BILLY GRUBER
Chef/Owner, Liuzza's by the Track – New Orleans, LA

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Date: August 4, 2006
Location: A friend's home near the restaurant– New Orleans, LA
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 1 hour, 37 minutes
Project: Gumbo Trail - Louisiana

[Begin Billy Gruber-1 Interview]

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Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Friday, August 4th, 2006 in New Orleans, Louisiana, for the Southern Foodways Alliance; and I am with Billy Gruber at a home near Liuzza's By The Track. We're a couple blocks down and—what's the street we're on again?

00:00:20

Billy Gruber: Grand Route St. John.

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AE: Grand Route St. John. And we're at the dining room table, and I have a bowl of gumbo before me, which I will dig into momentarily and—but first Billy, if you wouldn't mind stating your name and your birth date for the record please, sir?

00:00:36

BG: Billy Gruber and, gee whiz, three—eight—forty-six, March 8th, 1946. Sixty years old. Sixty years young!

00:00:50

AE: **[*Laughs*]** Exactly. Now we can ignore this [recording device in front of us] and talk about gumbo and all kinds of other things, but you were—

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BG: This is something I just—I like to go—you go into New Orleans areas and just look in shops and everything, and you find things that are just a part of history and this is a—I don't know what it's worth, but I know when I used to go to auctions I'd see cookbooks that are early 1900s and this one is 1908. And it's—it's copyrighted in 1908 but in this book you just look at things, the magnificence of what they do. There is no measurements. It is just paragraphs of dinners. It's called—the—the name of it is *A Selection of Dishes and the Chef's Reminder*. And it just goes through everything. You know, it doesn't—it tells you what to do; it says handfuls of this, wipe your hands with flour before touching this; there's no measurements at all on things. The—

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AE: But is it specific to New Orleans at all or—?

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BG: No. No, as a matter of fact, I think this might be out of New York. I'm not sure, but New Orleans, you—you know, I consider this one of the top three or four areas in the country for food because of the—because of the French, you know. I mean the original—the word Creole and what it's done, meaning the French, etcetera, etcetera, and the Canadians. They got exiled out of Canada and so they sent—were sent down here. So when they came down here, the Cajuns, they got with the—was—that was French and then they got with the Africans, they got with the Germans, they got—that's who New Orleans is; it's such a mixture. It's such a hodgepodge of every ethnic group you can think of. And, you know, just like—look at that—eggs a la crème.

[***Reading***] Spread circles of buttered toast with chicken—coarse meat on each circle—place a nicely poached egg, pour crème sauce around the egg-base and serve. [***To interviewer***] Well there's like—there's hundreds and hundreds of—you know and—and the—like I said, the meats, just meats you don't even hear of today. This is a magnificent book and somebody told me how much they thought it was worth and—not a shot. I can't get rid of this. You know, it's just too—too much part of heritage and you can look it up at any time and just see things that—that you'd never read today. I mean Emeril [Lagasse] would flip out if he saw this, you know, because—like half this book, all your great chefs of today don't even know anything about, you know, cooking in my estimation.

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AE: Well that's a treasure. Now you were telling me before that you're from Grand Isle [Louisiana] originally?

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BG: Oh, we used to go there every summer and my dad—my dad [William J. Gruber] was a Senator in 1946 and he had—his first restaurant. He was in the restaurant business. His first restaurant he opened in 1935; he was nineteen years old and he—it was a funny story. He—it was counter-seating for ten [people] and there was a big convention in town, so he—he owned all the property; he bought the property somehow and he put a big—big billboard on the property and he said a *Meal a Minit*—that was the name of it—M-i-n-i-t—rather than M-i-n-u-t-e. "Meal a Minit, seating for 1,000." And in small print at the bottom he had "Ten at a time." But anyway, he—he went on to have six restaurants, and he was one of the first people to do his own

commissary in the late [nineteen] fifties, meaning you go in there and you see a cow hanging with—much more than one cow but it was—the butchers would do everything and we wound up selling to other—to other restaurants around the city. We would make our own hamburger meat and make everything ourselves. And then that first restaurant, as a matter of fact, is across cattycornered to Delmonico's, which is Emeril's—one of Emeril's restaurants. Delmonico's was originally a very old restaurant in New Orleans—might have started in the [nineteen] fifties or something like that.

But so unfortunately, when people say, "You're—gee, you're in the restaurant business and you cook?" And I say, "Yeah, it's a curse because my father was in it, and I've tried many times to get out of it." And it's just something that really draws you in, I guess. Because when you see what other people are doing and they're successful and you know that, you know, you do something and you go wait a minute, I can do better than that, you know. It's like—and it's really funny because obviously through the years I've had a lot of great people work for me and unfortunately, I've never gone to cooking school and I've never—my father never showed me anything about the business; it was all osmosis, you know. But it's—it's hereditary and it's just—it's a curse is what it is because everybody I know who is in the business can't get out. There's very few people who can get out of it, you know. They still—yeah, they're—they're just always in it and it's—and everybody you talk to who know a little bit about it and they will go, "Oh, that's a hard, hard business." It is if you really don't know it a lot, but I mean there's too many people now. You know, I've consulted for about five different restaurants and I always start off with the same and it's usually people that's never been in the business, and I'll say, "You want to make a small fortune in the restaurant business? Start off with a large one; that's how you'll make a small one." Because if you don't know anything about it, it will eat you alive,

you know. The hours, you lose wives, you lose everything; you have no relationships because it's just—.

And I had one guy come in, I made an SBA loan one time for my first restaurant and they have a thing called SCO, Senior Citizen Organization, that help people when they get in trouble when you do an SBA loan, which is a great thing because these executives they've run their own family businesses and they've been in business and they're retiring. And this one guy, he—his family used to own a restaurant—a grocery store chain called Jitney Jungle; they were famous throughout the South. And he came to me and I'm in the—I'm in the kitchen, this is like four months after we opened—six months after we opened and all of the sudden the girl comes to me and says the guy from the SBA is sitting at table number three; he's waiting for you any time. So I you know—I go to him and he's sitting there, and I go sit down and introduce myself. And he says, "Billy," his family was from Mississippi and he goes, "Billy, I tell you. I've been sitting here—I've been stealing from you bare." And I said, "What do you mean stealing from me?" He says, "Well it took that waitress about three or four minutes before she came over here; it took you about ten minutes before you got over here. I've just been eating the hell out of them crackers. And that's two-cents every time I pick one up and eat them." And I said, "You know—[***SBA man speaking now***] "And then I put that butter on there and that was a penny-and-a-half." He said, "You've been losing, boy, ever since—." And then thus he went onto just to go to—because the grocery business was crazy then; it was probably a four-percentile profit margin or whatever and, you know, just that's pennies.

But the restaurant business, I mean when you're sitting there and you watch your waiter or waitress or bartender, instead of putting one napkin under a drink, they put four or five under a drink. They do. You know, it's just everything and it's just you've got to be on top of your game.

That's why when I tell people, you know, it's a bad thing to be in if you don't know the business, knowing the business is also about knowing about cooking, you know. What things to use, what things you can substitute. You know in the South one of our saving graces are rice; because, you know, rice is a big thing here. Like in the gumbo you're eating, well if you—if you do—our bowls of—like—they're helmets, people tell me. They're so big you—I couldn't finish it. You know, it's too big. But just taking a cup, let's say a cup is—ours are big but just say they're—say they're ten-ounces, well you're going to put four-ounces of rice and then six-ounces or five-ounces of gumbo, and then you have an ounce, you know, for spill, so you know the rice saves us. The rice is a cheap part. I mean, so now if you look at the Japanese, you understand why you know when I was opening my first restaurant down the street there was Trey Yen [Asian restaurant], and I'm looking and they were getting ten fifty-pound sacks of rice a week. I was going wow, you know, and we get one. Just going, oh what are—what are we doing wrong here? And then the Italians have the pasta and it's—so it's every ethnic group, you know, has their own deal, but that's part of all—like in the business, you know, it's just, eh—.

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AE: Well how do you think—what was your father's name first of all?

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BG: The same—William J. Gruber. Yeah.

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AE: And at nineteen [years old] what propelled him into the restaurant business, do you know?

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BG: Ah, he wanted something for his mother to do. She was—she came from Germany and so—they had four brothers, and he first did, I think, a snowball stand and then a little thing and wanted her—to have something for her to do. The father passed away and—even my dad was in law school, and that was funny too because after he got out of law school, he did a bunch of stuff, and then when I learned that I said, "Why did you go to law school if you never practiced law?" "So I wouldn't have to ask any jerk what to do in business," [he said]. And that's the way he—you know, he became a Senator later on. But he—as some of his friends used to say, he didn't let grass grow under his feet. He was a Senator; we owned six restaurants—all twenty-four-hours and—and, you know, in those days you cooked your—as we do because I kind of emulated what he did. I mean before we opened this last—this last restaurant out there, the longest one I've ever been—stayed at, in those days they cooked their own—they made their French fries. Because when I have the French fries at our place, everybody goes, "Wow, your fries!" And I'm saying again, this isn't really rocket science and cooking them all yourself. What's the difference? It's a big difference, but you—we make our own hamburger patties, you know. We put seasoning in them like you do meatballs. And then, you know, you cook your own roast and stuff it with fifty cloves of garlic and slow cook it for ten hours and then you put a lot of water in it, which thus it comes out to the greatest au jus on earth, you know, which is—and that's what we use for the roast itself. We just re-boil it and don't add any seasoning to it—no salt because all I do is put a little granulated garlic on top of the roast and black pepper and that's it—no salt or anything. But the au jus just brings it out when you cook it.

We cook our own turkeys; we cook our own corned beef; we cook everything ourselves. Well that's what he did then, and when he did that he would go down and do that at like ten until three or four in the morning. I knew my father getting up at twelve o'clock, having tea and toast, and then going down to the restaurant until my mother [Idea Mae Bourdeaux] made him come home and eat supper, as we called it, at five o'clock. I had to be home at five when I went out and played in grammar school. We'd have supper, and then he would leave at nine o'clock at night and wouldn't come home until six or seven the next morning. That's why I say it's a difficult business; you know, it's a crazy business. But you know, it's challenging and it's really neat.

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AE: Was your father a native New Orleanian?

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BG: Yeah. Every Christmas—they were German, so everybody thinks that the oil is roux, meaning no oil in a roux started when the no fat craze came on. Every Christmas we had sauerbraten. Sauerbraten is—is the way you cook—the way they cooked it was—my grandmother cooked it—they called it utility beef then. I can imagine it was just the—the worst cut of meat, you know, you can have. They're just—nobody used—would send you in a—had fat, just bad things. They marinated it for three days—marinated probably in some vinegar and different—a little wine, maybe. Herbs. And then what they did was my—my grandmother would tell my dad, "Willie, give me some roux." And he'd take the roux and you'd put it in a big baking sheet, you know, big—where you put all your brown—biscuits and things like that. But

you'd put the flour on the sheet and just put it in the oven by itself. Every once in a while, you'd stir it and when—I remember trying once, and it doesn't turn brown then; it only turns brown after you add the liquid to it because it would be tan. But then, you know, she would do that and then they'd cook it for about five hours. And then when everybody in the family—extended families, there would be thirty or forty people, you know, this one thing—table and the table setting was some vegetables, but it was basically bowls of this sauerbraten, which was just this meat. You know there was no knives there; you didn't need knives. And this broth that was just—I can't describe it to you. And glasses of Claret wine. If you were five or if you were ninety, this is what you had. And you know it was just, you know, the German thing. That's what we had every Christmas. [It was] just to die for. And actually, my grandmother took it to her grave and that was it. **[*Laughs*]**

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AE: So she would—she would literally call that toasted flour the roux?

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BG: Yeah, that's what it was. And then that was in the original recipe of sauerbraten which went back to God knows—1700s, 1800s from Germany—because her mother cooked it, my grandmother's mother. And like I said, it was just one of the most incredible tasting things, you know, just because the meat was three days being marinated, and then you cooked it for five hours and then obviously—and—and all we had was French bread, the bowl, and a fork and that was it. Everybody just—and everybody went home with a lot, you know.

