

VANCE VAUCRESSON
Vaucresson Sausage Company – New Orleans, LA

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Date: August 9, 2006
Location: A friend's home – New Orleans, LA
Interviewer: Amy Evans
Length: 1 hour, 34 minutes
Project: Gumbo Trail - Louisiana

[Begin Vance Vaucresson Interview]

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Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans on Wednesday, August 9th, 2006; I'm with Vance Vaucresson in New Orleans at a friend's house, and we're here to talk about sausage. Vance, if you wouldn't mind introducing yourself and also stating your birth date for the record.

00:00:19

Vance Vaucresson: Okay, my name is Vance Vaucresson. I was born December 3rd, 1968; I'm thirty-seven years old, and I am a third-generation sausage maker in New Orleans. My company, Vaucresson Sausage Company, we traced our roots back to 1899; the company wasn't officially founded until—or established as the current entity until—in 1989. No, I'm sorry, 1983. But my great-grandfather—no, my grandfather—had—he had a butcher—he was a butcher and he made sausage. And actually, his sister was the one who really got them started in the business, and we traced it back to right around the turn of the century.

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AE: Wow. And what were their names—your grandfather and—?

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VV: My—my grandfather was Robert Levinsky Vaucresson. He—his parents Levinsky Vaucresson, who was a French Polish Jew, married a woman named Odile Gaillard, who was a French woman of color. And they were from the Alsace region of France, and they migrated to

New Orleans and—and then my dad had—my grandfather, Robert Levinsky Vaucresson had siblings, but he was mainly the one that was in the—in the business as a butcher.

00:01:58

AE: Wow. And so then the sausage making—do you know how it evolved or how it became the mainstay of the business?

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VV: Well, you know, many butchers—back then, when they would buy—excuse me—when they would buy pigs or—or whatever they needed, if they bought it whole, you know, in order for them to really reap the benefits monetarily, would try to use as much of the whole carcass as possible. And because of that, my grandfather probably not only made sausage but out of that he probably also made hogshead cheese, which when you have the head of the hog and the skin, you know, you want to utilize every part because you buy it on a weight basis. So they would make the hogshead cheese out of the skin of the hog along with the—the snout and the lip and the—and jaws, you know—everything they could to make this hogshead cheese. So out of using—trying to use as much as possible, you get so many different—different products. And probably also what a lot of butchers would do is when you freshly cut meat—and if you don't cut—I mean if your cuts don't—if you don't move the—if over time if something doesn't sell and it gets a little old, then they go ahead and they reinvent it, and a lot of times they'll make sausage with it—trimmings. Either they'll use the trimmings from the—the cuts that they've made, and then also they'll take those cuts if they've gotten a little older or if they've tried to make certain—something else, they'll make it into sausage to have one more product to make to

sell. And my grandfather, being a butcher, I'm sure he did that; but he also fell into the traditions and—and made chaurice, which is the French word similar to the Spanish word chorizo, where in chaurice it was typically—historically it was—in some annals of history you hear of it being an all-pork product. I think over time the version my dad made and the version which has been defined has been a pork and beef mixture and that was more so of—of a product that he made. And then I think also came out of that or—or then he bought hot sausage, which now hot sausage is typically an all-beef product but—but why—I think it's more in terms of what people have gotten used to. You can make a hot sausage out of pork or beef or a mixture of the two. So it really depends on the individual butcher and the sausage maker in terms of how they want to make that product, you know. But, you know, those types of sausages, you'll find a lot of ingredients which are indigenous to the area that seem, you know, to come into these products and, you know, we use heavily what we call the holy trinity: garlic, bell pepper—I mean, not garlic—green onion, celery. We use bell pepper in different things—not in all one thing. You'll see we'll lend from these ingredients—paprika, which has always been an ingredient which has shown up a lot in Creole food, giving it that reddish color. You know, we've used it in hogshead cheese and hot sausage; hot sausage has that reddish color due to the fact that a lot of people are using the paprika to give it that—that particular look. So it's a lot of things when we look back historically that came from those influences, when the ones with that pork when you had people coming from the West Indies, Haiti—you have the Spanish influence; you also have the French influence. So when you look at a lot of those culinary influences, you'll see it within the Creole heritage—and sausage making.

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AE: Now when your—did you know your grandfather? Was he alive when you were coming up?

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VV: No, my grandfather died many years ago. I never got to—most of what I've learned about my grandfather was passed on. So I'm lucky enough to have aunts as well as my—my dad and other people who—who kind of over the years told me about my grandfather as well as what—what literature I have on him in papers and things like that.

00:06:28

AE: Do you have an idea of what part of town his butcher shop was in?

00:06:31

VV: It was in the 7th Ward [neighborhood of New Orleans], you know. Most of our existence is—has been in the 7th Ward and that's why our ties to the area have been so long because, you know, we've had opportunities to leave. We've never wanted to go too far from the community and—and the people that have—that could just walk—walk to get our product so—. Where we—we have always—we have tried to grow the company to where now we—we reach out to different areas. We, you know, never left the neighborhood, which a lot of people questioned because when you get into a more intricate processing facility, especially with all of the demands that the Federal Government is putting on food processing, you know, to be where we are, which is always a question, we always felt we were going to stay there as long as we could because we felt investing in this community was very important.

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AE: Your roots, yeah.

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VV: It's our roots.

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AE: So did your father take over your grandfather's butcher shop?

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VV: You know, my—my grandfather—my grandfather started—during his—his time he—he was—where the Circle Food Store is, which is on the corner of Claiborne—North Claiborne and St Bernard Avenue; it was once called the St. Bernard Market. And within the St. Bernard Market—it was a very open market and—and they had many different meat purveyors; they had a lot of different butchers that had what they called stalls. And in those stalls you had—you had like—you heard names that some people would recognize as Oddo, Mule', Bachemin, Vaucresson, Grillier; you had these names and they had different stalls. And a lot of those butchers and sausage makers developed a clientele to where eventually they moved out of the stall situation and got their own places in which my—my grandfather did. He went from the stall at St. Bernard Market to a self-standing butcher shop, which was located at 19—I want to say 1927 St. Bernard Avenue, which is now a Liberty Bank and Trust branch. And then from there he migrated down the street to another self-standing building which was what we call The Point,

which is one of those island type buildings you see in New Orleans where the building is—is—there’s—it’s not—it’s just by itself, and it’s actually on St. Bernard Avenue at—I forget the exact address. But that’s where we had our Vaucresson Meat Market and my grandfather had—he had six kids; he had three daughters from a previous marriage—first marriage; no children from his second marriage, and then his first son—my dad—and only son was in his third marriage and two other kids. So he had older daughters and one of his daughters—Mildred’s husband was a butcher and joined my grandfather in the business and then they became Vaucresson and Bordenave. And then when my grandfather passed, when my dad was a sophomore at Xavier University, my father gave up his schooling at the time and then joined and took over the business—the Vaucresson side.

And—but it’s funny, when you look at the different generations, each generation has their own ideas. My dad was a lot more entrepreneurial in spirit, where my—my grandfather was quite an entrepreneur. My grandfather had a—made a lot of his—his money during the war [World War II] and went on and bought property and did, you know, different things. But my dad wanted to invest it in different things. He did some property; he did a vending machine company, real estate, liquor—things like that. So my dad, during that time, being that his brother-in-law basically—could run the place, he went on and did some business ventures, but we always made sausage and through all of these different sausages, we always still made sausage and provided to the community.

Well eventually, my dad closed the meat market down after my—after his brother-in-law died and he decided to open up a—a sausage company, you know. He said, “Well, you know, I really just want to make the sausage.” And in the early [nineteen] seventies he had developed plans to open up a—his own sausage company. Well he went to the State [of Louisiana] and was

rejected in terms of developing his sausage company, basically, for all intents and purposes because of his color. Now those that knew my dad knew that he did not look like a man of color;. He had sky-blue eyes; he was just a very fair Creole and he never really, you know, as they say in the Creole culture you hear about people being passé-à blanc, which means passing for white. He never really did that, but in business, in order for him to get ahead, if you didn't ask him, well he didn't say. And that's actually why he was able to—he was the first man of color to have a business on Bourbon Street from 1966 to 1974. They had a restaurant called Vaucresson's Café Creole at 624 Bourbon, which is now the Pat O'Brien's annex bar. And it was just—it happened that way because a man named Larry Bornstein owned the building and he was an art dealer, and he became friends with my dad because my dad did a lot of business in the [French] Quarter—excuse me—and they came up with this idea to have a restaurant—a Creole restaurant. Well they went ahead and—and—and made it happen. And in regards to the development of that, the Bourbon Street Merchants Association didn't really want that to happen because they heard it was going to—in much more derogatory terms, you know, they said to him, “We don't want—we heard that there is a black trying to start a business on Bourbon Street, and we didn't want that.” So they basically rode that out and it existed, and it became a very popular breakfast and lunch spot. And one of the items that was a favorite was the chaurice. A lot of people, you know, was exposed to that and—and that was one of our big things—chaurice with grits and eggs. And to this day I still have people who—who when, you know, they ask me if that was—I was related to the people at the restaurant; they reminisce about, “Oh, I used to go there every—every morning on my way to work and get my chaurice, grits, and eggs.”

