:56

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah; well how do you want—we can cut out anything you want us to.

01:01:00

Poppy Tooker: [REDACTED.]

01:02:24

Rien Fertel: So that's—

01:02:25

Poppy Tooker: That's pretty delicious, huh?

01:02:27

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah; I'm going to listen. All right do we have to—a few more questions?

01:02:30

Poppy Tooker: No, no, I'm fine; I'm fine. I thought you wanted to talk about cookbooks.

01:02:34

Rien Fertel: No; let's talk about cookbooks.

01:02:34

Poppy Tooker: I thought that was the purpose of this.

01:02:36

Rien Fertel: Well, we talk about your career and your life and—

01:02:38

Poppy Tooker: But please be nice about that and make sure you edit out all that nasty stuff.

01:02:42

Rien Fertel: Well, it'll be in the transcript but I will bleep it—the only people that can hear this is if they go to the University of Mississippi and listen to it.

01:02:51

Poppy Tooker: Okay I—

01:02:52

Rien Fertel: But I'll put a bleep in the written transcript.

01:02:55

Poppy Tooker: I wouldn't have said all that if I had known that even that's going to be in the written transcript. Please leave the [REDACTED] part out.

01:03:02

Rien Fertel: Okay I'll leave that out; that's fair, yeah, yeah, yeah.

01:03:04

Poppy Tooker: Just leave it—

01:03:04

Rien Fertel: Tell me—

01:03:05

Poppy Tooker: I was just telling you that between us.

01:03:07

Rien Fertel: Okay I'll leave that out. Okay so after you did a cookbook Slow Foodish Market Cookbook—

01:03:15

Poppy Tooker: The first cookbook I did was the *Crescent City Farmers Market Cookbook*.

01:03:17

Rien Fertel: And then you did two cookbooks that stemmed from the life of a famous New Orleans chef?

01:03:25

Poppy Tooker: And then in 2012 I had the opportunity to write a forward for the re-issue of *Madame Begué's Cookbook*, which is one of the earliest cookbooks ever written in New Orleans. And it was published in October. Actually it came out on October 30 in 2012 and little did I know that Steven Latter was going to pass away, the owner of Tujague's, who had been for twenty-five years maintaining Madame Begué's spot, the spot where her famous restaurant was. And when Steven died one, I met his son, and we got to be friends and part of the saving Tujague's that needed to happen that I suggested was writing a book.

01:04:13

So we did end up doing that book together, but first there was the Market book and then there was Madame Begué and then in the fall of 2013 I published *Louisiana Eats!*, which is the cookbook version of the radio show, and it is the stories of my favorite interviews with portrait photographs by David Spielman and things you didn't hear on the radio and recipes. And so I figured if nobody liked the book, if nobody bought it, it was like a gift to myself because some of my very favorite people are in that book and their pictures are in the book and I've told their stories and two of them have already passed away.

01:04:58

And so I knew that one day I would be able to sit with that book and look through it and see all of my food friends. And so Rudy Lombard and Mildred Covert are both in that book and neither of them are still with us.

01:05:11

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Do you see your cookbook career as having a similar thread to your *save it to eat it* career—?

01:05:19

Poppy Tooker: *Eat it to save it.*

01:05:20

Rien Fertel: *Eat it to save it*, is it the same—

01:05:21

Poppy Tooker: Totally.

01:05:21

Rien Fertel: —thing?

01:05:21

Poppy Tooker: Yeah, totally, because that's my whole bent. I write about—it's all about food history. It's all about the food tradition. It's all about what makes us who and what we are here. And so I wrote the Tujague's book and I think really recorded the story of how New Orleans restaurant culture began and that very, very important place. I mean she really was—Madame Begué invented the brunch for goodness sake. And then my next book, which will be published this fall, is *Pascal's Manale Cookbook*, because I felt like I had done the French Creole thing and Tujague's is the second oldest continuously operating restaurant in New Orleans, second to Antoine's. Well, Pascal's Manale is the second oldest continuously operating *family* owned

restaurant in the city. And so that way I get to tell the New Orleans Sicilian food story and the story of this other historic restaurant.

01:06:33

Rien Fertel: I just have a couple more questions. What cookbooks do you want to write in the future, either—in an abstract way? What’s your dreams in—?

01:06:45

Poppy Tooker: I don’t have any dreams. I’m looking for—

01:06:47

Rien Fertel: [*Laughs*]

01:06:47

Poppy Tooker: I really don’t.