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AE: Have you tried to recreate that?

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BG: Yeah, my cousin did last year, as a matter of fact. He had a house on the 9th Ward [in New Orleans] and right off the river, and he—he was right on it; he—he was right on, you know. It was right there—because one of the things with, you know that type of thing is it's sauerbraten and I've done Hasenpfeffer, which is German rabbit stew—Gansenpfeffer, goose. And the one thing about German cooking is that it's just—it's a lot of the same things that we're used to, as far as American flavors, as far as roasts and things like that but it's a touch of vinegar to it. And then one of the things in the sauerbraten was some gingersnap cookies, you know. Just a lot of little things like that. I got the recipe and he did it and it was great, you know, it was fantastic. I died and went to heaven, you know.

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AE: Was your father a big cook, then? Did he learn to cook from his—?

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BG: No—yeah, he never ate one thing in a restaurant. He always brought it home and he cooked it or let my mother cook it. And you know—and my mother—you'll hear this again when we talk about my gumbo, but everybody asks, you know, "Is that your dad's recipe, the gumbo?" We were nominated top in the city two or three years—Tom Fitzmorris, a main critic in the city—top gumbo by him. With *Gourmet Magazine*: "The best reason to come to New Orleans is

the Gumbo and at Liuzza's by the Track." And you know countless people there. And they say, "Well, was that your father's recipe?" And I said, "No, my mother was a Boudreaux—B-o-u-d-r-e-a-u-x—from Chacahoula, Louisiana." [Idea Mae Boudreaux] Chacahoula [Terrebonne Parish] then was a town of 500; today it's 500. I don't even think it's on the map anymore. It's north—it would be like central Louisiana. It's north of Houma and then east of Gonzalez and Baton Rouge, so it's, you know, kind of south-central Louisiana, and it's—it's a typical—it's a different type of gumbo, you know. Want to talk about gumbos?

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AE: Yeah. I wonder if you could kind of put words to how that gumbo—

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BG: Is different?

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AE: —how it—how it merged with the German kind of influences in your house?

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BG: Well it was probably—like I said, the—the gumbo is—is you know, it's French, it's African—the Sassafras weed, that was the—the filé; the okra comes from the African thing. [*Filé is ground sassafras leaves, which are used to thicken a gumbo. Because of this, sometimes it is called "gumbo filé." The Cajuns and Creoles learned about filé from the Choctaw Indians of the Gulf South. Some maintain that filé was used when okra—another gumbo thickener—was out of*

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season. Today, okra and file gumbos are made year-round.] And you know, it's just all these different things. The German—I forget exactly—I'm not a really good historian; I just, you know, know taste. That's the only thing I do know. That's why I'm in the business. But it was just all this, you know, just this hodgepodge of everything. Like I say, when all the Cajuns came, when they were exiled from Canada and Nova Scotia, they came down here and then they met, you know, they were in the swamps. They had to deal with the wildlife, the gators, the—the crawfish, the—they had no—nothing. They had nothing. They were exiled from their homes. They had the clothes on their back. And it was told they came down here with their iron skillets and that was it. And then when they met with all these people there was really never—you didn't have a lot of one-pot cooking, and that's why you see down here—the etouffees, the jambalayas. Where everything goes into one pot and nothing is wasted. You know, I mean, you could look at hogshead cheese. Other people look at it and go, eh. Well you known France has their patés; it's the same thing, you know. [***Coughs***] Excuse me. And anyway it's—and that's how, you know, as it all emerged. I mean it was just—it was a great thing that came from all these different—these people meeting that they all put their own things there. The spices came from different—probably that was a lot of French and all the natural herbs that were growing around the area at the time.

I mean the West End, here in New Orleans, yeah, it's a big city, but I mean when I grew up you had—on the West End you had alligator pears—you know, avocados. They were small but they grew all the way down here. You had mirlitons [chayote squash]. And I'll be honest with you, I used—I still cook a great mirliton soup, a low—soups are my forté. I just feel you can get so much more flavor. I mean when I go eat pizza now days, I eat vegetarian because if you think about it, there's so many more flavors of different vegetables rather than piece of meat

with a sauce that's made up. Just the natural things like that are just incredible, you know. But the—the mirlitons for instance, when I cook mirliton soup, you know, it's a crazy little vegetable pear, a chayote they call it, and you would peel the—the thing, the skin off of them and you'd cut them in half and you'd take the seed out of the middle. The skin—after you—after you peel this and you touch it, it's like when you were a kid and you glued your hands—that's how strong this is, and it would just be all over you and it—it would be on you for a day or two until you washed your hands three or four different times. And you know, that's—that was indigenous to our city you know; this was going on here. The bay leaves, everybody to this day has bay leaves; you know, you can call somebody up and say, "I need a bay leaf." "Oh, Harriet has got some next door, don't worry about it." And they'd bring in the leaves, you know, and I mean and branches of bay leaf, you know. So it's so much to this area that started in north Louisiana, central Louisiana from the Nova Scotia Cajuns that came down, and it's still around. I mean you go all the way down to the areas that were destroyed by the hurricane at the end of—of Chalmette, in that area, the areas—Braithwaite, Louisiana, you know, just down at that end, that's where you're Creole tomatoes came from. And the point I was getting to with the—the mirlitons is that when I cooked the soups you could only—it was like a Creole season. They only had seasons—three months—and I remember doing that. And man, everybody is raving, you know, because I do it with a little shrimp stock and put the things in there—always puree everything so you'd get the natural flavor of everything. But then when—later on, one of my first restaurants in the [French] Quarter, I remember we had a French market with all the vegetables; that's where everybody brought their vegetables. All of a sudden, you know, I'm going, "Wow, they got the mirlitons here, and it's not the season—it's not the Creole season." I asked them where they're from. Well, they grow them in Costa Rica. Well, I went and did them—not even close—not even

close because I think they hydroponically grow them, you know, where they rushed them and they weren't done. But I mean all in that area down there is some of the great—the oranges, you know, just the greatest, you know. And the Creole tomatoes bar none, they're so different than any other tomato anywhere in the country, you know. And I mean you can tell I'm a little prejudice about Louisiana growing because there is nothing like it anywhere, you know—other than Europe, probably.

But it you know—and the Creole tomato, I mean you look at it. It's got the—those indentations in it where it hung on the tree a lot longer than it was supposed to, and you've got the green leaf coming out of the middle and, you know, it was—they were just there and you know you go into groceries—yeah, you look at the tomatoes. You take one of those tomatoes home, you bring it home; that baby can sit on your counter for about—well, two weeks without doing anything because it's full of chemicals. These Creoles, you better do something with them in a day or two because it's, you know—they're natural and they go. And you know, the same with Ponchatoula strawberries. Man, when strawberry season comes out, it's like you can—you know you can—when you do the strawberry shortcake or just some of the strawberry coulis [a thick sauce made of pureed fruit] or, you know, different things with that, you do it, and then all of the sudden you want to continue it because it was so good and people are going bananas over it. So you go well, let me try these Californians. It's like eating a napkin. And there what you have to do is you—you have to actually—I mean you have to cheat sometimes and cheating is you take your strawberries, you wash them and you—because the sweetness of a strawberry is in the seeds on the outside. They're not in the middle. That's why the Ponchatoula strawberries are so dear because they're meat on the inside, where that's sweet. But with the California and other places, you have to take sugar and put it in there and kind of wash them over and then put them

out. Yeah, those Ponchatoula strawberries. Anyway, like I say, I'm just turned on by our natural produce and our natural stuff.

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AE: Do you still make the mirliton stew from time to time?

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BG: Yeah. Yeah, when it's the season because I—like I say, it's night and day. It's a very sweet, beautiful—beautiful—and I call my—when I do it, I'll call it a stuffed mirliton soup because stuffed mirliton, you just do your trinity of your bell pepper, celery, onion, and then a couple of herbs. You don't want to get in the way of some of these vegetables because they're so—they have their own flavor and they reek with their own self, you know, and you don't want to—you don't want to get in their way. You don't want to put too much thyme, oregano, or basil. Basil would suit it more because it's light and airy but—.

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AE: Can you describe the flavor of the mirliton?

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BG: Yes, it's a sweet—they call it a chayote [squash]. And I think it's an African thing, but they call it a chayote—it's grown indigenously here a lot—there's a lot of them grown and when you do it you—the dish that everybody knows is going to be a—a stuffed mirliton or a baked. What you do is you peel it and you cut it into slices. You can bake it or you can sauté it a little bit in a

pan with the herbs—with the vegetables—onion, because the—the best way to do it is you caramelize your onions and get the sweetness out of the onion, and then you brought in the bell pepper and celery, and then you kind of go ahead and mix it all with the mirliton. And like I say, you can—you can either simmer it a little bit to get it soft, and then after that process you put it all together and you marry everything, and you don't put anything in it too strong. You don't need a lot of salt; you don't need pepper. You know, that has its own flavor and like I say it's—it's a cousin tasting to an eggplant but it's sweeter and it's not as—yeah, it's just lighter. And that's why one of the best things to stuff it with is going to be a shrimp because I mean it's really even neat when you take your shrimp and boil them and then you boil the eggplant or the mirlitons in that because then you have that water mixing with that. They're both very light and very subtle. So anyway, when you bake it for like an hour or two you put a little—maybe some egg yolks, some eggs, some breadcrumbs—just light, just to hold it together—and then some shrimp and that's all. It's—it's naturally just—like I say, it will bring you to your knees. Or like some of them say, make you slap your grandma, you know. It's just good.

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AE: So what is it about gumbo then?

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BG: The gumbo?

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AE: Since you're a stew man and a soup man, yeah, tell me about your gumbo.

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BG: Well like I said earlier, you know, when they ask you about the gumbo and no, it doesn't come from my daddy; it comes from my mother, Boudreaux from Chacahoula, Louisiana. So it really has origins that go far back and—and you know and—you know, if you ask me—I mean when I go to a restaurant—I mean I've been told I have the best gumbo in the city and you know, I like it; I think it's good. You know, I created it and my mother showed me, you know, kind of her version, and I did it similarly, very similar. And—but there's fifty or sixty different types of gumbo. I mean, you know, from gumbo z'herbes, which is all greens and it's all done in odd increments—three, five, seven, nine, eleven. There's some stories behind that, but we'll let that go for another day. And it was all greens that go into it. Then there's this whole different—and they put this—all gumbos, they're cooked the same. Like I do andouille [sausage] and chicken gumbo and—**[*Phone Rings*]**—.

00:29:28

AE: I can pause this, if you'd like.

00:29:30

BG: Yeah, stop.

[***Short pause***]

00:29:31

AE: You were talking about different kinds of gumbo—that you make a chicken and sausage gumbo.

00:29:35

BG: Yeah, like the—I make—basically a lot—most of them are chicken and andouille [a smoked pork sausage] or chicken and smoked sausage and, you know, and there's—there's—you can take that alone and make thirty different types. I mean New Orleans, I think, would be known more for a thick gumbo. I know mine is thin, but it's powerful and it's just a lot of flavor. And what I like about mine is—and I tell people, you don't need salt, pepper—you don't need—and I don't put a lot of salt in mine. It's more chicken stock than anything because, you know, I use all natural bald chickens to get the stock, because I don't like—I'm not, you know—I'm sixty years old; what do I need more salt in my body for? So I try to do things right even though—I mean they even say you know that—the people talk about fat is bad for you. Well when you get—and I've heard this and I should know it, but when you do a roux—and my roux is black as the ace of spades, as they say. It's black and it—but when you heat a roux oil that high in temperature, which you—you will get up to 400-degrees and it knocks all the bad stuff out, you know. It just—so it's not really a bad, bad thing for the gumbo.