So, you know, we—my dad's sausage influence stayed with him in whatever business entity he went into and—and then when he was lucky enough to be in a position where at the

restaurant, that was where they basically brainstormed the idea for New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. George Wein had come in; he was a friend of Allan Jaffe and Larry Bornstein, and he was doing Newport News already—the jazz festival—and they had pretty much—chance meeting was in the restaurant, and they just started brainstorming. And from there they came up with the—the idea of doing the New Orleans [Jazz and Heritage Festival]. And from there George Wein left from there and developed the concept and made it happen. And they asked my dad right then and there, would he be a food vendor. And so he was—he made sausage po’boys at the restaurant, wrapped it in foil, and then would transport them out at the booth at the Congo Square. And since then we’ve—we’ve been in the festival every year; we’re the only original food vendor at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival for thirty-seven years, and we’ve always sold hot sausages at the festival, so you know—and every particular business entity my dad went into, there was always sausage.

00:15:10

AE: Can I interrupt you and ask you to say your father’s name?

00:15:14

VV: My dad’s name is Robert—nickname was Sonny—Vaucresson, so everybody knows him as Sonny. And he—he was a great guy. I mean he was really a gentleman who—many people who knew my dad took a liking to my dad. He was just one of those personalities that, you know, you may meet him as a stranger, but you always left as a friend and—and that’s one of the things that I admired about him and—and one of the legacies that he left to me was that because of how—how good he was with people that was then extended to me over time. A lot of people

from his generation have helped me along the way because of the legacy my dad left, and I appreciate that.

But he—my dad then decided back in [nineteen] eighty-two that he wanted to try the a sausage factory thing again. And there was—it just so happened that at that time—eleven years—it just so happened that the state had a black veterinarian in its staff with the Louisiana Department of Agriculture named Dr. Ray—Charles Ray—and because of his influence and because of his determination, he basically took our hand and told us what we needed to do and made sure that we got—were given the chance. And from there we opened—we opened our factory in October of [nineteen] eighty-three on the corner of St. Bernard and North Roman in the neighborhood in an old grocery store that we converted to the specifications of the Department of Agriculture and—and did it on a wing and a prayer. And my dad had no major contracts; he was not trying to stay within that mindset of a meat market. He wanted to boldly say that he wanted to do—sell to a grocery store.

Well it's not easy when you don't have—to get into the grocery business as just an individual purveyor back then, but luckily, because my dad just basically stuck at it, he got help and—and he got to the ear of John Schwegmann [Public Service Commissioner] at the time, and John Schwegman gave us a chance, and from then on we—we grew—our business grew to the point where we serviced all of the stores at the time and he had—it enabled us to branch our name within those, and then offering our products into the—into the grocery business. Well once we got into Schwegmann it allowed us to then go—I approached Winn Dixie or National Canal Villere at the time and any other stores, and once you have one, then they're more inclined to listen to you and give you a chance. And from then, we then did business in the local supermarket arena. But also we started to branch off into institutional business working with

bidding—school boards and prisons and things like that. So that’s pretty much where, you know, where we took the business, you know, trying to take advantage of as many opportunities as we could. Now it was not always easy because I don’t think there were at the time—I don’t think they had any, as you would say, African American sausage processing businesses. Historically, the meat processing business has not been receptive to change and it’s—it has been a good ol’ boy network for a very long time so—.

But, you know, it’s funny. It’s like really, I guess, you know, my dad’s look was not threatening because of how he looked and, you know, he was just a guy that you got along with once you met him. And I think that once—as time went on and as the relationships were formed and he was given a chance, I think that some people basically let down some of their reservations and—because yeah, they may not—in their minds, they were not dealing with an African American man; they were dealing with Sonny. So I found that over time he did kind of help to, I guess, you know, change some people’s minds in terms of business and—and any perceptions they had with doing business with a black-owned company. And it allowed us to go into some places business-wise that people had not even thought about pursuing, and we were very grateful for that. And I was very grateful for that, and it allowed for when—he had a massive heart attack in [nineteen] ninety-eight and—and then passed on All Saints Day, November 1st of ’98. And—and then I was doing the Alligator Festival—in the booth, that’s what I was doing at the time. I was out there with my cousin, who was in the business with me, and it just so happened that I got the call out there to find out that he had a heart attack. And you know, normally you would think okay, the person has a heart attack, you know, it could be minor and it could be okay. I knew from walking back from the pay phone I used because I didn’t have a cell phone with me—to the booth I felt the transition. And I just said, “Well that’s it.” And I just felt it, you know, he was

gone, and it was going to be my responsibility. And lo-and-behold that evening, he—they tried but they couldn't—they couldn't get the heart back so at that point [*cell phone rings*—I'm sorry.

00:20:56

AE: I can pause that if you want, if you need to answer it.

00:20:57

VV: No, no.

00:20:58

AE: Okay.

00:20:59

VV: I'm just going to put it on silent. And the irony of that was we had been working on a contract—a rather large contract, the New Orleans Parish School Board—for a very long time, and we found out that in that process that was a very closed network of—of meat purveyors and suppliers, you know. We tried to break into a little—get a chunk of their business, and it's not always an easy thing. They kind of box you out; they close you out, you know—do whatever they can to keep you from doing it. Well eventually, you know, my dad eventually—he learned that process and he was successful, and it was one of our first really, really big institutional contracts. We were going to start delivering our first-ever opportunity to do it on our own because we were actually selling to a distributor for a while in this, but that relationship had

soured and we were now taking full control of our operation. We were going to deliver it ourselves; we were going to make it, you know. It was a big thing for us. We were going to do that on November 2nd; so he passed on November 1st. So that Monday I had to, you know, I got in the stock; we had 116 schools to deliver to, and I had to load up trucks and get them done and it was done, you know. So that was the transition in terms of the third generation. And since then I've just tried to maintain all of our business endeavors whether it was the [Jazz] Festival or the institutional products or just—I just kept on making sausage. But I tried to take the element of sausage-making—the art of sausage-making—and grow upon it where my dad was so in-tune to say, making a few products historically indigenous to the area: hot sausage, hogshead cheese, pork breakfast sausage and that, where we decided over time to expand into things more exotic, more health conscious; we make turkey products, turkey-sausages; we got into patty making because the—the po'boy market in the city changed. The po'boy market at one time was, you could get a po'boy sandwich in terms of sausage, and it would have links. Well once the po'boy market started to change, I think you started to see more of a—an Oriental influence and an Arabic influence—started to get more Arabic owners, people from say, different countries—Iran or different Muslim countries; and then we had the Vietnamese, Koreans taking over that market; it wasn't so much about the type of product as it was what was the cheapest and most cost-efficient. So the patty market changed and so now, when you go to get a sausage or even an Italian sausage or a hot sausage, it's going to be the patty form. And so we had to then adjust and we invested in patties and that helped our business because of the demand. And then we went into exotic sausage and made crawfish sausage; we make an alligator sausage. We even got into boudin and made crawfish boudin, shrimp boudin, and regular white boudin.

And the way we got into the boudin making market was because my mother—my dad met Paul Prudhomme’s aunt. Her name is Lillian Prudhomme—God rest her soul; the lady died sometime ago. But through that association she came in and taught us how to make boudin, which in this area, you know, no one really makes boudin, so we started to get into the boudin market and that was always a challenge because the stigma is, if you want the boudin, you’ve got to go to Lafayette County [Louisiana, which is in Cajun Country], Crowley, and things like that—Breux Bridge. And so you know, I mean we also had the—the challenge of introducing this product to an area where typically people from this area don’t eat boudin. So it was quite an experience, you know. You’d say we’ve got boudin and people would say, “What? Bowden? Boughdan?” you know. And then they would say. “What is it?” Then you would have to try to figure out a description; we would say it’s like a rice in a pudding. “Like a what?” “Like a dirty rice.” “Oh, okay. Stuff it in the sausage?” Say, “Yeah.” So it’s amazing how we would have to try to describe and sell this to the area. Well now boudin is quite a popular object. Not because of us but because the market has changed and different food influences—but we may have had something to do with it, but I doubt it. Not as much. But in the local area, people have a little more understanding what boudin is.