01:06:48

Rien Fertel: Do you want to write a memoir?

01:06:49

Poppy Tooker: I will write a memoir one day. I will write a memoir one day. Well, I already told you, we’ve got the first recipe. It’s going to be those nasty olive rosebud bushes. [*Laughs*] So we got the recipes already, so, yeah, one day I will write—I will do that, but in the meantime

there's a very good chance that my next cookbook might be the *Drag Queen French Cookbook* because—

01:07:15

Rien Fertel: From the Flamingos—from the original—?

01:07:16

Poppy Tooker: No, but they'll certainly perhaps make a special appearance somehow in there. I have been doing—well, really the charitable organization that I've worked the most for in recent times is the NO/AIDS Task Force, which has become CrescentCare. And just on a lark we've started doing these drag queen brunches that benefit CrescentCare, and they have just gotten such an incredible response and I just think that that book will be a hoot. And so if I manage to pull that off there will be a charitable tie-in to that, and then maybe I'll be ready for the memoir.

01:07:56

Rien Fertel: What did your grandmother mean by—

01:08:00

Poppy Tooker: My great-grandmother?

01:08:01

Rien Fertel: —your great-grandmother mean by *eat it to save it*?

01:08:02

Poppy Tooker: She meant clean your plate.

01:08:04

Rien Fertel: That just meant clean your plate?

01:08:05

Poppy Tooker: It just meant finish eating. Finish what you're eating. Don't make me throw it away. So save it: *eat it to save it*. And so it has now come to mean something vastly different.

01:08:19

Rien Fertel: Okay. This is my second to last question: a lot of your relationships in the food world have been with important women. We're talking about Leah Chase, we're talking about—

01:08:35

Poppy Tooker: Susan Spicer.

01:08:36

Rien Fertel: Susan Spicer.

01:08:36

Poppy Tooker: Lee Barnes.

01:08:39

Rien Fertel: Lee Barnes. Do you see New Orleans as particular having an important community of women in the restaurant world? Is there a reason for that? Am I just making that up? Is it

01:08:55

Poppy Tooker: It's—

01:08:56

Rien Fertel: We're in a moment now where things are changing politically, socially, in restaurant kitchens.

01:09:02

Poppy Tooker: Yeah, we did that show, too.

01:09:03

Rien Fertel: So—

01:09:06

Poppy Tooker: We did that show, too, [*Laughs*] the sexual abuse show.

01:09:08

Rien Fertel: Yeah. So what is there—

01:09:12

Poppy Tooker: I think it's just a— this is just something that, thank God, has naturally happened. You've got people like Kristen Essig, Danielle Sutton—help me with this—Allison Vines-Rushing, even though she's mostly cooking for her babies—

01:09:35

Rien Fertel: Yeah, but I want to talk about personally, because you even talk about your—you have a very deep and personal relationship with a ghost, with a woman, right, Elizabeth Kettering, Madame Begué.

01:09:46

Poppy Tooker: Oh well, so yes, yes, the ghost of Madame Begué. I took cooking classes from her—because I revised all the recipes that she did and so I felt like I took cooking classes from the 19th century ghost. But then you have to remember I also have a very close relationship with the cross-dressing ghost from Tujague's, the cross-dressing ghost who was a fan of Madame Begué's, and he's very happy to be back from the dead and better than ever. So the drag queen thing is just chasing me, see?

01:10:23

Rien Fertel: I think you have to write the book.

01:10:25

Poppy Tooker: Uh-hmm.

01:10:26

Rien Fertel: All right I have—

01:10:27

Poppy Tooker: So did I answer that? I just think it's about time and it's way too late. It's ridiculous, it's absolutely absurd that we're talking about a time forty years ago, when I had a hard time getting a job in a restaurant kitchen because I was a white woman. So great, forty years later, and I'm having a really hard time coming up with all the women chefs—*really*, all the women chefs. It's still a good old boys club. Okay, great, Rebecca Wilcomb won best chef of the South; way to go, girl. Who am I not thinking of? Well, of course Kelly Fields is nominated twice, but it's about damn time, huh? But look at it; it's still not—no.

01:11:21

Rien Fertel: It's not changing?

01:11:21

Poppy Tooker: No, no, no; you show me how it's changing. You see it changing?

01:11:27

Rien Fertel: I don't work in a restaurant kitchen. I mean I—

01:11:29

Poppy Tooker: You eat in restaurants and you're a part of the community—

01:11:31

Rien Fertel: I eat in restaurants.