But anyway, my point is—is that, you know, like you do so many different gumbos and mine, what I do is—the difference in mine is—you'll see a lot of them, like you'll see—let's say what I use—you'll see okra in it. And mine, you won't see okra because I cook mine at a minimum of four hours and what I've—what we've done, you know, we started off the restaurant doing two-and-a-half gallons. My mom doing that a couple of days a week and the next—two weeks later all of the sudden five gallons a couple times a week, and then all of the

sudden I go—had to go in the back and use a crawfish burner and cook ten-gallon pots. Well now I do twenty-gallons three times a week, and we sell a lot of gumbo. But I cook it no less than four hours and I have tomatoes—I don't use tomato sauce, tomato paste as a lot of people; I use canned whole tomatoes. I kind of learned that from Paul Prudhomme, you know. Paul said that he uses canned tomatoes because when you use fresh ingredients it really sounds cool. You have—yeah, it's good, it's hip, but you can't rely on a fresh vegetable being the exact same taste every time. When you have a neighborhood joint, when you have a place that people go, they want to go there going I know what tastes like, so I'm going to go back to that exact same taste. I don't want any other; I want that taste; I like it. So when you use the can then, they—these guys spent billions of dollars—millions of dollars getting that thing right, so why not take advantage of it, you know, and it's not a heavier thing—not a heavy tomato thing, so you know when—the juice you use when you have a canned diced tomato you can taste it. It's like a real light, light, light watered down tomato juice, you know. So therefore you have a hint of tomato. And I believe that the real definition of Creole cooking is a hint of everything. When I do a sandwich, I don't—even though I have a Vidalia onion and a Creole tomato and this, I want just a hint of a taste of everything, so when you taste it, close your eyes and you can go whoa—whoa—whoa! I got all these different flavors. What's going on?

But back to the Gumbo, when I cook it four hours, in twenty-pounds, I put sixteen-pounds of okra, okay. It sounds like a lot. Okra in the old days was used as a thickener—a thickening agent, period. You either thickened it one or two ways: with a lot of roux and I don't like it because then you become a flour-based taste and it's just—and you can taste the roux; the other way is filé. You use—at the end of your Gumbo when you—when it's set in front of you, you take filé which is the Sassafras leaf, I believe, or whatever and you just pour it in there, and

it will naturally thicken it up, you know. But mine—it's really funny because, you know, everybody says, "Oh, God, all that Okra? Eh! Oh, it's slimy." Well you don't—you cook the okra before—number one. What we do is we put baking sheets in the oven and cook it for about a half-hour. Okra, the natural seeds in it are slimy, so when you cook it and bake it like that it takes—naturally it takes the slime out of it. Or if you're not doing that much, you're not doing sixteen pounds you can take one pound and put it on top of the stove and with a little bacon grease. I'm sorry, I'm not going to be a purist and say extra virgin olive oil. But you cook it with a little bacon grease, you give it a little more seasoning and you just sauté it and you—don't leave the pot because it will burn the pan. So you do that and then that will cook the slime out. But—and then you put it in the gumbo, so all—what you have is—and all of the sudden you're watching it—you're watching it—you're watching it and all of the sudden in four hours there ain't no okra. You don't see any seeds; you don't see anything. But when you—and everybody says why four hours? Well it's like when you—and this is the fun part of it. When—you know, I've been filmed a lot of times doing the gumbo and I said, "You know really—if you really want to film it and you really want to see it and how it turns into gumbo, this—you've got to be here from the beginning to the end."

And when you're there from the beginning to the end—okay, I get the pot of water, the stock rolling, and the first thing I'll get is the chicken stock. If I don't have enough chicken stock, I'll put some—it's—it has a little sodium and a chicken base in it. I try to get the most non-sodium stuff, but I get the chicken flavor in it, and then I make my roux beforehand. And once again, you know, hey, Emeril is great; he's this but he's a Northerner. He came down here; he used us—but anyway, Paul Prudhomme, you know, when he's the first one that did his gumbo, before he did his roux—the way he did the roux would take forty-five minutes to an

hour-and-a-half. They were put on a slow flame and those women would sit there—or those men would sit there and just stir it. You got to stir it because it won't—you can't leave the pot or it will burn. And it's equal amounts of flour and oil and that's—you know, that's basically it. And then you wait and after about forty-minutes later it starts—you know, it will start turning [color] in about twenty-minutes—it starts turning from white because you have white all-purpose flour and vegetable oil—peanut oil or whatever—and you start to see it turn gray—ashen gray—and then beige and then it will get into a little brown and then you start to get later to a little burgundy—get a little reddish. And that—that roux is your etouffee roux because that's a little reddish, but you want to stop it there. But I go all the way with mine to the black. And you've got to pull it off before black because it will keep cooking fifteen to twenty minutes after [you take it off the heat]. So you go to Paul [Prudhomme], where I was saying what he did was, all of the sudden he puts that fire up on a humongous burner. I mean that—that oil gets 300, 400, 500-degrees and that's why you hear it known—a lot of chefs will call it Cajun napalm, because you get that thing on you, it's going through you, you know. And—and I tell everybody, I say, you know, "I don't want any phone calls." I said don't talk to me while I'm doing the roux because when you have it that high—well anyway, you put the flour in and that—everybody uses Dutch ovens, they say, the cast iron—you can use anything, you know. I like to be a purist and say that's what I do but I don't. So—and it's the same; it comes out the same. But the reason you tell people the Dutch oven is that it's a thicker piece of iron, and you would be less apt to burn it than you would a regular aluminum pan. But what I do is I use a big old two-foot wide aluminum pan and go at it. But when you get the oil that hot, you put the flour in and as soon as you—I mean, you know, I tell everybody to get the hell away and you don't leave that pot for anything; you don't leave that pan and you just start stirring like a madman, and you throw in the big whisk and

you're going and you're going. And you're going to complete a roux in about eight minutes. And—and you just—like I say, you keep going and going. And what I do is—and I think Paul mentioned—said that too, I'm not sure. I've read a lot of his stuff early and—in his earlier years—and you take it off the stove, like I said, right before it becomes black, you know, when it's deep, deep brown and it may be still going. You're not going to stop 500-degrees like that, you know. It's—so you pull it off the stove, off the heat and you put it over—and on the side. What you do, the best way to do is you have an onion already diced up celery or bell pepper or whatever and you take that and you don't get close to it but you hold it at a little higher—like a foot away, and you kind of throw it in there and you **[*Sizzling Sound*]** and as soon as you throw it in there it's going to ignite. And you keep stirring and you'll see it start to molt like—like when you see volcanoes go; you'll just start to see it like bubble and fizzle and—and you'll hear it. **[*Sizzling Sound*]** And you throw—and it's best if you get somebody else to throw it in **[*Laughs*]** and, you know, throw it while you're stirring, and you can see it start to cool down. You'll see the next time—by the last time they throw a little bit of that last handful in, it doesn't ignite as much and you'll do that.

And then what I do—I have the liberty of going into the walk-in cooler and holding it, you know—towels around it in the tin—and placing it on a rack that it will cool for Monday and cool from the top and do it. The reason is, when you make a gumbo and I've—and the reason I can sit here and talk to you about gumbo—because I have made over 450 mistakes, you know. And I have—-proud to make them all because I—you know, that's how you learn, you know, and I did. One of the first things that people do—I didn't let the roux cool down to where it was room temperature. I put the roux in when it was hotter than 220 [degrees], the—the temperature of a boil and all of the sudden the roux—you're looking at it and one of my friends came in

and—who is a chef and he goes, "Oh, you did it. Don't even think about trying to rescue it." So you had to start all over—not the roux, but you can't put that into that because it will be chunks of flour and oil, rather than smoothness that will come to create the color, the nuttiness—that's the whole deal. Like in my twenty-gallons I'll put three large kitchen spoons of the roux; I'll put it in a tin thing and let it cool down. And when the stock is rolling—remember right now all we have is the chicken stock rolling. And then when it's rolling and the roux is ready I'll put three large kitchen spoons—what equals about three-cups—of roux. And that's twenty gallons. And that ain't a hell of a lot but—but that will turn it, you know.

So then the—let's just talk about hues right now. What we're talking about is a black roux. Like I say, that blackness will curb from after you cool it down into the cooler, and then you take it out and all of the sudden it went in brown and by—it kept cooking a little bit, it's black now. So anyway, when you do that and then the only other colors you're adding are the—the okra, which totally dissipates. You have a little color in the cayenne. Some chili powder I put in—see, I'm giving away all my secrets now. But anyway—and then the tomato water. So then what you're going to get is anywhere from a light, light—or a deep red to a dark colored gumbo; that's what that is. All right. And then there's little tomato flecks, and that's all there is.

So then you put that in and that's all rolling. So that all marries together; then the okra that has been baked in the oven for thirty to forty-minutes—slime gone—you go ahead and scrape all of that in. Then we use smoked sausage, and I've got something to say about smoked sausage because my friend [Vaughn Schmitt of Creole Country] came over this morning and gave me a batch. Then I bake the smoked sausage in there also but what I do is—a lot of people take the sausage after it's baked and they'll tilt the pan and let all the fat go out. And it's not only fat, it's—it's just the juices that are in smoked sausage, which is not all fat. So anyway, I pour

everything into this. Okay, so now we got the stock, the okra, and the sausage. So what you got is the smoked flavor, the thickener—no flavor—and then the chicken base and then the nuttiness of the roux. So about this time what I do is I go ahead and I'll put all my herbs in. And I use thirteen different herbs including oh, like I said, a little salt. I might put three tablespoons of salt in a twenty-gallon pot, okay. So I have like thirteen different herbs in there. And it's funny because I do everything to odd numbers. A friend of mine, who is one of my best friends, he died a couple years ago—he used to say, "You know, when the black cats would walk in front of you or seven-eleven," he'd go, "that's bad luck for everybody else—double good luck for us," you know. So from that moment on, everything I do is increments—and the most of the herbs I've put in there, the majority of them are thirteen spoons. And I don't have it on me right now, but you can never find me without a large iced-tea spoon in my back pocket. The reason is, you got gallon containers that all your spices are in, and when I do the measurement, I just go in and do [***whoosh***]—I mean that sound is I just shovel it in and take it out. That's probably two level spoons like that [***gestures to illustrate a rounded tablespoon***] but I—it doesn't matter; this is what it is. And I tell everybody in the kitchen this is what I measure; this is the way we do things here—with an iced tea spoon—and just put it in and do it. So everything in there, you know, whether I do six spoons of this or—or not six—nine of this or five or seven—do everything in odd numbers **[*Laughs*]**, it's all do with the teaspoon. So anyway, that's that.

So now we got the herbs in it, so we got the flavor; we got that. But if you take a spoon—now let's say that whole period is twenty minutes—twenty-five minutes that we've—the water has been boiling—got everything going. Well you take a big kitchen spoon and you put the water and you put it in the water and you hold it up and you look at it. And if you look at it, you're going to see the center of it about the size of a fifty-cent piece and then the periphery of that

will—will let's say spread out to an inch. Well the guts of that is that fifty-cent piece. The outside of it is still water, okay. So if anybody tells you they cook a gumbo or, you know, in a half-hour, just tell them you know, talk to you later. But anyway, so thus my point is—and I just let it roll from then on, and I let it roll to a strong boil—one hour, two hours. Well then, you know, you start to lose—it evaporates, so you got—I'll fill it back up with water, you know. I've got a hose right there on the thing and get the low burner—if the thing is going and then at about three hours—three hours, fifteen minutes—three-and-a-half if you do that spoon test again, and you look at it you're looking like if you were looking at roast beef gravy. It is all solid, meaning that there's no water; it's all just flavor. And then all of the sudden the herbs all marry into it; the okra has dissipated. The thickener—the thickness is coming into it and then, you know, one thing I forgot to say is after the—the—the sausage you put in. What I used to do, and I kind of changed a little bit—you cut up chicken thigh meat and in that—in that twenty gallons I put right about thirty—thirty pounds of sausage and about thirty pounds of chicken thigh meat. So then I put the chicken thigh meat in right around the sausage and okra time. But when you do that with raw chicken, well what do you get? What do you get if you boil in plain water thirty pounds of chicken? You get this humongous chicken stock that's natural, so then you're adding that into it. So you've got all of this really just natural stuff, you know. I don't know what people think of gumbo elsewhere but hey, this is the real deal and, you know, so it—all—and then all of the sudden—. But what I do is I stage the chicken, meaning that I'll put some of it in the first half-hour, maybe half of it, so that chicken by the end is not shredded but it's kind of getting ready to shred almost. And then you have the other stuff I might put in maybe an hour before the end and that will be a little more solid, you know, something like that.