But it’s just interesting to see how, you know, the art of sausage-making has changed. A lot more people are taking sausage and marketing it in a different way adding non-traditional combinations. You know, you can get cinnamon apple and pork sausage; you can get a tiramisu sausage; you can get, you know, these—these, you know, sausages based with say, tofu or things like that, all trying to carve out a niche and—and you know, we’ve—we’ve done the same. We’ve always tried to experiment and find new ways because sausage is something—a relatable item to everyone, you know. Hotdogs, everybody has eaten a hotdog in their life. Well sausage is

one of those items that people eat, and I think that the sausage market, especially the—when the sausage market demands for different types of products came into being, then you started to—it kind of happened around that whole Paul Prudhomme and the whole Cajun craze. You know, the thing Cajun thing took off all over the country, so then people were getting introduced to andouille, people were getting introduced to boudin, people were getting introduced to what they considered Cajun sausages, but in that whole time you then—within the whole big umbrella of Cajun, Creole, and those foods associated with that—those foods got sucked in and they started to get mis-defined. So I mean it was somewhere where I heard somebody say, “Oh, you want some Cajun food? Let’s get some of that Shrimp Creole.” You know, it’s obvious that that’s not a Cajun item but—and then, you know, people don’t realize a lot of—where the Cajun influence came from and what the—the seasoning influences that are normally with Cajun is something that—it was told to me that the French Nova Scotians—Dutch Nova Scotians, when they migrated down to North and Central Louisiana, were traditionally what they called *courier de bois*, which was like trapper of the woods, and these people would basically trap and—and skin, hide for their commerce. But then at the end of the day they would have carcasses that then they would use that to cook and eat. Some of them would be out all day in the sun; some of them would need to maybe get masked flavor because they may not have been the most-fresh meat. So I think over time you start to get a seasoning influence of a lot of pepper to mask. You know, the blackened thing, I think, that was more a Prudhomme invention but—and it may have found some historical significance in that whole tradition, when it came in—the Cajun tradition of cooking and it wasn’t centered around the type of seasoning profile that you would find, which has been traditionally making Creole, which has a history more of a—a French culinary influence, a Spanish culinary influence; some of the seasoning is coming from the West Indies

that gives, you know, such a broader flavor profile. The flavors are—are just developed and it's like a stacking of flavors and that's where you eat—like you may have an etouffee, you know. It's—it's a Creole-type food, but it's from a French influence—to smother. You'll get the—the differ usages of some of those things like the bell pepper, the onion, the green onion and—and then the way it's used and the—the roux and—and the gumbos and—and—and some of the other dishes, and you'll see a lending into the two—the Cajun and Creole—but they're very distinctive. And we've always tried to maintain a Creole sausage influence in—in everything we do.

We talk about, you know, obviously our name is associated with a Creole family in the 7th Ward [neighborhood in New Orleans] and some of the—the things that our products were used for are Creole dishes, you know. The way that they make red beans and rice is different here than they say, in the Acadian heritage. One way they cream their beans is different here; when they do sausage and beans here, they typically use a fresh sausage—a hot sausage—or use in a gumbo. Leah Chase of Dooky Chase [Restaurant in New Orleans] says that, you know, she's used our product for years in her gumbo because of the seasoning agents that it adds to it, you know. It's like a seasoning-type sausage, so when she makes her gumbo, she'll throw our sausage in there to stack the flavor; it adds another flavor to it. So a lot of the different—the same as indigenous to Creole foods and the history in Creole foods, you know, we find where our place was in there in terms of sausage. And, you know, now lately you're starting to see through the Creole Cultural Center in Natchitoches [Louisiana] and, you know, different Creole groups—an education between the difference Cajun food and Creole food and its cooking. So you know, I mean—I mean, I've seen where Frank Davis is very knowledgeable, and when he stresses certain things on television he will designate this is Creole; this is Creole cooking and

this if from the Creole heritage. And then he will go over and he will say, “Well this is from the Cajun area.” So he will—you know, I’m very thankful for him because he tends to know like—and promote the distinction so—. It’s a—you know, it’s nice to see that—that Creole [food] is now getting its due.

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AE: What kind of food was on the—the menu besides the—the chaurice and grits in your grandfather’s restaurant?

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VV: Well you had—it was my dad’s actually—my dad’s restaurant.

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AE: Your dad’s; I’m sorry.

00:32:13

VV: Well he would have the chaurice; he would have well, you know, red beans and rice was the staple; he would have different—he would have a version of grillades and grits. He—he would also what we call panéd meat or breaded veal, you know; and he would have the stuffed bell peppers in the Creole tradition. He would have different types of—or gumbo. Certainly etouffee. He would have jambalaya, which would be more of a—a brownish jambalaya than say, a reddish jambalaya; he would—he—he told me one time he said, “You know, when I was looking for recipes for the restaurant,” he was, you know, compiling different ones, he said, “But

you know, one of the best—one of the best sources,” he said, “was—were the earliest diversions of the *Times-Picayune Cookbook*,” he said. Because that actually had or encompassed the best tradition of Creole cooking because of its influences from the French and the Spanish tradition. And so what they did was they’d use a lot of those recipes and then tweak them. You know, more to the flavoring that they were used to where they came from, you know. A lot of breading, a lot of sauces; it—it was a—it really introduced the—that end of the [French] Quarter to a—an eating—an eating difference. You know, a lot of palates were giving a little different type of flavor profile in their foods, you know. I mean yeah, you had the Antoine’s and the Arnaud’s [restaurants] and everything, and they had their own Creole tradition of cooking but there is—there is a little difference, you know. You get a little bit of a difference in say, the kitchens of—of Creole people of color in the neighborhood. The flavor profile would be—be—and I think that over time, that influence has now gotten into those restaurants, you know, because a lot of the cooks, you know, the sous-chefs, when you start to look at them they’re—they’re people of color, so they’re bringing those things that they pick up from their—their mothers and their grandmothers that they then take to culinary school and they tweak over time, you know.

00:34:57

AE: What, specifically, would you say those differences are between the—?

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VV: I think it’s the use of seasoning. I think that, you know, where some—some things may not have as much garlic, traditionally, will have a little more garlic, a little more onion—pushing the salt limit on—the salinity, you know to—and stacking more of the flavor with say, bell peppers,

celery, you know, really—really adding and stacking a lot more flavors into a dish than normally you would see. And it may have a little—it may be a little harder, a— a little more onion or a little more bell pepper, you know, and when someone eats it, they say they can taste it; it will come up, but it will be blended so well that it will add a different type of flavor to the dish. I think it's really in how these—these same ingredients are used in different traditions. It's just the dominance of one may be a little different than—than another or the usage of one may be a little different. It's all in interpretation.

00:36:01

AE: But while it's a subtle difference, it's a discernable difference.