01:11:32

Rien Fertel: No; it's not changing because I don't eat in restaurants now. *[Laughs]* That won't change.

01:11:41

Poppy Tooker: No, uh-hmm. No, I don't know if, how, and when it ever changes but God knows I tried, Susan tried. Leah doesn't try—Leah just does what she does.

01:11:58

Rien Fertel: Yeah.

01:11:58

Poppy Tooker: She's an anachronism.

01:12:00

Rien Fertel: Yeah, all right last question, I personally I think of you and I think a lot of New Orleanians think of you either from knowing you or knowing your books or knowing your radio show as one of the city's great story-tellers. Do you have a favorite story you like to tell? I have a favorite story I've heard you tell at least twice about Wynton and the gumbo.

01:12:21

Poppy Tooker: Oh.

01:12:22

Rien Fertel: Can you just tell a story—

01:12:24

Poppy Tooker: I love that one.

01:12:24

Rien Fertel: —just tell a story, either that story or—?

01:12:27

Poppy Tooker: I haven't thought about that one in a long time.

01:12:28

Rien Fertel: Or another story?

01:12:30

Poppy Tooker: I do like the Wynton gumbo story because that's the power of gumbo. My gumbo it turned out was quite a powerful thing. One Friday I got a phone call from—no, I got an email. It all started with an email from a producer at CBS *Sunday Morning* asking if I would make gumbo for Wynton Marsalis at my home. And I was kind of like, “What?” I wasn't really sure where that came from.

01:13:00

I remembered Wynton from the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts because I was in the second graduating class from there, and he was there at the same time. And so I thought, “Hmm, I wonder if he remembers me.”

01:13:12

Well he didn't remember me from there but when he did show up at my house for that shoot it was like old home week. And by the time we got around to the part where he sat down and tasted the gumbo that I had prepared he looked right into the camera and said, "Hmm, have mercy Poppy." Well I just thought that was the most hilarious thing and it aired on the last time we had Super Bowl in New Orleans, it aired on CBS *Sunday Morning*, and I really thought that was probably the end of the story between me and Wynton.

01:13:49

However, just a few months later, I was in my kitchen, interestingly enough prepping gumbo to do at a demonstration in Lake Charles, and the phone rings in the kitchen and I pick it up and this voice goes, "Baby, I need some gumbo." And I said, "What?" And this voice says, "Baby, I need some gumbo. Poppy, it's Wynton, baby, and I need some of that gumbo because you do not play with that gumbo. How can I get some of that gumbo, girl?" I said, "Well, where are you, Wynton?" **[Laughs]** And he said, "Well, I'm in Birmingham but I'm coming to New Orleans this weekend. Can you hook me up?" And I said, "Sure, Wynton." And so that was the first time that I ever delivered gumbo to the green room, and that very first time Wynton wouldn't share it with anybody but the guys who were in his horn line. And his whole jazz orchestra was there, but, no, they didn't get gumbo. And so then gumbo has just brought Wynton and I together over and over again.

01:14:53

One time the fellow who runs a big music hall in Memphis—what is the name of that place, I can't think of it—but anyway, it was a big anniversary event, and he surprised Wynton with me. And brought me up there to cook gumbo, and I made it for the whole orchestra that time. I've done events in New York City where I've called Wynton and said, "Okay, there's leftover gumbo." And he's met me in the lobby of the Palace Hotel for instance because *he's got*

to get that gumbo baby. And I'll get these phone calls, and it's hysterical because it is truly like that first one, *baby I need some gumbo.* I said, "My goodness, this is like the gumbo version of the booty call." **[Laughs]**

01:15:49

Rien Fertel: So if we want to find this gumbo recipe what do we—

01:15:52

Poppy Tooker: It's everywhere. It's everywhere.

01:15:54

Rien Fertel: What kind of gumbo is it?

01:15:55

Poppy Tooker: It's seafood gumbo. I just make all seafood gumbo, that's what I do: crab and shrimp, delicious, and oysters sometimes, too.

01:16:06

Rien Fertel: All right, well, I want to thank you. I think this was—

01:16:09

Poppy Tooker: Thank you.

01:16:09

Rien Fertel: —just a wonderful interview.

01:16:10

Poppy Tooker: Oh, thank you; thank you; thank you. And I hope you don't mind, just be kind with—.

[End Poppy Tooker Interview]