So anyway, we get to the end and I'll turn it off and a lot of times everybody hates me because there might be a little burnt on the bottom because you're cooking it that long, and I'm rolling it that long and sometimes I'll turn it down a touch. But I mean, you can't even find a spoon that large to go all the way to the bottom of the gumbo pot. So, you know, you feel a little bit. You can go a little bit long, but you don't want to test it by turning it down because when you—and those times occur when I'll add more water to it, meaning some of the okra or seasonings may go down to the bottom when they're—when it stops boiling like that. And then when you bring it back up to a boil, sometimes it will stick, so that's where you might get a little bit on the bottom. But other than that, you know, and then it comes out and—and then like as I told you earlier, I always try to regulate the gumbo that it is never cooked on the same day you eat it because, like red beans, which we cook three days before you eat it, gumbo or any of the—well I guess, you know, we talked earlier about the Cajuns the way they were the first—some of the first people to do the one-pot cooking. Just think about that and when it all marries together and then it hangs out with each other overnight, and it all just sits there in that walk-in cooler. What do you think it does? It all just—the flavors just, you know—God, they get together so greatly. Meaning that a lot of the—you know, some of the heat that you put in there, well that heat kind of dissipates because some of the other stuff—and it doesn't come into the form of like—heat goes in—it's three different things of your tongue. Like when you get—you eat a habanero pepper, well you put it on your tongue—that beginning of your tongue is going to burn; you've lost your palate. You can't taste anything else. Then there's another type of heat that will get you to the middle of your tongue and then another type of heat that after you eat something and you swallow it all of the sudden about fifteen, twenty seconds later it comes up from your gills, the bottom of your throat and you go oh, hello! And it's not a heat—I usually think that is

the white pepper, which is the most expensive pepper and the pepper that is most dealt with. But anyway yeah, and all of this stuff put together overnight, and when you eat it that day and you eat it the next day—two different animals in my book. You know, the thickness of it and—usually when I make my Gumbo I make it such that—I make it like a concentrate, meaning it's—it's hearty and—and I need everybody to be on the same page. Everybody who works for me knows number one they have to carry around a spoon; number two, the reason is you have to taste it everyday. You have to taste that Gumbo when you put it on because you're going to have to add a little water to it. It's going to seem too salty, but it's not salty; it's just a lot of—lot of concentrated chicken stock, you know. And anyway, you know, you do that and you add a little water to it and—like I say, I've tried to get my gumbo manufactured, and I've been to four manufacturing companies that are humongous, and unfortunately, when you go to a manufacturer to do it like in a frozen thing, they can't let you on their line for three-and-a-half hours even though they cook it twice as fast because it's a steam kettle. But the minimum they can do it, you can't do it, and I—they've tried and I've never been able to do it, so keep things as they are, you know.

00:51:55

AE: Hmm.

00:51:57

BG: So that's kind of it. That's—and—and like I say, a lot of people may—they complain and like I say, you don't need hot sauce, you don't need salt, you don't need anything. What it is it is,

and then in New Orleans it's warm because a lot of people who grew up liking heat—always more you know; so anyway.

00:52:18

AE: Well I can't tell you how many questions I have. **[*Laughs*]** And one of them is about your roux because I wonder how common or uncommon it is for people to use such a black roux in a gumbo.

00:52:32

BG: I would think that it would be uncommon, if we're talking about lay people. Or we're talking about chefs?

00:52:38

AE: Or—or traditionally—all of the above; I mean I—in the culture that is gumbo, how often is that—?

00:52:45

BG: It takes somebody that knows what they're doing to get a black roux, you know. And black roux traditionally is just used in a gumbo. Like I told you, the mahogany roux, the deep, deep, deep beautiful mahogany just—I mean it's like Technicolor, you know, and that usually goes to an etouffee because—crawfish etouffee—etouffee means smothered in your own gravy and once again, etouffee is done thirty different ways. **[*Laughs*]**

And I mean mine is just—my cooking, I just you know—I'm here to tell you, I do a lot of the basics because I think you can't—you can't top it, you know, some of the things they did that were natural, you know. I mean when I do an etouffee, I'll take a crawfish boil and then I take the crawfish and then I'll take those crawfish heads and tails that everybody discards, I will boil those and get a stock and boil the hell out of them, you know, just—and you taste that—so what you're tasting is the seasoning that goes into a crawfish boil. Okay you're tasting the salt, you're tasting—and if you ever look at a bottle of crawfish boil, you know, Zattaran's, Rex—they all put them out. Okay, if you ever look at what's in it, it will flip you out. I mean anise, just these—all these things and most people when you smell it, I mean it burns your nose, but you're going to have that flavor in these shells with the salt and the different things and when you have a crawfish boil you have—in the pots go onions, garlic, you know, everything is thrown into a pot of crawfish, so when you do that then you boil the etouffee—you boil the etouffee stock. So then when you do that—strain that and then you—you—I take the seasoning, go ahead and sauté that and then put some of the mahogany roux in there. So when you're cooking that roux, when you're cooking the vegetables down, then you add the stock, okay. So the roux is getting a little bit dark but you don't do—you know you're not doing a more—darker roux; you're just doing it to sauté the vegetables, and then you put the stock in. So say—I don't know measurements but anyway, you've got this much. So anyway when you do that, all of the sudden you're tasting it and you—you add—you don't have to add any seasoning. It's already in the stock from the crawfish boil. So when you do that you—all of the sudden you taste it, but it tastes kind of roux-y. It tastes—the roux is just where it really—all of a sudden—so what you do is per order at the restaurant or if you're doing it for your family, you have that sitting over here and then you take crawfish or shrimp etouffee—whatever stock you're using—and you put that in the pan, and then

you take the crawfish with some mushrooms and some different things in it. Because you have your rice over here—rice again—and you start cooking that. When that's all cooked, one of the things of Creole cooking is always finishing dishes with that wonderful artery-clogging substance called butter. And what you do is you turn the fire off and you throw butter in—soft butter, not melted butter, not—not frozen butter; put soft butter in it and you stir. It does two things. It calms the hell out of that roux. You don't even taste it anymore. And gives it that butter flavor, but it also thickens it up. You know, that's the basis for Shrimp Creole, Shrimp Stew, you know etouffee), etcetera. I know I got off on the etouffee, but when you talk about stocks and things and roux, it's all married together.

00:56:41

AE: Well how much does the gumbo that you make now—how much does that resemble what your mother made or your mother's family made?

00:56:47

BG: Ninety—ninety-seven percent, ninety-five percent, yeah.

00:56:53

AE: Did she use a black roux also?

00:56:55

BG: Yeah.

00:56:57

AE: Now is that kind of—is that something that—

00:56:58

BG: And you know what? I—I can—when I first opened, I remember a couple people from Chacahoula came in and they can tell where—they can tell because there's something that I put in there that's different than anybody else.

00:57:13

AE: So it can be identified as a particular regional kind of style that they recognize?

00:57:18

BG: Yeah. I mean you can tell, like I said, the difference between a—I think a North Louisiana and a—and a New Orleans [gumbo], you know, and everybody naturally associates food with New Orleans. You know, I've got a cookbook over there called *Creole Feast* and it was my bible. If I would show you—that was the first book I ever read in cooking. My father never taught me anything about the cooking aspect of the business, but that was one of the first. And it was just so funny to see those—it was the fifteen best black chefs in New Orleans that gave New Orleans its name, really. Not the French guys. You know, this is the real deal and they—they did the stocks and they did this, but they didn't use a lot of—lot of herbs like people use today. Whether they didn't have them in the area and, you know, once again these—you get the Cajun cooking coming down and then you've got the black people who will—they will use a lot of things. They won't let anything go to waste, which, you know, I mean—it's a great, great way to

learn, you know, to use everything and yeah. But you look at that book—it's out of print now but it's cool; it shows you the—yeah, and you just—yeah.

00:58:39

AE: Hmm. So is—I wonder, in gumbo-making and in families and communities, if the color of your roux that you use to make your gumbo is something that you want people to know. If it's like a badge of honor to make a black, black roux—?

00:58:53

BG: No, New Orleans is about flavor. You know, when you come—when you come down here—and I don't think a lot of people—I really don't think a lot of people cook it that long to get rid of the okra. I really don't think so, even though I know that's one of the old ways of doing it because a lot of people love—I mean if you give me fried orka and ham and tomatoes, you know—excuse me; see ya later. I can—that's, you know—. So a lot of people like okra and then—and then also what we do at the restaurant is we sauté the shrimp and oysters or whatever per cup or bowl, meaning that, you know, when you have that bowl you're going to have the chicken andouille and then the guts of it but also we're going to put the chicken, the shrimp and the oyster, whatever and it's going to be sautéed and put in it. And so when you cook a gumbo, like if I was to cook a gumbo at home, first of all I'd use about two gallons of oyster water rather than anything because it's a natural salt, and you don't need any type of sodium or anything but you know—but you want it chocked full of stuff. So they're going to leave the okra in it; they're going to make it a lot thicker. And most people I know who do gumbos at home—whether you do a duck gumbo or whatever, you want it—they want it full of stuff, you know. That's—to me,

that's the badge of honor of—of a home-style Gumbo. You know, when you get, "Hey, come on over. I'm making some—cousin Laramie shot ten ducks. I made some duck gumbo," you know. So that's kind of what, you know, that's—that's more the badge, you know. I don't think it's the color of black—I don't think.

01:00:34

AE: Well when you were making—when you started making gumbo in large quantities for the restaurant, when you're adding the roux and having it at a—at a high boil and you were testing it like you were describing it with the spoon and looking at the color and consistency and all, how—how long did it—or did it take you any time to reach that level where you knew the ratio of roux to stock—?

01:00:57

BG: You know, the ultimate—and you know once again, you know, I love this city you know; I just—the people, the culture, the—everything about it no matter what anybody says. Hey I like Banana Republics. But anyway, one of the reasons New Orleans is known as a food capital is that number one you go—anybody from New Orleans—you go sit in my place, you go sit in any bar, you go sit in a restaurant where people are gathering for anything—within fifteen minutes you're going to know somebody's aunt's, cousin's, uncle's, best friend's, gardener—whatever, you know. And also to that same thing is that you're going to within, you know, when you meet people [hear], "Oh, man, Aunt Tillie cooks the best this, that, and that. Come on over!" you know, everybody has grown up with tasting good food and—not everybody can cook good but everybody in this city, their level of appreciation, you're not going to BS a lot of people from

this city and put like—like if I'm selling roast beef, I'm not going—I'm sorry, I am not going to get Arrow [or] Sysco-bought roast beef and sell it with a nice gravy *[Arrow and Sysco are food distribution companies*]. They ain't buying it. You know, so if you want any place of last—any kind of time and you can walk around and tell people hello in your restaurant and not go, "Oh God, here he comes." This food, you know, you don't sell it, you know. Well my point is, everybody has tasted good food for generations in this city, so that's why I feel, you know, it's—that's what it is, you know, because just—somebody could just take one spoon or something and go, "Eh." And they'll let you know, too, by the way. Early in my life, I mean, I was an underwater diver and a welder, and I can remember offshore going, "Oh man, I'd hate to be a cook out here." Because these guys, you know—we do hard work, we do, you know—and some of these guys, I got a little sadness for these guys because I know what they went through growing up in the business, but these guys are—[they'd say] "Man, what is this crap? I'm not eating this." You know, it was like, whoa! So yeah, people know how to eat down here.

01:03:13

AE: So tell me a little bit of history about Liuzza's by the Track.