00:36:04

VV: Oh, yeah. Well you know, it's funny. It's like I was talking to—you know, one of the joys of my life in this business is that I had an option—when I would deliver to Leah Chase [chef/owner of Dooky Chase Restaurant], you know, twice a week, you know, and I always stay and talk to her because it's a wealth of knowledge. And I would talk to her—and it's funny because in her travels, of course, you know everybody wants her to taste their versions of it and it's—it's—and hearing her talk about, you know, it's—you know it's—it's good in its way but it's not, you know. It's not quite replicated; it's—and they're trying but it's just something about the—those things that we have access to and we just traditionally use in terms of how—and even the process. I think maybe her process in terms of how she made the gumbo and the things that she made. It just—it's just—it's just an envelopment of—of many different flavors and the way that they come out all together. And even somebody—I mean, it's funny; after [Hurricane]

Katrina, you know, you had a lot of displaced New Orleanians who have gone other places and eaten versions of their food. You know, you go to another place—I heard somebody went to Virginia and ate a gumbo, you know, and they said it was like—almost like a whitish color and they're like, "Well where did they get that interpretation from?" Or, you know, you'll have people who around the country are sausage-makers; because of the Cajun craze they're making andouille or they'll make a boudin, so you'll try it. And well, nowadays, you know, the way things are being communicated and a lot of the purveyors down here, the food companies can go out and—and teach people. You'll get, you know, a good representation. I mean you can't knock the good representations but like when you go in—you know you may go into Jacob's [Smokehouse] or you know—you can smoke an andouille and—and really just you know it's indigenous to this area from a maker from here. The same thing with boudin, you know; I'm—I was displaced into—I'm in New Iberia [Louisiana] now, and I have really been enjoying tasting different types of sausages, you know. Boudin, it humbled me, you know, because they have some great boudin out there, so I have just been taking notes. I mean people look at me like I'm crazy when I'm eating a sausage because I'm sitting up there—I do like a wine tasting. You know how when you see people who—who—wine aficionados, they'll take a wine and shake it up in the glass and then they'll tilt it up and they'll smell it and they'll look at it. Well I'm looking at it; I do the same thing with the sausage. I'll cut a sausage in half; I'll look at the texture from a—from a side profile, look at the ingredients and different things. I'll bite into it and I'll kind of—just kind of move it around on my tongue because, you know, different ingredients follow the palate a different ways. You know, like certain peppers, they'll hit you right at the top of your tongue immediately. [*Finger Snaps*] Some other peppers, they'll—they'll hit you more in the bottom of your throat, and that's more of a delayed reaction. Salt—the usage

of certain other ingredients; you—you can just roll it around on your tongue almost. You know, and so I'm picking it apart. I'm just like, "Wow," you know, "it's very interesting how they did that." And so I've gotten a great respect for that—up in that area. But then also, you know, I may eat a smoked sausage from in that area, and I'll feel like it's a little different, you know, in how they get—how they season it. I feel like maybe they could have seasoned it a little better, you know. Or a fresh sausage, which is more of our specialty, you know. I'll take and try a fresh sausage and I'll be like what, you know, that to me, you know, everybody is going to have a different exposure; mine is more salty, you know they could have done this; they could have done that and built up a little flavor on that. So it's just—it's great to go to different places and really, you know, try it on the products. But then the cooking, you know, I've tasted some great gumbos and some great rice-type dishes—dirty rice and—and things of that sort and some newer types of inventions that I've seen—and I said, "Oh, I'm going to bring that back when I do get back up and running." So it's just great; it's been great. But then, you know, a friend of mine who went to Houston [Texas], and, you know, Houston brags on boudin and because of the influence, you know. Some is okay; some is not. It's all about, you know—I've had so many people say, "I can't wait until you get up and running because I want you to ship me hot sausage," you know. Because that is something that, even though they have some people that's replicating it, what they're used to is not what they're—they just don't—something is missing, they say. It's just the way they say—so they'll call and they'll say, "Man, you know, ship me this or ship me that." So, you know, I'm going—I'm getting there. My wife has been sick—well, she's had four operations in the matter of seven months. So I haven't had really the time to get back really seeing customers and—and trying to get things up and running. As soon as I get her health back I'm going to take off running.

00:41:21

AE: What's the status of your facility?

00:41:24

VV: Oh, my facility in really bad shape. I've got a lot of water damage. And my building was already an older building, so in order to—and a lot of stuff I will need to do in there to get up and running. But luckily I have another sausage facility; a guy has a company that he's working out of, and we established a rapport where he's going to make my product out of his facility. It's amazing, [Hurricane] Katrina has—has showed options to a lot of different businesses, and I think in order to survive you—you look at your options, and I think it's beneficial—it's a mutually beneficial thing. It's not like I'm coming in there and—and putting a strain on his operation; it's more a situation where, you know, we both see how this could work for both of us and maybe something—a new relationship could come out of it. And—but we're going to keep our businesses separate; like he's going to have his business, and I'm going to have mine, and I'm going to work here.

00:42:22

AE: I'm hearing a lot of stories like that. I think that's a great thing that's coming out of this is that people are being resourceful and working together on different things—and the same thing.

00:42:30

VV: Oh, yeah. Because I'm going to tell you, this—the meat industry down here was very, very—you could say cut-throat, but that might be a little too hard. I think everybody was very territorial. That's the best way to say it, territorial. "You're not going to come to my plant; I'm not coming to yours. I don't want," you know, "I'm not—you don't infringe on my area I won't infringe on yours," you know. A lot of us would fight over contracts. A lot of us would fight over things, but I think once you pretty much got your niche, you know, and people were doing their niche, they didn't bother you. They didn't try to—they may try—if they're looking for businesses, they may say, "Well let me try to make this product and push into your area." You find that a lot, you know. I mean I was definitely in a battle with a lot of different companies with like items. But, you know, I mean it's just business, you know. You forge out your little niche, and you work with your customer base.

00:43:24

AE: So is this facility that you're sharing, is it here in New Orleans?

00:43:25

VV: It's in Metairie.

00:43:26

AE: In Metairie, okay, okay. So what kind of production schedule are you working with now with your wife being sick and—?

00:43:33

VV: Well I don't have one right now because I would need to be on hand to be able to really—you know, if I'm going to produce something, I'm going to want to be able to sell it, and there's a lot of things that I would like to do that I just can't do right now, you know. But once we get her healthy, and she can stay alone, and I can leave her for stretches of time then I'll—I'll get more product on the street. I had product for the Jazz Fest and French Quarter Fest because she was at a better place physically for me to do that but—but since then we've had two more operations, and it's just getting her healthy. And you know [Hurricane] Katrina made me realize the most important thing is—is your family and your kids and—and you know, we've lost—lost—we lost our house, we lost my mom's house, we lost equipment and stuff in the business, and so whatever—lost rental property we had and—and in that all those personal—all those personal belongings, you know, so you have to rebuild your life and then try to get some work done.

So I'm fortunate enough to have this situation come up with this guy and to be able to use his facility. And really, what it does is it puts me in a position where I can just take off running—get product made, get on the street, and start selling, you know. So I'm going to take that avenue for a while, and that will give me more time to set up my building and the equipment and see what's left. Because I just haven't had any large blocks of time to stay down here to do that because in between operations and taking care—I've got two other kids—I've got two kids, plus you know, taking care of my wife. And my mother is trying to help out but, you know, she's an older lady, and you can't put too much stress on her. So, you know, when I do get up and running it's going to be—I'm going to go gangbusters because it's just—and when you lose everything, it puts everything in perspective.

00:45:30

AE: Sure. Yeah. How old are your kids?

00:45:32

VV: I've got—I've got three kids. One is—is five and he lives with his mother in Houston, and then I have a three-year-old and a seven-month-old.

00:45:41

AE: Oh, wow. [*Laughs*] Quite a brood.

00:45:44

VV: It's a lot of—as most people know it's—it takes a lot of energy when they're that small so—.

00:45:51

AE: Well I was going to ask if they helped you in the sausage making, but I think that would be—. [*Laughs*]

00:45:54

VV: No, no, they don't.

00:45:56

AE: Well do you have ideas about your kids taking over the business and—and continuing with it in the future?

00:46:01

VV: You know it's funny, growing up in a situation where basically I was exposed to this as young as—as eight-years-old, my dad gave me a little leeway on the chain—on the choker chain for a while and then eventually, I went away to school for college, and then I was kind of—the pressures of coming back in the business I was like—it wasn't the—the biggest—I wasn't jumping for joy trying to come back because I had—my two older brothers, my oldest brother pursued—he wanted to be an opera singer, so he pursued that, and he toured Europe and did things like that. And my other brother, he had a lot different pursuits. In between there we—we would all come back in different forms and fashions and work in the business. My oldest brother worked in the business in an office position managing the business, but it was understood that when he got a gig, my dad let him go and pursue that. My other brother just—it just was not for him to—to work in the business. He would do it, but it was more so when he wasn't in anything else at the time, so eventually he made up his mind that he just didn't want to work in the business and that was that. Well there's a ten year difference between me and my older two brothers. They were eighteen months apart, and I was ten years difference. So when my time came and my dad was older—I was finishing school, my dad—I'll never forget, my dad came up to school one day and sat down with me and—very matter-of-fact—and said, “What are you going to do?” He said, “I've got this business, and I have no one else to leave it to, so what are you going to do? You know, are you going to get you a corporate job, or are you going to come back and do this?” And you know the—the—when you look at the family histories and the