01:03:17

BG: We've had it ten years. And everybody always assumes that there's another Liuzza's, you know, three-quarters of a mile away right across from here; we're all—both in the Mid City, spelled the same and everything, and everybody thinks that they're related. Well they never were related, you know. I mean it's just funny; this—this place—I guess they've been there seven years, you know, something like that and that's, you know—you know, I was talking to you

earlier about a newspaper I found from 1951 and thinking about that, you know, you're looking in the newspaper and that was before you had big supermarket chains—big grocery chains. Well when you look in that paper you see so many ads for grocery boys, delivery boys, because they had a grocery every five blocks—a little corner grocery. Thus, they did neighborhood barrooms—you know, neighborhood restaurants—so that's why the approximation is the same. I mean it's right across time. So it's probably five or six places in between—between us, you know, right there and it's just and old thing growing up. But ours is fine because we're right by the racetrack. And I remember a friend of mine who was a—he's a horse wager or a bookie, as we call them; he's a big-time bookie and he came here one time and he said, "Yeah, Bill," he says—he's older than me and he says, "Yeah, this used to be a bar down the street, and it's a coffee shop now. And he said, "Yeah, it used to have murals and this was a bar and he had all this—booked the horses and everything." And I go, "Really?" Well with this—when the next owner bought the coffee shop, he took down all the stuff that they put on the walls and some of the plywood and different things and sure enough, there was a mural behind there. It's still there now; it's there right now, and it's a mural of the racehorses and everything. But the best part is that when they went upstairs—there's an upstairs to it—when he was like taking the stuff down from the walls, they found five phone lines, meaning they used to be up high; they could see the track and they were calling to their buddies to see what's going on. **[*Laughs*]** So anyway, they both have—and the other Liuzza's that was owned by Ray Liuzza. Ray Liuzza went on to do the Cuco's chain; Cuco's is a Mexican [restaurant] chain. They were around the city, and I think they were in Texas. It might have been five of them in the New Orleans area, and I thought he did one or two in Texas. They're very successful, and he went on—

01:06:04

AE: The restaurants?

01:06:04

BG: Yeah. He went on to do that after he sold that. And it was funny because the lady who owns the other Liuzza's, Miss Theresa [Galbo], sweetest, sweetest woman on the earth, and the family is great; I—I grew up with the family. I played football against her son; he was a great football player and—but you know, like I said, no relation [to Liuzza's by the Track]. But she was a waitress there and another guy had it, and when she found out he was going to sell it, she asked for first refusal. [She said,] "Let me see if I can put the money together." She's got it now. She's—I'm not going to tell you how old she is but anyway, yeah, she is just the sweetest thing. She used to sit right by that cash register because I used to go there once a week at least, you know, and they've got great food.

01:06:49

AE: Have they reopened since the storm [Hurricane Katrina]? I thought I heard—

01:06:50

BG: Yes.

01:06:51

AE: Okay.

01:06:51

BG: They just opened about a month ago.

01:06:53

AE: Yeah, okay.

01:06:54

BG: And another great—and it's funny, we both sell the same type of beers, and we started it first—whatever. But they—they got more popular for it because there was eighteen-ounce schooners that are frozen and those are—those are killer. Those are great, you know—a bowl of Gumbo and that—gee. And French bread? Nothing in better life. **[*Laughs*]**

01:07:14

AE: So your place, Liuzza's by the Track, was it [called] Liuzza's by the Track before you got it ten years ago?

01:07:20

BG: No, no, it was just Liuzza's Bar and Grill. It was Jack Liuzza who owned it and they—it was really funny, you know, because the place is very small. We only seat forty, including the bar and if you—you've been in there—and you walk in and that front area where you walk in, well that was the bar area and in the back in the beginning—where before we took it over—it's right around the racetrack, which is also [where the] New Orleans Jazz Festival [is held every year], and so I mean thousands of people come in there during that time. But they—Larry had a

little partition and it didn't partition off from the whole—go to the other wall; it just came from the bar about four-feet out, but that was known as the dining room and that couldn't have been more than an area of fourteen by eight or ten [feet], you know. So it was only—it couldn't have fit more than four tables, you know—three or four tables, but that was the dining area.

So what was really funny I thought—and—and then in the—what—what made a significance, too, there was different tile down there—still is the different tile. One is—the barroom had a certain tile and this one did, and what's really kind of neat is that when we first went in there we looked in the kitchen and it was nothing like it is now but there was a—a Maytag stove and something else and it was all like home appliances it looked like. But we went upstairs because we thought well, we'll want to get upstairs maybe to do private parties and everything and then the—the little lady—his wife is still living and lives with—oh, her sister and they live right on City Park down here, the sweetest ladies in the world—and the—what they used to do when—when Jack and his wife owned it, we went upstairs to look and there was no kitchen upstairs. Wow, no kitchen. So what they must have done is [say] "Goodnight everybody; see y'all later," [and then] lock the door. They had their dinner, and then they went upstairs because there was no kitchen upstairs. I thought that, you know—I never—I guess that was a lot in those restaurants in them days, you know. So that's the way families were—people were, you know.

01:09:38

AE: Hmm.

01:09:39

BG: Yeah, that was kind of cool.

01:09:42

AE: So you've been making your gumbo in all these other restaurant ventures you've done?

01:09:45

BG: No.

01:09:47

AE: No?

01:09:49

BG: I didn't really get to what I wanted to do 'til this one because I was—I started a restaurant in the [French] Quarter, Palm Court Jazz Café, and that was 1989—'88—humongous restaurant. But when you're in the Quarter, you know, *then* we catered to mostly European groups. Like I say, we were the first restaurant to have dining and music, so thus we became like a European hub. When the Europeans came in we did, you know, we created a menu of like forty entrees, twenty soups, ten salads, fifteen desserts and, you know, just different things. And they would choose from things before, and then we'd have groups of twenty. We started out—it held 125 and after the first season, I realized that they were just building the convention center. New Orleans was just figuring out that convention was the deal; this is after the World's Fair and all of that area had to be used and the dock, the river, etcetera. So thus, the convention center. And I think we became the long—the longest straight consecutive center in the country and all of the

sudden—oh man, we've got to expand and George bought the— I said, "Are you nuts? We did make money last year." I said, "Well we don't want to be building while these people are coming in; we wan to be done when these conventions started coming in." Sure enough, I mean the biggest party that they had ever seen you know like 350 people or something and—.

But the point is—is that yeah, we—I didn't get to really do my gumbo because the French don't like things too hot. The Belgians don't like it this way—the this, the that—the that, so really I would—and then it was funny, like when we did group—French groups, 100 French people and I'd do choices of like, you know—they'd have choices like forty different things; what do you think they chose when the came to New Orleans; the—the Beef Bourguignon. That's like their red beans or their staple of their country, and I'm going—the first time I go, "What, are they trying to test me," you know? "What is this?" Well they had been around the city eating all of this spicy, spicy food; they wanted some comfort food that they were used to. I mean that would have, you know, the soup in the front and then the dessert in the back. But yeah, that's what they—they Beef Bourguignon for 110 French and I'm like, "Oh, my God."

01:12:35

AE: **[*Laughs*]**

01:12:36

BG: But anyway, you really—because we did groups. Because we—you really had to cater to what they wanted. I mean you didn't want to see sixty bowls come back full. And if it was not going to be done right—so I kind of studied internationally, knowing what these different groups would want. And no, I wasn't able to do what I wanted to do 'til I got this [Liuzza's by the

Track] and, you know, I said, "Wow, local joint with my friends." And just went, "All right, let's—let's roll," you know, "let's party." You know, like I said, we would do everything as my dad did, you know—the old way of doing things, which is comfort food, especially now after the hurricane thing. That's one of the biggest demands in this whole area; everybody wants comfort. They want—yeah, it's the old shit, you know. So anyway, this is really the first time I was able to do it and look what happened, you know. It's kind of cool.

01:13:34

AE: Were you making gumbo at home in the time before you had Liuzza's?

01:13:37

BG: I never cook at home.

01:13:38

AE: No?

01:13:40

BG: And now—I rarely stay home. Maureen [lady friend], she's an excellent cook. Like I say, she grew—she was around and she grew up in New Jersey but—and in Saint—she was in the islands, St. Thomas, and if—I mean, you know, there's a lot—all these islands and that's where the Creoles are and all these different, you know, St. Martin and all these things—you get this mixture of foods. So when she cooks she—so she's just magnificent, now. So anyway, no, I

don't cook that much, but I do love to cook once in a while, you know. But I can't cook for two—four—.

01:14:16

AE: **[*Laughs*]** Whole different ballgame.

01:14:17

BG: Man, I don't—they're just—

01:14:20

AE: Well what do you think your mother would—would say about all of it?

01:14:21

BG: Thumbs up, thumbs up. My dad, too, you know. I—I—it's a shame that they're not around to see the accolades etcetera and taste the stuff, you know, etcetera but yeah, especially since I always am proud to say I'm a Boudreaux, you know, because that's really where it comes from. And then—then now I just—I always now research food a lot more, because like I say, if you look at this thing it's just amazing to see what these people used and presented, etcetera, and it was very hard—a lot of their things. It wasn't easy what they did. And then you figure in 1904 there wasn't a hell of a lot of good refrigeration, etcetera, etcetera; so when they got things in, things had to be done really quick. So anyway.

01:15:10

AE: And is Chacahoula—is that where your mom is from?

01:15:14

BG: Yeah.

01:15:15

AE: Is that considered Cajun country, if it's near Houma?

01:15:18

BG: Yeah, yeah. Chacahoula, yeah. We—we had some property—family land around there and some gas and different things. Every quarter we have—had a meeting and I'd go to it with my mother sometimes and with the family, I mean it was the Taureaux, the Bougeois, Boudreaux—everybody is eighty-years-old, ninety-years-old. And then what they would do, they would lease some of the property out to family members and friends, so all of the sudden they would be calling out everybody that they're leasing it on to these meetings and they'd say, "Well there's Mr. Grabert. Mr. Grabert, he's got 400 acres." What do you think he does? He's an alligator farmer. And I called him one time. I said, "Hey, Mr. Grabert," I said, "I'm a Boudreaux." I said, "I—I really want to get some Boudreaux boots." He says, "Cher, you want to come here alligator season?" So, you know, I'd go up there and catch the alligator and, you know, there's Boudreaux boots. **[*Laughs*]** It was just funny. Those people, they're so hardy, so to-the-land it's not even funny. I mean—and you can go as far as like Des Allemands right out before you get into Bayou Lafourche, which goes straight to Grand Isle, and by Des Allemands is—they have a Catfish Festival out there every year. It's a catfish—they call it Catfish Capital of the World. But there's

some people I know down there and just, you know—because I mean when you go to a barroom down there or something and just start talking to these people, it's one time when you zip your mouth, you know, and just listen to the tales. Listen to the tales—listen. You know, I mean I can remember a time going—somebody talking about an area and going, "Yeah, cher, yeah. And I got this turtle—." Oh, I know what it was, because when you go to Grand Isle and you drive back down, there's one road; it's Bayou Lafourche and that goes right along Bayou Lafourche. One on side you got all the cane fields and then you see—**[*Phone Rings*]**—excuse me.

01:17:23

AE: Uh-hmm.

01:17:26

BG: But you go down and it's like—it's just full of cane fields—sugarcane. Summertime you'll have to—if you're on that side of the highway you—in the old days you'd have the mules and this wagon just full of sugar. You know, it's spilling out all over the place, you know, and you'd see oil rigs and everything. But if you leave Grand Isle and you're coming down and you go into all the bars and as you leave you're going from the French-speaking mixture of French, English, and Cajun and stuff. I remember they had this one bar; it was a tug boat and the tide was low and all of the sudden you went in and the tug—what was it called—the Floating Palace and it was literally the inside of a tugboat and it was—the tide was down. So all of the sudden you went in and you were listing—you were up like forty-five-degrees and you were holding on [and saying] "I'll take a beer." But, you know, then the further you'd get to New Orleans, the more English.