different established meat companies in the city of New Orleans, there's not a very rosy picture; it's a lot of in-fighting between brothers, a lot of break-ups, every, you know, family that's in the business in New Orleans has had some issue when it comes to ownership or brothers working together and everything else. So—and I've even had that own experience with my own brother when we were working the business together. But I just—I felt that one of the things that I wanted to do was my parents gave me a lot, and I wanted to give back to them. So I came back after college and got the business. I was depressed for six months because I felt nothing had changed, you know. I went away to college for—for five years because I played a little bit, and when I came back I felt like things had stayed—stood in time. So I had a lot of work to do. And working with my dad was—it wasn't the easiest thing because you had experience versus theory, and I'm bringing new ideas based on theory and business practices, and he's bringing years of experience. So he would tell me how much I didn't know, and I would tell him how much he was not willing to look at. And we—if we didn't fight everyday, I thought something was wrong, you know, but that was just the way our relationship—and it wasn't like big fights, but it was mostly disagreements. But through that time we forged—or I got—I had the wonderful opportunity to work with my dad for about seven years, and from then—and then he passed. But in those seven years we—we worked out some things; we grew the company to different stages and—and it gave me the opportunity to not only learn the business from a trial and error standpoint, but also to learn my dad from a man-to-man standpoint, you know. And now we were looking at each other from a different level. So it was a great experience. But it's very hard when you are dealing with a family business to plot the future of a family business, especially with passing on to a different generation.

From hearing stories about my dad, my dad didn't really want to do the meat business. And I think that's why he segued from the—the meat market to the sausage business. He tried to tweak it to where the tradition kept going on, but he didn't have to cut meat all day. He didn't have to—you know, that which he came on was very strenuous. I mean my dad was, you know—where I have a mixer—a Butcher Boy mixer, my dad was mixing sausage by hand in washtubs, you know, and it was a very laborious thing for him to do. I mean, when it came down to where he could make a decision, he had veered away from that; but then he came and he—he had reinvented it. For me, I had, you know, that same challenge, and I think it's more so you know, you really have to, you know, expose your kids and give them a choice, you know, but give them something that is—is a good enough option to work with.

I'm going to give my—my kids that exposure, and I'm going to teach them how to make sausage. Now if they want to take it a different way or if they want—if they feel that what we're doing is profitable enough and they can get in the business in some form or fashion and learn it, and if they feel like this is something that they can make a living and—and enjoy to do—if I can create that environment for them, then I'll be more than happy to—to push that for them. But if it comes a time where they're—if I have one that's a musician and wants to tour the world, or I have one that wants to be a doctor, then I will then make plans to—to make sure the business is—keeps going on and see if somebody wants to—to take it on there, you know, sell it or something like that. But I think it's—it's really the—the—burden is on the generation that has it. You have to market it to your kid. You can't just assume that they want to take it over; you have to give them a great enough of life and a great enough exposure and really teach them the business because they're not going to want something that's confusing to them, if they don't know. You know, my dad really didn't teach me the business end of it. He taught me how to

make sausage and, indeed, how to run that business. That's where the trial and error period came in. And that's one of the things. My dad had a friend—a Jewish lady named Suzanne Adler; her family owns Adler's Jewelers and, you know, just a really well-ff family—real good friend of my dad. And one of the things that she said that they were made to do was the family said, “Okay, we're going to pay for your education, and you're going to go off and you can, you know, major in whatever you want; but when you come back, you've got to give us four years. The amount of time that you had in your schooling you've got to give us in the business.” And she said that normally you get so—you get into the day-to-day and you get the exposure that eventually you make the decision to stay, which is a great—it's a great philosophy. I say, “Well, you know, if I do this for you, why don't you come back and just give me couple of years. If you don't want that, fine; I have no regrets.” So it's—that's another dynamic. I think in not only sausage or meat, I think even in restaurants, you know, it's very interesting. And I know that's a challenge for Dooky Chase; you know, Miss [Leah] Chase is old. You know, she's got all these grandchildren. She's got these children and they've all worked in the business at different ways, but her daughter Leah is a jazz singer, you know. She's got—her son is—was—is Dean of Business at Dillard [University in New Orleans]. I don't see, you know, somebody in there cooking, you know, or saying we're going to, you know, maintain that culinary tradition. But I think they—the grandchildren have plans for that because they've been exposed. So it's good to see.

00:54:03

AE: Well since your father has passed, have you changed the business at all or changed any of the recipes or—?

00:54:11

VV: Well I changed—I changed the recipes to certain things—more of the things that we’ve kind of created. Some things, some of the older things I just, you know, we leave alone. If it ain’t broke don’t fix it as Andrew Young said. But some things that—that we’ve done I’ve changed a little bit based on, you know, I listen to people; you know, I listen to what they like and what they don’t like, and you have to tailor to their taste; and some things I’ve changed and some things I haven’t. Some things I’ve tried—I’ve tried to create and add, so I have some ideas—even after this storm—some things I want to—try some new things. It’s all about, you know, really just creating—putting it out there and seeing the response, and if it hits fine, if it doesn’t go back to the drawing board, you know, so—.

00:54:59

AE: Well aside from your rich family history behind the business, which really creates, you know, a lot of the richness of what you sell and make, but what would you say sets your product apart from other products, aside from that?

00:55:17

VV: Well I think that when you look at the individual products, from what I’ve heard from my customers who have tried other products, it’s a—it goes back to what I said in regards to that—that flavor and tradition. It’s just that they’ve had a certain flavor for a while that they like; they like the way that I take the seasoning and—and then—and flavor the products to create that profile. And you know, I’ve had—I’ve had people tell me they didn’t like my product because

they were used to another flavor product. I've heard people say, "Well your product is not hot enough." You know, I learned from an old seasoning man a long time ago, he said, "You can always add pepper, but you can't take it away." So I'd rather add just enough, you know. They have hot sauce and things like that out there that you can add to something if they want to, but I'm not going to make something that, you know, that's just unbearable to the average tongue. You know, my dad said, you know, "When you talk about the product, say it's a product that you make with love." Because we put more emphasis on seasoning rather than pepper. It's the overall seasoning of the product. So I just try to create a product or whatnot—I take one of my own products; I make sure that it has a seasoning profile that I think when it hits your palate it will be distinctive. It will have a robust flavor that you can say, "Wow, you know it—it's just—it's good; it's pleasing." And because a lot of us—a lot of other meat producers in the area, we make a lot of the same stuff; and over time they've become very similar, but I think they always still have their distinctive flavor profile based on the—the—those people and their stories or their histories and where the influences come from.

00:57:10

AE: Can you speak a little bit to how the culinary culture of New Orleans, specifically, demands things like that—demands spiced sausage and people developing tastes for that and that kind of thing?

00:57:25

VV: Well, you know, over time the New Orleans culinary industry has just blossomed. I mean we have chefs that come from places in this area who have gone on to do great things. I mean

I've never heard of Falls Rivers, Massachusetts, having this great Cajun/Creole culinary tradition, but it took Emeril Lagasse to come down here and learn what's indigenous to this area and how things are made down here and then from there his—his whole—I think his whole industry now—he's an industry—his whole industry in itself is based on what he learned from—from our culinary traditions. I think that these traditions are demanding that they want things that are going to stay true to the history that has made our food what it is today, but they also demand for us to create dishes that may have historical components but that become new products. Like I've seen some of these chefs put together things, and I'm like, "Okay, yeah, they'll—they'll bread, they'll pané something; they'll bread this and they may add a certain sauce to this and they may add another type of entity—an oyster or something else—but then they'll add these different things, and they'll create a new product, a new item, a new—and so that's the demand: "Okay, we want to take those flavor profiles indigenous to this area and create new products, create new things that we can then market and sell."

00:59:12

AE: Okay. [Vance's wife, Julie, and their friend walk by to say they're leaving to get some lunch.] [*Laughs*] [*Short conversation off of the record*] Nice to meet you both.