So I remember this one time we'd go into this bar—especially if you go down there in the wintertime and everybody is hunting and everybody is eating in the barrooms—and you'd walk in the guy would say, "Hey, cher, you want some turtle sauce piquant?" "Oh yeah, man, yeah." So man, you'd get—and then [they'd say] "Here, you want to see where that turtle sauce piquant comes from?" And he'd take an old like a—a cooler, like a beer box cooler and all of the sudden you'd pick up this head from a big turtle, and they'd have logger heads down there. Now loggerheads grow 'til they die, okay. So there's—they get really big. And then you got all the guys in there; the Cajuns doing the turtle shell stories. You got the fishing stories? Turtle shell stories. "Oh cher, I use my turtle shell as a bathtub." "Oh, I put—oh—." You know just great, yeah, stories.

So the barrooms coming down from the Grand Isle to New Orleans get less French and less Creole as you get into the city. But the stories, I mean my father and I had been down there and almost every summer I'd go down there and work with him; go to the Ace Hardware in Golden Meadow [Louisiana] and the water fountain? That was a keg of beer. Hardy people, yeah—.

01:19:49

AE: Well but with a mother from Cajun country and growing up with her gumbo and then—I might be wrong, but on your menu do you call—you call your gumbo Creole Gumbo, right?

01:20:01

BG: Yes. Yeah, because it's everything. It's a mixture of everything.

01:20:06

AE: Can you talk about that a little bit more? Because with the Cajun influence—and so the Creole gumbo—and Creole kind of, to me, is being New Orleans—urban-New Orleans specific.

01:20:19

BG: Well the Creole is really—I mean it's Cajun—and that's a big—that's a big discussion right there. I mean when I was younger I didn't like to be considered Cajun. You know, when I went in the military in 1967 [I said,] "Oh no, I'm from New Orleans. Oh no, don't compare me to those crazy people." Because I mean, you know, they were—yeah, those were people who came out of the swamps literally, you know. I mean because they caught all the crawfish in the swamps, they caught the alligator further down and, you know, like I said, everything—but there's two different schools on that. You know the—the Cajuns, they're—we're the ones that come from Nova Scotia and the Creole—the Creole goes, you know, into the French and it goes into everything. I mean the island of Martinique, that is the European Creoles; it's the one with the blue eyes and the light, you know—the light skin. I mean, you know, when—.

One year—and you've got to do this if you've never done it—Mardi Gras—Mamou, Louisiana, you know. I did it once and I tell everybody I know you've got to do it once in your life—just once and it's—you know, I went up there and it's where they ride. They get up at seven in the morning. The town of Mamou is about three-and-a-half blocks long and these guys get up; they go into a big hall like a Jaycee Hall—or whatever it is and they all meet, and they come in dressed in these costumes and they look—it almost looks like the Ku Klux Klan but it's not; it goes back to the old French—like hats like this ***[moves hands to illustrate a tall cone shaped hat above his head***]. And they get off there. They're drinking beer at seven in the

morning on their horses. Man, and they'd go into the meeting and they blah-blah-blah—whatever they say, whatever they talk about. They probably talk about nothing, but they just give it that mystique and that—what they did—their ancestors did. And they do the whole thing. And they come out, oh yeah—yeah, well what they do is they go each farm and they get three, four, five chickens and everybody gets off their horses and they're diving for the chickens, I mean and they just, you know—they don't take a net or anything. They've got to catch them by hand, and then when they catch them they give them to this one guy and he brings them back to town where they have the old humongous 200-gallon vat—old cast iron vat—and he's making gumbo. And excuse me, that gumbo is—all they do is they de-bone it but I mean by de-bone, I mean the wings—the wings are there, the meat and the rib cages are there and it's the old way of eating it. I mean it all goes in the pot; I mean they pluck it and then that's it. And every farm they go to they take, you know, the chickens and send it back to town **[*Laughs*]** and put it and at a certain point they start serving, you know, some hours later. But it's funny because after about—we—we followed them for about three or four, you know, farms and by the way, when you go there, you know, you stay in the Atchafalaya Basin and at that time it's wintertime, the Basin is low. You see all these cypress and you stay in these State Park cabins that are screened porches on the outside, and they just have little tiny rooms that you sleep in. And then my God, you get the crawfish, you know. You're in heaven, man; you're totally in heaven.

But anyway, so what we did is we all went back into town and they come back around 3:00—3:30 and I'm really—I was supposed to ride this year and the guy said that he—the horse wouldn't whatever—and he didn't—and I didn't ride. Thank God. Anyway, they came in and all these guys come in. And so they come in town and I'm looking around town and I see all these people, you know, in like—it looked like high school football jackets. And I'm going wow, you

know. And I look on the back and it says *World Champion Bareback Champion, Las Vegas, Nevada 1980-something*. These are Louisiana's cowboys. Now, you talk about something—so many—the—I don't want to say black, I'm going to say Creoles. Their—their skin is—is like this [***points to the amber-colored wood of the table before him***]. I mean it's like—it almost looks Indian. It's like a mahogany-type skin with the blue-green eyes like Indians. I mean it's just a total different anything you've ever seen, you know.

But anyway so 3:30—4 o'clock when these guys come in, they are standing on their horses holding the chickens. They are so drunk—standing on their head on their horses—but these are Louisiana's cowboys. And if you ever saw the movie *A Man from Snowy River*, all these mountain horses, well these horses are—they are the combination of an Appaloosa and just a—a dredge horse that will pull, you know, just things for your farm, the plows—everything. The girth on the front of these horses, I mean, are like five-foot wide. They are the just the most massive animals; that's why these guys could stand on them and do everything and what—and these horses would go anywhere. You know it's—it's really cool, you know, to see that. But yeah, and everybody is eating that gumbo that they bring back there and it's—like I say, when you cook gumbo like that, you got all those bones in there and everything—the flavor is just—that's the gumbo you've got to go taste. You know, it's just a real hearty—and it's a thin you know—just a thing going on. It's neat.

01:25:59

AE: Well talking about Indians, we haven't mentioned filé at all. What do you think about filé gumbo? Do you have a taste for it or no?

01:26:06

BG: Yeah, I guess. I just like flavor. It doesn't have—I'm not—being a—a soup guy, I don't care what consistency it is; as long as it's got flavor, I'm for it, you know. Yeah, last night we cooked here—I mean one of the few times. Maureen cooked a—a chicken on the grill the night before, and she always does like herbs and marinates it a little bit before she puts the herbs de'provence in it and some different things and—she won't tell me. But anyway, different things and great seasoning so, you know, we had some of it left and I just threw it in a pot and got that stock and picked the meat and put it in. We got some vegetables from Whole Foods [Market] and I mean, you know, and she does jasmine rice, and it don't get better than that.

But anyway, my point is I don't care about consistency or the thickness or whatever, as long as it's got flavor. That's why my gumbo is thin, but every spoon speaks for itself. I mean it has a lot of power. You don't have to, you know—

01:27:10

AE: Well what would you say your gumbo says about you? **[*Laughs*]**

BG: [***Short pause. Makes face, as if startled***.]

AE: That got your eyes open. [***Laughs***]

01:27:19

BG: Wow! Never heard that question. It came from my mother, you know. It's just something that's handed down, and I'm very proud of it—that I happened to learn it, you know, from her because I know it came from her mother and that whole area, so I really feel honored that I was

able to—as a kid learn something about this, you know. It's like, you know, one of my favorite people in this city [is] Leah Chase [chef/owner of Dooky Chase Restaurant] and, like I said, I can—I can—she reduces me to being twelve years—ten years old, eight years old when she talks because I just love to listen to her talk. She talks about life and food and, you know, just different things.

There was a guy in the city; his name was Buster Holmes. Years ago he—he had a place—it was on Burgundy in the [nineteen] sixties. He was known as the Red Bean King. And Buster, he was the first place—one of the first places I ever knew of to have communal seating. Everybody thought K-Paul's was the first but at Buster's, you'd walk in and a big long table and everybody sat down, you know, and you'd be next to somebody, you know, and you'd ask the waitress, "Mama"—it was a little black lady—"Mama, you got any butter?" She'd reach over and grab a pound of butter; it was always a pound thick. "There you go." Red beans were 35-cents; they were $1.25 if they had any kind of meat on them. But Buster catered Nina and George Ohr in Palm Court at their wedding. And they could—George is worth millions; he could have got anybody. He got Buster. And anyway Buster came in later on because one of the dishes he had was a garlic chicken. They—it's been known to have other names, Chicken Bonne Femme, the famous Tujague's [a restaurant/bar in new Orleans in operation since 1856] and others of your—French places. He calls it Garlic Chicken and the way these old-timers would tell you how to cook it's—it's like Uncle Remus; it's like a—it's a story, you know. It's not cooking; it's not just about do this, do that—do—if you don't have a love for it and a real deep, deep, deep appreciation for it, get out of the business, you know. It's not a dollars-and-cents thing. But what Buster did was his chicken—just this beautiful chicken with chunks of garlic on it and parsley and just flavored it. Anyway, he is explaining how to do it, you know. First you do

this and then you put the chicken and some butter in here, and you do this and then you take the chicken leg quarters and you put them in a baking pan on top of a grill with some water under it so it steams, cover it with aluminum foil, put it in the oven. So where does the garlic come from? Where—you know—and he said, "Son, we're going to do that." So he had big, big hands, you know, and he always had a diamond horseshoe around his neck. And anyway, when he was doing the beans he would always—he would carry his colander with him—his colander. And it's this old beat up thing and he'd put the beans in and put the water on and lean it over the sink, because first he'd mix the beans and sort through them and take out the bad ones. And he said then, you know—because then he'd put the beans on. Well then we'd get over to the Garlic Chicken and he says—I said, "Man," you know, "chopping like forty cloves of garlic," I said, "that's a pain in the butt." I said, "You know, trying to—they're always scooting and everything." And he goes, "Now son, you know this about—this is about family. It's about love. It's about—first you make the bed." I said, "What?" He said, "First you make the bed." Well what he meant was you pick the parsley and you put the parsley down and he said, "And then you take the garlic and you lay it in the bed and then you start chopping." Well what that—what that did was that enabled it not to scoot, and you were chopping the parsley up at the same time. So all of the sudden you were able to dice the garlic like **[*Gestures*]** without it going all over the place, and you were doing the parsley at the same time. I said, "Man—." Well what he'd do is he just took the garlic and the—the chicken out of the oven and probably—you can't quote me on this because it's probably against the law but—and then had the chicken sitting in the pan, you know. It was steaming because you had the water in the bottom and you had the butter on it, and then you'd just take—[***sniffs and suddenly recognizes a wonderful smell coming for the kitchen***.]

01:31:52

AE: I know, Maureen is cooking something good in there.

01:31:54

BG: And anyway, you'd take and—you'd take the parsley and the garlic and you'd just put it all on top of the chicken that's already cooked—it's got the seasoning on it and everything and then you'd cover it. And then, you know, on the kitchen stoves you've got the shelf behind the stove and you'd put it up there. Well I'm going, "Really?" I said, "What happens, you know, if you serve a piece an hour-and-a-half later? What you know—an hour later what goes on with that?" And he goes, "Son, put a thermometer in them chickens an hour-and-a-half later." In the back of your oven, on the back of your stove, that's where all that heat is going—up there. And you got your oven going and, you know, 400-degrees or—because you're always putting stuff in the oven and taking it out. You've got your burners going on. It's got some heat under there and you got this water under there, so it's steaming it so it's constantly cooking and the garlic gets a little softer and the parsley gets a little—the little things.

01:32:51

AE: Genius. [***Laughs***] So when—you just had foot surgery, you were saying. Were you out for a long enough time that somebody else had to make the gumbo or—what kind of situation like that came up?

01:33:05

BG: Yeah, and I gave one—and one of the secrets of—everybody knows the basic—because some of the basics, what I just told you, a lot of that is kind of the normal stuff. Probably—with the exception of cooking it a long time, probably a couple other exceptions, you know, and that. But obviously, the one exception is spices. And I gave one person that, you know—the spices.

01:33:33

AE: Just for this surgery you did that, or is it somebody who's known for a while?

01:33:36

BG: Yeah, because I've never—I've never—. If I wasn't able to be there I would make up some bags and put them there and say that's what you do.

01:33:44

AE: Have you written anything down?

01:33:45

BG: No.

01:33:46

AE: It's just—you've—okay.

01:33:46

BG: No.

01:33:47

AE: Are you going to?

01:33:49

BG: No.

01:33:49

AE: **[*Laughs*]**

01:33:51

BG: I mean, you know, yeah, I guess. And yeah, probably—I mean, I'm doing a cookbook now for my barbecue invention that I'm working on.

01:34:03

AE: Barbecue you said?

01:34:04

BG: It's an invention-type thing. It's the first—

01:34:05

AE: Oh that you—outside? Okay, yeah, yeah.

01:34:08

BG: Yeah.

01:34:09

AE: All right.

01:34:10

BG: I'm tired of working.

01:34:11

AE: Well is there anything that I haven't asked that would be worth adding or—?

01:34:15

BG: Not that I—I get exhausted talking about stuff like that. Well, you know, I mean it's just—in this city and, like I say, you keep talking volumes—.

01:34:28

AE: Especially if it's about food.

01:34:30

BG: Yeah, yeah. And like I said, you can stop anybody on the corner and they'll talk to you about it.

01:34:38

AE: Uh-hmm. Would you mind quickly retelling that story you were telling before about the woman who ate your gumbo at the—?

01:34:43

BG: Oh, that was the Palm Court Jazz Café. Chester Zardis, who played—one of the original bass players for Louis Armstrong, and he started Preservation Hall [*a famous jazz performance hall in the French Quarter, where the Preservation Hall Band performs, as well as other musicians*]. And he was a little guy; he was about five foot-two and Bertha, his wife, used to bring him into the Palm Court, and he was senile at the time. And she would walk him up to the stage, and when he would get to the stage, take his hat off, and get on stage, and all of a sudden he became nineteen-years-old again. And he'd attack the bass and because the bass, if you know anything about music, the bass and the drums are what sets the beat and the tone for any musical rendition of anything, whether it be waltz or jazz, rock, or whatever. So he's the one that set the paces for these different things and he was [looking] what, nineteen [years-old], and he was [actually] eighty-nine [years-old], you know. So anyway, we would feed the band all the time when we'd go to the—the last break and ask them what they wanted. Some of them would eat there, and some of them would take it home. And Chester and Bertha would always, you know, want to take it home. She'd always say we should put extra whiskey sauce in the bread pudding because it puts Chester to sleep right away. But when I cooked the gumbo for her she said something and I really—at first I didn't know to take offense to it or—or I didn't know what to expect; I didn't know what it meant. And she said—she told somebody and somebody related it to me, she said, "Oh, Lord!" This is after two sips of the gumbo. She goes, "Oh, Lord, Billy must

have stepped in that gumbo." And I'm thinking I didn't step in the Gumbo; what is she talking about? **[*Laughs*]** Well that's one of the highest compliments anybody can tell you in that, you know, genre. That was just one of the ways they thanked you and said it was the best they ever had. [That you put your mark on it.] So you get compliments in a bunch of different ways and anyway—yeah.

01:36:52

AE: It's a good story. Well your supper is smelling good and I've taken—

01:36:56

BG: [***To Maureen***] Maureen, you're knocking us out—whatever you're doing.

01:36:58

AE: **[*Laughs*]**

01:37:00

Maureen: Chicken Curry.

01:37:01

[End Billy Gruber-1 Interview]

[Begin Billy Gruber-2 Interview]

[The following is an interview that was conducted two days after the previous interview. The location is the kitchen of Billy's restaurant, Liuzza's by the Track. Billy talks about how he makes his roux, and the making of a roux is documented from beginning to end.]

00:00:00

AE: Monday, August 7th 2006, Amy Evans for Southern Foodways Alliance with Billy Gruber again, and we're at Liuzza's by the Track, and he is making a roux.

00:00:15

BG: Yeah, in the old days, as we talked before they—it took those ladies and gentlemen an hour-and-a-half—hour and forty-five minutes to do a roux. So I think that's where the beginning of cooking ambidextrous came in because they had to switch hands. **[*Laughs*]** You know, you can't do something like that for an hour-and-a-half with one arm so—.

00:00:38

AE: So I just asked you if you were a righty or a lefty, and you said your dad taught you ambidextrous.

00:00:41

BG: Right, just—even though—

00:00:41

AE: But you're a righty [right-handed].

00:00:43

BG: —we—I do this right hand I start off with, you know, you do—I usually do a counterclockwise circular thing and then you'll go clockwise as not to get boring and tired. And then after a little while you might switch hands, you know.

00:00:58

AE: Do you ever have a pattern to how you stir, like five [times] left—five right?

00:01:01

BG: No, no, because you can be viewing it—if you're taking pictures, you can see every once in a while there's a certain stage and then you see right now what I'm doing—the pan is just being heated. I'm going to put the oil in the pan now and we're not going to look at that pan or touch it 'til it's smoking. That will mean it passes 222—220-degrees boiling point; it passes it. You know, it's going to be getting up to 300 and 400 degrees. I'll put three cups of flour on the side and—. All right; and I always think it's better to have a little more flour than oil. Don't ask me why. **[*Laughs*]**

00:02:03

AE: Okay, I won't. **[*Laughs*]**

00:02:11

BG: **[*Short pause*]** White flour. **[*Short pause*]** You want a clean, clean pan because if anything gets in there—anything can cause this to burn. And I'm getting it at such a high temperature that

one little burn and the whole thing is gone. So you've wasted your time; you've got to clean it up and you've got to do this, blah-blah-blah, you know. It's crazy. **[*Short pause*] *[Goes to the refrigerator and takes out a metal container*.]** See this is how it will come after—.

00:03:01

AE: Okay, this is [an old] roux that you're pouring out?

00:03:03

BG: Yeah, that's the grease or oil that comes to the top—that's after it's been sitting. But you can see the color of it. I mean it's just a nice dark, dark. All right, go get a cup of water—. **[*Short pause*]** This is that tomato cucumber soup. Cold.

00:03:40

AE: Yeah, nice.

00:03:43

BG: Yeah, I like them. Don't do it that much. Gazpacho—

00:03:54

AE: Yeah.

00:03:54

BG: You know about—how to make a Gazpacho?

00:03:54

AE: I love Gazpacho, yeah.

00:03:55

BG: When anybody makes it they'll take tomato juice or V8 juice on account is really kind of the stock to make it pure—you know, and you can put chicken stock in it. But what I do is I make my own V8 juice. I take all the vegetables—celery, onion, bell pepper, and then a cucumber and other things and throw it altogether and puree it. So it's really—so that's the basis for it and then throw all your other—.

00:04:20

AE: Nice.

00:04:29

BG: Most people when they do gumbo, a lot of people think it doesn't matter—sausage, thousands of sausage out there. Well I get mine from Creole Country [in New Orleans]; that's Vaughn Schmitt and his number one person Deanie [Bowen]. And I'll get it like fresh because he did—they roll out a lot of volume. They sell it at a lot of local grocery stores; they do hogshead cheese, they do boudin, they do everything. He's got great crawfish sausage, green onion, etcetera. But I can do five other different sausages; when I do his—his thing to me, it's night and day; I can tell in a second, you know. It just gives it a richer—

00:05:13

AE: What do you get the andouille or the tasso or—?

00:05:15

BG: No, just smoked sausage—

00:05:17

AE: Just smoked sausage.

00:05:17

BG: Smoked sausage is just really—really, really good, yeah. But definitely, you know, call him.

00:05:24

AE: I will. And you mentioned the other day when we talked that you had a definite opinion about sausages, but I think we got on something else.

00:05:31

BG: That—what's that?

00:05:33

AE: You said you had a definite opinion, but I think we got off on something else.

00:05:35

BG: Yeah, and that's it. I mean his—and I—you know, I think because it's not frozen. I mean I get it fresh. It does matter. His stuff is that good because he makes it, and it's a beautiful little place. They went under from the hurricane [Katrina], and they went in early and got all new stuff and got everything out and they really got a neat little plant. It's in an old house about ten blocks over and yeah, it's an old house. They run it; it's a mom and pop. The mom just died really about four months ago. She was really a sweetheart and anyway, they—like I say they—he runs it over himself for me, you know, whatever I need. And I said, "Well you know we're buying it sliced." And he goes, "I'll find somebody to slice it. Don't worry." So they slice it up now and give it to us.

00:06:22

AE: Wow.

00:06:23

BG: Yeah. When are you leaving?

00:06:28

AE: Wednesday about noon.

00:06:30

BG: Well give him a call or just go see him. He's a really—

00:06:34

AE: Okay.

00:06:34

BG: It's something to see; it's like a one-man operation and he does a lot of good stuff, you know really, really—they're good people.

00:06:41

AE: Good to know. Thank you.

00:06:44

BG: Yeah.

00:06:44

AE: So you said the other day that you don't like people bugging you while you're making your roux, so I'm feeling a little—

00:06:49

BG: You better.

00:06:50

AE: —a little dangerous standing here. **[*Laughs*]** But would you mind—I won't ask you questions or—and I'll try and stay still, but do you mind talking while you're doing it and telling me what you're doing.

00:06:58

BG: No, I can do that. Yeah, just—I don't want to leave it. I don't want anybody—if the phone rings, I might not even answer it.

00:07:05

AE: Okay, all right.

00:07:07

BG: But it's, you know—like I say, it's going to take ten to twelve minutes, maybe and—or anyway, it just depends on how, you know, when you—and you'll see what I'm talking about when we're in the middle of it. It starts out white and, like I said, when you want—it's not smoking yet. But you see how long this [vegetable oil in the pan] has been on full boil.

00:07:31

AE: Yeah, a few minutes—yeah.

00:07:31

BG: Okay, that was only three cups [of oil], so don't stick your finger in to see if it's hot.

00:07:35

AE: No worries there. **[*Laughs*]**

00:07:37

BG: But anyway, when it gets going—so when you do that, you've got to be very quick to—and what I've done is I usually do it with four cups, and then when I do four cups of flour, four cups of oil, that will put it up to here [***points to the top edge of the pan he is using***], so I don't want to do that while you're around. I like to do it—and I tell everybody to get out of the way because it—it's Cajun Napalm, and if it touches you, it will burn you. It will hurt. It will go through, you know.

00:08:02

AE: I believe you.

00:08:04

BG: So anyway—

00:08:04

AE: All right. So this batch you're doing as a demo you'll be able to use this week for gumbo?

00:08:09

BG: Yeah, I'll just do—do gumbo, do like I said—we can use it for anything—etouffee, there's a lot of different dishes. You know, like I say, you know, the—the pot, when I do gumbo—and

I'll show you in the back, but I do it on this burner here ***[points to a short single burner, which is to the left of the main stove***] and the pot is about that big [***gestures***]; it's twenty gallons.

00:08:29

AE: And it's like three and a half-feet tall, something like that?

00:08:30

BG: Yeah, yeah; and that's it out there. [***Points to a storeroom at the back of the kitchen***.] See it hanging?

00:08:36

AE: Oh yeah, sure do, okay—in your garage sort of.

00:08:39

BG: You know, when you—yeah, I only use, like I said, three of these [large kitchen] spoons, you know, filled up, to go in it [a batch of gumbo]. So that's not a lot, you know, but what it does is—is just a certain nuttiness and a—because if you taste that, you could taste oil and flour; that's all it is. And it's terrible tasting. But dissolved and done right, you know, it does—like I say, it gives some credence to it.

[*Short pause*]

00:09:10

AE: So you make the Roux every—once a week? Every Tuesday?

00:09:23

BG: Well that—that batch there, I'll usually get three batches out of that, so it's three gumbos.

00:09:28

AE: Oh, okay.

00:09:29

BG: So once a week—or maybe a week-and-a-half.

00:09:33

[End Billy Gruber-2 Interview]

[*Recording was actually paused for a short moment but a new audio track created. Audio picks up where the interview left off.*]

[Begin Billy Gruber-3 Interview]

00:00:00

Billy Gruber: See?

00:00:05

Amy Evans: Yeah, I see it smoking for sure.