00:59:29

VV: So—so yeah, that's the—I think that a lot of these chefs, you know, you deal with—like Brookstein and some of the other chefs that are coming out of this area or coming from other places and coming to this area, they're learning things and then so the—the pressure then comes from when they want to go to these different areas or compete in these different competitions or

get these different exposures, and then they have to create these different types of products and they want, you know, wholesome, rich, traditional items that they can use in these products. You know, to the point where some of them now, I'll say, well they're making their own products. Like I know some of these chefs make their own sausages, you know, because they are so specific. They—they want it to be of a certain quality, you know. You know, we have them where some of them are growing their own filé [*ground sassafras leaves used as a thickener in some gumbos*], you know, or they're growing their own bay leaf, you know. They want these things in a certain fashion; they want to be able to use them, so it's always interesting to see how the New Orleans culinary tradition reinvents itself. So—because now it's—it's all about marketing—marketing and selling. You're competing with different traditions—the Chinese tradition. **[Coughs]** Excuse me. You're dealing with European food, and you're dealing with ethnic food, and so now you're seeing where okay, we're not going to stand alone. We're going to borrow. I mean I think Copeland has always been an innovator on his restaurants in taking different traditions—taking Cajun/Creole or ethnic, taking different aspects. I think PF Changs is like a Chinese/whatever, they use and they're pulling from different traditions in creating these new dishes because the public is demanding new items, especially in a—in a setting—a new restaurant. You have to come up with a new—something that's going to make your restaurant stand out. The chef has to create new things that make him stand out as a chef, so there's a greater demand of—from the products that they demand from us. I think that's why you've seen people—innovators in the sausage you know like Bruce Aidell from the San Francisco, area who was a chef in his own—who is a chef in his own right. He then saw the demand from the local culinary scene and started a sausage company to the point where now Aidell Sausage Company has some of the most varied sausage creations that I've seen, you know. Jodi Marone who came

from Venice, California; he has such a varied sausage classification, and when you see our exposure, you've got Creole sausage, Cajun sausage, you know, chaurice. Oh, I'd love to taste that to see what they've done, you know, because they—they're going to try to work with it from that educated culinary standpoint, replicating or reinventing and making it their own. It's always interesting, you know. See, that's the thing, food is, you know, it's an open landscape. You can do whatever you want, you know. You don't know what's going to catch on, you know. I don't know you know. It's—it's what you make it. It really is. And we just try to take our traditions and say, "Well maybe we can—I'm trying—I would love to make a sausage with oysters and I—how can I make that happen?" It's probably almost impossible; the problems with—with oysters and fresh oysters and making sure nobody gets sick. But I'm sure if somebody comes up with it—if you find a sausage with oyster in it, it will sell because somebody—just the curiosity alone. "That's crawfish sausage—crawfish, shrimp, and oyster? I'm going to get that!" We made a crawfish sausage in—and put it in the Jazz Festival, and that became our biggest—selling at the Jazz Festival strictly. Because, you know, "Oh, crawfish sausage?" People will come up to the booth and say, "Give me the crawfish sausage. What's that? you know. And that's what I'll give them. Now this is crawfish sausage, okay. I'll give it to them, and they'll say, "Where is the crawfish?" I say, "What do you mean? You don't have it on top or—?" "It's in the sausage." "Oh." And I purposely keep the—the [crawfish] tails whole in the sausage so when you bite, you could pull away and see a whole crawfish sitting in your sausage. I do that purposely because people think the sausage—"Oh, they're just mixing anything." And a lot of times I'll leave my ingredients just large enough to where when you bite into it, you can actually see the green onion or the bell peppers or—or the onion, you know, and you can—you can see the shrimp and the crawfish because it falls out. And it's very important. So trust me, I've tried buffalo—I even—

the Department of Agriculture brought me some nutria [*a semi-aquatic rodent plaguing the wetlands and bayous of the Gulf Coast*] one time and said, “See if you can make a product out of the nutria.” Because if we can get it to catch and find a market for it, that would create a demand, so then people would then want to hunt nutria, you know, slaughter it, provide the meat for processing. First of all, we had the nutria, and it is the hardest animal to de-bone. And it’s got all these little bones, and it’s got all these things and it—it’s just not a—it’s not a—it’s not an easy thing; it’s not just—it’s just a—it was very, very laborious to do that and—and to get the meat—just enough meat to—out of a carcass and just it wasn’t worth it for us. We made some product. Oh, we made—we tweaked it. I made that sucker—I, you know, seasoned it up. But after that they were like, “You know, it’s good but we just—.” They just couldn’t find the market. They tried to market the nutria to China, you know, because they tend to take things and more exotic foods—just hasn’t hit you know and—

01:05:43

AE: What does it taste like?

01:05:46

VV: Nutria has—it’s—it’s got a gamey taste to it. [*Sighs*] It’s—I really can’t place it; it’s—it’s—it just is a very distinctive taste. More like if you would eat like a small game or maybe a coon or possum or something like that. It’s more along that line, but it’s—it has a different type taste even still from them. So that’s what made it interesting in terms of marketing. Maybe—it came out fine. It’s just, you know, working with the meat itself. They’ve had other processors that have tried to work with it and make nutria products, and it’s interesting—it’s—it’s just one

of those things, creating new products. I'm looking forward to doing it, you know. I've got to come up with something that's going to knock people that—in the rest of the places—they'll say what—what? It's got to be just different enough to one, not chase away the consumer and make them interested and make them want to try it, so you know it's—it's fun, you know, to try to figure out these different things. And sometimes I've made some stuff, too, and I've been trying it, and I'm like, "I don't think that's going to—." But that's the beautiful process. I mean you look at these major food companies; they spend millions of dollars on R&D—research and development—trying to create new product. So obviously, there is an important phase to—to just trial and error which is what that is; so—.

You know, my dad and I used to have some fun; we—we would make some stuff and, you know, my dad and I, we—we had totally different views on—on new product creation, you know. He would do some things, and I would totally be like, "You know, that's not just going to work." And then I would do some things and—and he would give his opinion, but you know, over time we created certain things, and it was a great experience. But that's the challenge, you know. So what's the next great item coming out of New Orleans? What's the new great item coming out of Acadia [Cajun Country] that's going to take us—the nation—by storm? People are expecting something out of this Cajun/Creole tradition. You know, boudin took off, and it's doing its thing; and andouille, you know, everybody and their mom in different places are making andouille because it's becoming a different product to their constituents, who may have kielbasa or bratwurst, you know. Did you know notice we don't—that's not a big thing down here, where everywhere else, you know, those sausages take off. Not here, you know. They offer them, you know; you can have—you can find a bratwurst in the grocery store, you can find kielbasa or any of the—it's—it's not a big market like it is somewhere else because we're very,

very particular in terms of that—very particular. People will come and get ours and love it, but when you come to bring something you've got—you've got a hard row to cut, you know. That's why I never understood until recently, Red Lobster [restaurant chain] finally made it into the area. They had—they made it in Metairie because over time you just—they just kept trying to get in this area, but people in this area are so used to fresh seafood in a certain way. But now they just—I guess we just have been homogenized so much that, you know—and then you have people from different areas that live in the area, so they—let's put that on the menu and marketing of it and—Dungeness crabs, you know, it's new to us. You eat that much crab and you're like, “Wow, we leave that—we leave those Lake Pontchartrain crabs alone, you know.” But—but it's definitely a challenge. I'm looking forward to seeing who is going to make the next food product to come out of this area.

01:09:24

AE: So are you confident, then, that the sausage industry has sustaining power; that it's a tradition that is not going anywhere here in New Orleans?

01:09:33

VV: Yeah, I think—I think now more than ever because the more that these people have been displaced from the hurricane [Katrina], and they go other places, you know, really value what they had. And they want to have access to it, so I think that—that market is really going to—going to grow because, you know, you have people who have been displaced and then introduced other people to our product, and they're going to want the product. So now you're going to have more of a desire for our products from different places.

01:10:04

AE: Could you name some other restaurants that you sold to?

01:10:06

VV: That I sell to?

01:10:08

AE: Uh-hmm.

01:10:10

VV: Let's see. Some of them I don't know because I sell to distributors, so I'd have to ask, you know, you—so you get people that will pick up your stuff from an order form or whatever. My individual ones are the little mom and pops, you know, Dooky's [Dooky Chase Restaurant] I was doing Crump's, which his a little corner place, doing, oh, it's been a while. A lot of po'boy shops, you know, because a lot of people with sausages now, they're making po'boys so, you know, I have The Bakery and Prytania Street; you'd have Magnolia Street. I mean it's just, you know, that market for me was where I really moved a lot more product as opposed to like the finer restaurants. There's a lot more competition. All these other sausage makers are—they're really fighting for the—the hotels and some of the restaurants. So I have a little business in there; But I did a lot of the corner stores. I did a lot of the po'boy shops, a lot of the—and then the grocery stores for me was where I really put all my time because I went straight to the individual consumer, you know. They can cook with what they want. I serviced—I was in the Wal-Mart

Super Centers. I was in the Save-a-Centers, Winn Dixie; I was in the—Robert's [Fresh Market] locally. I mean that is where a lot of my energies went

01:11:41

AE: How many employees did you have?

01:11:44

VV: I had six—six employees. I learned a long time ago, if you invest in the right machinery, you don't need as many employees, so we—we put a lot of our energy in getting the proper stuff first and all the computer stuff and portion control and other packaging machines and—and concentrated on the issue of training those that I had and really maximizing and making sure they get good wages and good money out of what they do. And then just put a lot of effort on the delivery side and go from there. You know, we didn't have the biggest place, but with the space we had we—we tried to make it—store it for a little while and then ship it out because we didn't have as great amount of storage. So we would put it up; we developed our cycle where what was in the freezer on a Friday, we brought it out Monday, and then we'd back up and fill it up for Friday and—kind of new trends on buying when this would be this and that. We did a lot of contract work because then you know the cycle. And the biggest—the biggest thing you have to beat in the meat industry is the garbage can, you know; so you want to make a lot of stuff, but a lot of times we'd get caught where we would have a lot of other things in stock because it moved, and some of the other things we might not make as much of because, you know, it just wasn't that we had found a big enough demand for. But we would make it available for our customers.

01:13:14

AE: Did you have a retail element at all?

01:13:16

VV: I had a small retail element; my dad got away from the retail. I guess he just—it seemed like it aggravated him because he had done that so long at the meat market, and he was the type that he couldn't sit still. He was not—he didn't want to sit by a counter and he—so he would go out and talk to customers and do whatever. So we—when we got to the point where—for what we were doing was so much on the production end and we just—we closed it down and really worked on getting production where we can get product out—those other avenues. But as of late, I found that it seemed like consumers want more and more of an instant buying relationship; they want to be able to go to the source and go in and buy and tailor-make what they want. And so as of late I want to—we would have the retail open, and then right before the storm [Hurricane Katrina] we were really—we were doing the retail, and then we were going to have where people could come in and, you know, the whole display thing and redecorate the rooms, you know, and we were in the works of doing that, but then the storm came. But you know that—that is a—actually what I'd like to do is, if this relationship works with this gentleman, I may get out of the production end and work it out where I would oversee the production at his facility of my product and then take my place and just use it for freezer and storage space and larger retail. These things give you options. You think about what your differences would be, you know—what's going—you know, how can I rise from these ashes and reinvent myself? So that's where I am now? I mean my mind is just spinning, but it's just kind of stagnating because, you know, the

most important thing is the health of my wife and taking care of my family. So once I get her like—she’s going to lunch [today], and I’m like, “Okay, are you feeling better now? I’m going to start spending more time in New Orleans and get doing my work.” So it’s getting there—it’s getting close. So I’m looking forward to doing that.

01:15:23

AE: Are y’all going to be able to move back here [to New Orleans] soon or is that—?

VV: Eventually. We’re working on getting the house worked on, you know. Challenges is just—you know, the contractors and getting them to commit to do a project. We have one, and he’s rescheduled, and he should be able to start our house shortly. So it seems like everything all at once is starting to gel, starting to work. So you know, I’m—I’m a religious man, and that was a tradition my folks passed down to me, you know, so I can’t worry about it. It’s just going to come in time. So but I think he’s going to bless me and take care of my wife so—. He’s going to help me out here. [*Laughs*]

01:16:09

AE: Well what would you want people to know about your family and your sausage?

01:16:15

VV: [*Sighs*] Vaucresson Sausage Company came out of a tradition of men who—who really took heed to their community and the desires of their community and really tried to make products within the—the—the traditions of the specifically the 7th Ward Creole community.

From that the exposure into maybe more of a Creole heritage and then in cooking style and product making and then also creating products and really making sure that we one, put a lot of our love and effort into our products, but also that we felt was consistent with what we felt was our family tradition of making a—a very good flavorful product that when you would bite into it, the bite of the product would be pleasing, the flavor profile of the product would be pleasing, and then the—the digestion of the product would be pleasing, as opposed to having where some instances you have people who get a lot of repeating gas and things like that. So we just want to make sure that it's—it's an overall enjoyable eating experience and that they know, you know, that there's a lot—a lot of history behind these products and that, you know, we're—we're—the people that made this product have gone through a lot and a lot of diversity, you know, and that what they're getting is the product of—of a lot of that. So that's what I want them to know that, you know, it's—it's one thing to—to start something overnight and it take off, but it's something to last as long as we have through all the struggles, and I think I'm facing probably the biggest challenge that my grandfather or my dad might have ever faced—it will be to survive and then from there, just to make sure that those traditions—those things that people hold dear that they can look at one portion of that history in us and say, “You know, it's like how it was. That's like how it was.” So that's what we want, just to carry on the tradition.

01:18:36

AE: Do you remember ever hearing anything about from your family about the flood of [nineteen] twenty-seven? Did your grandfather talk about that?

01:18:41

VV: The Flood of '27?

01:18:42

AE: Uh-hmm.

01:18:43

VV: No, no, I've heard about the flood of—of [Hurricane] Betsy, you know, and what that did but I didn't hear anything about that. I may have to inquire about that, but I don't think my—I don't think there was anything that—that really was substantial. I think I would have heard it because my dad was born in [nineteen] thirty-one, and so I know that my grandfather was working and had older kids and things like that. So I don't know; I mean I'll have to ask about that. I'm sure it was—I've never heard of that, so maybe you're educating me, you know, but I know that when [Hurricane] Betsy came and flooded the area, for some reason, I don't think where—where we were—it got water but somehow, you know, they—they worked it out. They didn't take the hit. I think—but I don't know if the—the whole infrastructure of the city was shut down with Betsy. And I think when they blew the canal in the 9th Ward, it flooded certain areas of the city and not the, you know, the whole city. Like you may have the east shut down, and you'd have, you know, all the other areas shut down. So that's just interesting, you know. Yeah, we'll survive like they did.

01:20:11

AE: Yeah, New Orleans is coming back. This is my second time back in nine months or so, and it's definitely coming back.

01:20:19

VV: Oh yeah, it's coming back. You know, if these politicians would just, you know—really just in the spirit of their job, you know, really serve the community, I think it would work out. I think there's a lot of—you know, there's still deals need to be made and cut and—and it just holds up the progress, you know. I don't see why certain things haven't been available to the public yet, so I don't know. You think the storm would have taught something, but what you do?

01:20:51

AE: Maybe it takes a while to learn those lessons—some of the lessons.

01:20:54

VV: I guess, you know, you think that if you lose everything, then it might wake some people up but no, they still want to fight over who is going to be the congressman and mayor and—you know, but we'll see. We'll see. But we're just going to keep making food; that's one thing, you know.

01:21:11

AE: Can I ask you about gumbo real quick?

01:21:13

VV: Yeah, please.

01:21:14

AE: Do you make a gumbo?

01:21:16

VV: I—I do make a gumbo. I make a gumbo. I make our usual, you know, basic flour and oil roux.

01:21:28

AE: What color do you like in your roux?

01:21:30

VV: I like my color—I like my color like a nice—how can I put it? It's more like a—a—it's not a dark brown like I've seen like in—in central Louisiana. I've seen some—some very dark brown rouxs. Mine is more of where I'll make a—somewhat of a—a brownish roux but over time, after I add other things, it lightens up a little. It's more of like a—hmm, I don't know. I wish I knew the different stages of brown but it's—it's not a dark brown. It's not a very rich thick flour-based Gumbo. It's a lot lighter. It's—it's more of a—

01:22:33

AE: Like a pecan color, maybe?

01:22:34

VV: I'd san pecan-ish, you know. And—

01:22:36

AE: Light?

01:22:37

VV: Dependent upon—it's got a little—I guess a hint of—after I put all my stuff in it's kind of like a—a pecan—kind of like slightly reddish because of, you know, I might put a little—you know, I put like—when I put my sausage in that, you know, you get a little bit of pretty color from that, so you get a little bit of that. But it's, you know—it's more of a pecan-ish color; it's—it's a light—it's not a very thick gumbo. It's lighter in consistency; it's more—it's not like a soup but it's—it's like almost—it's in between like a soup and—and when I say about a soup, like say—say you get a chicken noodle broth, like chicken broth and then you take—you go all the way to a—a thicker gumbo roux, like a thicker—in between there. So it's a little lighter in—in texture. So like when you take a spoonful, rather than it—let's say you take a spoon and then you turn it; rather than it—it go in a stream, it will drip. You know, like—it will drip. So it's more sort of, I guess, on the side of—of like a thicker soup almost, but we all love the stuff I put in it. It's—it's—you see everything in there. It's—it's a good gumbo. I learned that; it was a trial-and-error-type gumbo. My mom made it, and it was a little bit—it was a little more soup-ier. And then when I started making my own—excuse me—I kind of thickened it up a little bit.