00:00:05

BG: And what I would do is if nobody—you know, normally yeah I would go ahead and do it—I'm going to put this [flour] in. ***[Pours four into the pan of hot oil and immediately begins stirring it with a whisk.]***

00:00:11

AE: Okay.

00:00:34

BG: See? Look at the bottom. And you keep stirring it because if you let anything sit—I'll shake the pot, and we'll keep doing this because if one thing sticks, it's going to burn. And—and it probably really sounds funny saying it's going to burn when the finished product is, you know—it's black, basically. But there's a method to the madness. I'm not sure of the engineering and the—the chemistries but some people know it very well. But you can see right now it's turning a little tan [in color]. And like I say, you do not ever leave the pot because you got the flame as high as you can. And what we'll do—what it's going to do now is it took the temperature down because oil was up, and then when you put the three cups of flour in it to match the three cups of oil, it brought the temperature back down. So now I don't know how far to bring it down; I can't assume that much, but it will go back up, and you'll see it start to bubble again and it will start to change colors rapidly.

Like I say, in the beginning you'll see—that's why I did it real quick; you don't want to see anything stick. And you can see little brown flicks in it now.

00:02:17

AE: What would you call that color that it is right now?

00:02:20

BG: Tan—and I wouldn't use it for anything. Some people might use it; you might use something like this to thicken up like roast beef gravy or something like that, where it's not totally a lot of flour and oil taste yet. It's just really a thickening agent now. A lot of people take stuff like this—stop it and put it on their—on the back of their kitchen shelf and they'll use it if they have to thicken something up, you know—a meat or a chicken, you know. This would be perfect to thicken up a chicken gravy or you know—to make any of your chicken dishes—the Coq Au Vin or anything. See, here comes a point, and I'll go this way ***[changes direction of stirring]***.

00:03:06

AE: Counterclockwise. **[Laughs]**

00:03:09

BG: I'm getting ready to go ambidextrous on you.

00:03:12

AE: I'm waiting for you to get your whole body into it. **[Laughs]**

00:03:16

BG: Yeah, shit. Yeah, it's funny—the phone is all the way down there [at the other end of the bar], and most people know when they answer the phone and they see what I'm doing, they won't even ask. They'll just say, "He'll call you back when he's finished his roux." That's it. And being, like I said, everybody who knows everything about food in New Orleans, everybody knows; they don't even question it. "Aw, come on; let me talk to him." They wouldn't dare. See it getting a little darker?

00:03:43

AE: Don't interrupt. Yeah, it is a little darker.

00:03:44

BG: I should have timed it. Let's say we're into it four minutes.

AE: I've got a timer on this recorder here. It says three minutes [and] fifty seconds.

00:03:53

BG: What did I say? Four minutes?

AE: Four minutes; you said it.

BG: I'm telling you.

00:03:55

AE: And that should be an eight-minute roux? Is that what you said the other day?

00:03:58

BG: Yeah, I generally try to do an eight-minute deal. See what I forgot to do?

00:04:05

AE: What's that? Uh-oh, I'm distracting your—.

00:04:09

BG: Damn, I forgot to cut up an onion. So what I'm going to do is—and you can tell the people in case you forget that—and the onion is used—if you remember when I told you about it, it cools it down.

00:04:25

AE: Right.

00:04:25

BG: So what I'm going to do is I'm going to stop cooking this probably about a minute, maybe, before I normally would. And I will keep stirring it so it won't go over the limit and get burned. Because if you just—if I just took this off the stove and put it there [on the counter] and let it

alone at a black thing [a black-colored roux], it—it would burn because it kept cooking, you know. So now we're changing hands.

00:04:50

AE: [Laughs]

00:04:55

BG: And you can see it turning now. ***[Short pause]*** And then usually, like some of my workers that work with me in the kitchen through the years—a girl named Bernetta McMillan whose son goes to Jackson State; she stayed up there [in Mississippi] six months after the hurricane. She said, "Billy, I'm coming to the bus stop, and I can smell it all the way down there." She says it almost smells if you're away like a—a burnt popcorn or something.

00:05:27

AE: Would this be peanut butter [color] about now?

00:05:30

BG: Yeah. And what's happening now, the—I don't know if it's physiological or whatever—it went from a very loose state, very liquid-y, okay, where the oil was more than the flour. Now it's getting absorbed, the molecules of the flour and the oil and roux are kind of coming together. See how it's getting thicker? Maybe you can't see it, but you can feel it when you do it.

00:05:54

AE: Oh, yeah.

00:05:55

BG: Well yeah, because you got the—so therefore it's really, you know, getting into each other and the colors are marrying perfectly and—

00:06:04

AE: Beautiful.

00:06:06

BG: —and like I say, yeah, it's kind of coming together. But it just turns—the thickness of it because they're integrating each other, you know, the oil and the flour. I always like to say they're marrying; they're getting together—like couples, you know.

00:06:31

AE: We're at six-an-a-half minutes.

00:06:34

BG: All right, I might go a little longer then. Call me a liar. Lot thicker now.

00:06:48

AE: Yeah.

00:06:52

BG: And then while I'm doing this—that's one of the signs too, you're—you're feeling it; you're feeling the bottom of the pot—pan because you don't know if it's sticking or not. So by doing this, you constantly have the feel of the bottom of the pan—it's smooth. If it were to start sticking, you could feel it and then you would concentrate on that area and turn it down a little bit. But, you know, you can see it now accelerating—the color. In about another minute it's going to be probably a really perfect etouffee look.

00:07:27

AE: Is this the only thing this pan is used for?

00:07:30

BG: No, no, it's the one—yeah, I always use for this.

00:08:10

AE: What color would you say we have now?

00:08:12

BG: This is an etouffee color—that's it.

00:08:16

AE: It's a brick red, kind of?

00:08:17

BG: Yeah, burgundy.

00:08:22

AE: Is this what you were calling mahogany [the other day]?

00:08:24

BG: Yeah, yeah.

00:08:27

AE: Okay—gorgeous.

00:08:39

BG: And you can put your hand over here and feel how hot it is.

00:08:42

AE: I don't think I need to do that. **[Laughs]** I got it. Thank you though.

00:08:46

BG: Like now towards this point we're getting ready to take it off. How much time we got?

00:08:53

AE: You're at eight [minutes], fifty-two [seconds].

00:08:54

BG: Okay, nine minutes. It's a cross between eight and ten.

00:09:19

AE: Smells great.

00:09:42

BG: Okay, [in] thirty seconds we'll pull this off.

00:09:46

AE: What makes you say thirty seconds?

00:09:49

BG: It's a lot of smoke coming out and, like I said, it's very close between done and burnt and, you know, you have to make that distinction. All right, I turned it off. What's the time?

00:10:13

AE: All right.

00:10:14

BG: What time is it?

00:10:15

AE: Oh it is ten minutes and fifteen seconds.

00:10:20

BG: Okay; so—. Turn it off. ***[Places the hot pan on the stainless steel counter.]*** See it still turning the color?

00:10:37

AE: Yeah.

00:10:39

BG: Much darker and—.

00:11:23

AE: And it would still be in pretty deep danger of thickening up and chunking up on you then at this point or no?

00:11:29

BG: What's that?

00:11:31

AE: Getting pieces in it and—?

00:11:32

BG: If I left it alone?

00:11:33

AE: Yeah.

00:11:35

BG: You might be all right now; like I say, I got off where the heat is on the bottom and it should be, you know, all right. I always like, like I say, to control it. You put those onions in there, you'll see, you know, kind of what I'm talking about. And you can see the separation of the oil and the whole product. That was what I took off the top. It will always separate—the oil, you know, like I say, will come—some of it won't get married into the—the flour. So that's—and later on after it cools down that's when you, you know, pour it off the top because you don't want to pour oil into any products you use. You just want to pour this mixture in.

00:13:17

AE: It's hypnotizing to watch you do this [to stir the roux]. **[Laughs]**

00:13:19

BG: Do what?

00:13:19

AE: It's hypnotizing to watch you do that.

00:13:23

BG: Yeah. But see the color now? I mean, it's black.

00:13:26

AE: Yeah.

00:13:27

BG: And it's still going to change a little bit more.

00:13:38

AE: What do you think about those commercially packaged rouxs in the grocery store?

00:13:42

BG: There's—I knew one of the guys who did it, and there's nothing wrong with it because they have like a machine over a pot—in other words, as it would sit like a motor would sit here and so it would be just a big slow—that does it the slow way, because they just turn it on and it's just one of those things like **[Laughs]**—but it—it's kind of a paddle, and it just does that for I guess an hour-and-a-half—two hours maybe. So, you know, it's all the same process; it's how you do it, you know. Jacques Pepin—one of the people, nobody has ever taught me anything but I read a lot—Jacques Pepin, the famous French chef—and Julia [Childs]—he has his first two books were called *La Technique* and *La Methode*. And that's what it is—between technique and method, the way you do things and yeah, that tells you how it's going to come out.

00:14:55

AE: Have you ever documented your own roux?

00:14:59

BG: No.

00:15:01

AE: **[Laughs]**

00:15:02

BG: Documented it?

00:15:03

AE: You never know, it could be a good teaching tool, if you were going to teach someone.

00:15:07

BG: Yeah.

00:15:25

AE: How long does it need to sit before you refrigerate it or anything?

00:15:28

BG: I'm going to let it sit because every once in a while I'll stir it and make sure and I know—because I know we're out of onions because I used the last one Saturday, and I won't get them in until tomorrow morning early when I start cooking again.

00:15:45

AE: But you're going to put this in the refrigerator eventually after it cools?

00:15:49

BG: Yeah, in a little bit—yeah.

00:15:52

AE: All right. Well, any final thoughts about your roux-making technique?

00:15:58

BG: No, I guess it's me and a couple thousand other people kind of use the same—I don't know because I don't—I haven't asked people what they do.

00:16:09

AE: Well when people talk about it, it seems so mysterious like it's making a high meringue or something, and so you made it look so easy, it looks like there's just absolutely nothing to it. But I know there is.

00:16:19

BG: You know it's—like I say the old days you know they'd go an hour and a half, hour and forty-five minutes and I couldn't imagine **[*Laughs*]**—you know I could not imagine doing that. But did you ever see the Channel 12 thing; it's been on TV lately? It's something to see—the *Lost Restaurants of New Orleans*? Channel 12 did it—the public broadcasting. Peggy Laborde [producer and narrator of said documentary]. And they interviewed me by my dad's place and I have his place but there's a lot of them done on—there's a lot of things on Gumbos, excuse me—of old gumbo you know—the old black restaurants—Kolbs's Restaurant, the German restaurant downtown.

00:17:04

AE: Tom's you say?

00:17:06

BG: Kolb's. It's a German restaurant—was. And you know just a lot of people making the gumbo, you know. Two characters in it through the whole thing with Tom Fitzmorris, the critic and Gene Bourg, who was a critic before him [for *The Times-Picayune*] and a couple other people in there and it's really very insightful and very, very insightful—big on New Orleans history and their restaurants. Even if you never would have known any of them, some of the stuff is—it's funny. And it's like, you know, black restaurants that didn't let white people in, and their food was so good they had a line—line outside that people waited for their fried chicken. This was before Popeye's and Kentucky [Fried Chicken] and all of these things, and yeah. Yeah, a lot of those people that you read or looked at in *Creole Feast* or in—that's who started a lot of these restaurants, yeah.

00:18:15

AE: All right.

00:18:15

BG: ***[Looking at the roux]*** Yeah, see—?

00:18:19

AE: Yeah.

00:18:25

BG: Yeah.

00:18:27

AE: **[Laughs]** I don't know how many pictures you can take of a roux, but I've got plenty.

00:18:30

BG: Yeah. But you know it's funny because you—you can tell now—*you* can understand now when I say—when somebody would go for this color—the black—and then if you didn't know anything about how to do it and the temperature and the speed it's done. A lot of people would probably go for it until it got to that color on the stove, and then by the time they took it off, I guarantee you, it would have been burnt. In other words, you've got to take it off before because it keeps cooking.

00:19:20

[End Billy Gruber-3 Interview]

[END]