01:24:22

AE: Are those two gumbos anything like what your father had at the restaurant?

01:24:25

VV: Yeah. Actually, I think that's more of a Creole tradition of filé gumbo. And that's the way I'm talking about filé—it's a lighter Gumbo. Now when you go to okra, you know, that's obviously thicker, but the key for me is really how I manipulate that okra and make sure it's not slimy. I can't stand a slimy okra. [*Gasps*]

01:24:49

AE: So wait, when you are talking about filé gumbo, is that a roux-based gumbo? Is filé added at the end or is it—?

01:24:54

VV: Yeah.

01:24:54

AE: Okay.

01:24:54

VV: Now, it's a roux-based gumbo, where you would add filé at the end and, you know, we always—if you wanted more filé, you could do it on your own, but it wasn't where—it's not—it's not a filé gumbo where you—you— filé, yeah. It's more so you can—you can take your time to taste it but you know, we—we leave it for—we're wrapping a whole bunch of other flavors in it and sausages and oysters, the—the—in my—in my gumbo, the sausage—hot

sausage, smoked sausage, pickled pork, you know, a little bit—not too much; I put oysters and—
and I put shrimp. That’s all. That’s all you need.

01:25:46

AE: You look hungry for it now.

01:25:48

VV: That’s all you need. You know, some people put chicken, some people put—well, crab. I would put crab for those that want crab. Personally, I don’t feel like fussing with the crab. My wife will throw them crabs in there, which is fine; I don’t mind it. It’s really—it all depends on how I wake up on the side of the bed, if I’m going to put crab. It doesn’t really matter in terms of that, but I usually just put that in the—in the ,you know—some people put chicken, some people put—what else—.

[Cell phone rings]

01:26:21

AE: That might be your wife. I can pause this.

[Short pause]

01:26:26

VV: You know, I just don’t know. You know, gumbo is—gumbo is like—it’s like the individual, you know. You can—you can give somebody the same—five people the same gumbo recipe; it will be different. You know, I went up there to this gumbo Cook-Off in New Iberia, when I went

there. And the rules to this place is, you had to create your gumbo on-site from the roux. You cannot bring roux; you had to make your roux on-site. And I was wondering around, and I'm like, first of all, everybody makes their roux different, and I really learned that everybody makes their gumbo different, and you see all the different influences. And I mean in certain categories—yeah, they had a filé gumbo category, and every gumbo was different. Every—okra gumbo was different. Every, you know—chicken and sausage gumbo was different and it was—it was crazy, you know, but it's just—it's really just—when you taste mine, I think you get a lot of, you know—that's my family's traditional gumbo, and—

01:27:33

AE: Did your father do all the cooking in his restaurant?

01:27:34

VV: No, no. He—he helped—he helped to put together the recipes, but he just supervised the implementation. You know, he had some very good staff, some—some good old big mama cooks in the kitchen, who he knew was going to take care of him; he didn't have to worry. He'd let them know his vision, and they'd say, "We gotcha." And he, of course, enjoyed the—the taste-testing and making sure that it was what he wanted. But—but no, he—he trusted, you know—they had the same cooking traditions that he came from, and he just let them go. He didn't want to, you know—he just basically gave them—he said, "Look, we're working with this recipe—this recipe, you know—work with that. If you feel you can tweak it, fine. Let me taste it and go from there." But he made sure it stayed within that flavor profile that he wanted—that

Creole tradition. And I find myself doing it. Like with the gumbo I'm sipping [*slurp*], you know, and doing this and doing that and it's—it's the same tradition where I grew up on it.

01:28:45

AE: Do you think there's any one thing that makes a good gumbo?

01:28:47

VV: [*Sighs*] I really feel that if you—if you really, you know, develop your roux and, you know, you can develop your roux where it's not too flour-y tasting, it's not too oily, and you really cook it down and take your time with it, and you really develop it, once you get it and you then start to add to it, now you can—you've got people who do it every day; they boil the shrimp and then take the shrimp stock and throw it in there, and you can boil the chicken and the chicken stock and put it in there. And they're just going to get chicken broth, you know, or they might just take water and do it from that. Everybody has their own way. But as long as they're cognizant of the building process that they're really—it's all—it's just building that flavor. They just stick with it and, you know, they don't, you know, really make it too far this way, too far that way, it will be a very pleasing gumbo.

I had a gumbo one time—looked great but it was so salty and so onion-y. I don't know what happened. They must have just put too much, and I think that it just—it—it was like when you sit in the car and you put too many people on one side; it was too much on one side, so that's all you—you couldn't enjoy it because all you tasted was the over-salinity and the over onion—like—. [*Slurps as if eating the gumbo*] You couldn't wait to get rice in your mouth. Cut that—cut that taste, you know. It was so—so yeah, it's just—just really building those flavors and

making sure it's all—everything compliments. That's why I say, you know, when people tell me, "Man, I'm making my—trying to make my own sausage." I say, "Good." I try it. "Yeah, I can—I can see, you know, it's a balance. You've got to have a good balance." You don't want anything to—to really take over the sausage. People tell you they can make a good hot sausage. Its' hot, hot, hot. Well, I mean all people are going to taste is that. Some people want that. Some people feel like, "Oh, a real hot sausage is, you know—" No, we—we really don't believe that. We believe that, you know, the sausage—they're hot, the pepper is a compliment, maybe a little bit more because it's a hot sausage, so it's got to, you know, stand out, but it's not going to overpower. It's not going to land you choking or, you know, running for water. Some people—I've even had people tell me, "That's what I like. I like my sausage hot." I said, "Well you better get you some Tabasco and add it to mine." I just refuse to—to make it like that.

01:31:24

AE: Do you have any final thoughts about what you do and what you make and where you make it in New Orleans, Louisiana, and when you'll be making it again?

01:31:31

VV: Oh, yeah. I'll be making it again, and I think that I'm looking forward to it. I think it's going to be a challenge, you know. It's going to definitely be a challenge because the market has changed, and you have less people to work with so you have a bigger fight to get your product out there. I'm going to try to start shipping more product, you know, to customers that I know and then really just trying to get back to carving my own niche and—and getting back to growing my business to where it was and then maybe bigger than that. It's a challenge, you

know. I'm just going to try to do what I know and work with it and experiment, you know, and take risks and go from there, you know. I've seen certain businesses; they're not coming back—food business. I'm somewhat sad but—even though it may have been competition—but you know, everybody always wants to—they had certain businesses—certain sausage makers that they would always compare and say, “Well that's your, you know, sworn enemy and things like that. And when people asked me about them, I'd say, you know, “I'm happy for them because they continue the tradition.” And that's all I want, you know. They're going to get their customers, and I'm going to get mine, you know, but just—you know, I respect them because they're—they do what I do, and they continue to do it in a fashion, which continues our tradition. And I think if more of us had that outlook view, we probably would work better—work together. And then the next thing you know we got this big food company in New Orleans, and everybody is living comfortably because we all put our heads together. But that's an ideal world. But I just—you know, I'm coming back. I'm young enough; I can fight for another ten, fifteen more years. After that, I'll go sit on an island in Jamaica and climb coconut trees or something.

01:33:28

AE: Well, I look forward to the day when I can come back to New Orleans and have some of your sausage.

01:33:31

VV: Yeah. I'm sorry I didn't have any this time. But—but yeah, I will definitely—you will get an email saying, “Amy, it's time.” *[Laughs]*

01:33:45

AE: All right. Well, thank you, Vance, so much for meeting me here. I know this was not totally convenient to fit in but—

01:33:51

VV: It's a pleasure. Oh, and you know, it's just you know—I just—I think it's important to know that people, you know—especially the way that y'all are doing things, you know, that—that certain is preserved, you know. I respect my history and those who came before and the shoulders on which I stand, so hopefully someone can benefit from this.

01:34:03

[End Vance Vaucresson Interview]