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Tampa Food Families Oral History Project
Oral History Program
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Andrew Huse: Let's get started.

Dan Fernandez: Okay.

AH: Well, I'm here. Today is March 10, [2006]. My name is Andrew Huse from the University of South Florida. I'm here with Dan Fernandez Sr., of Naviera Coffee Company?

DF: Coffee Mills.

AH: Coffee Mills. Okay, and first, before we get to your life, let's go back to your grandfather for a moment. And just tell us how the company got started.

DF: My grandfather, when he immigrated back at the turn of the century, like most immigrants that came over, was a cigar maker. But he was not too nimble with his fingers, so he was not a great cigar maker. Then—I don't remember the exact year—but they had what they called a nine-month strike.

AH: Okay.

DF: In the cigar industries here. And he went to work in the phosphate mines up in Lake Wales and that area in there. And when he came back, he knew that he couldn't go back to the cigar factories because he couldn't make any money. So he and his brother began a coffee roasting plant, which was called La Reguladora. If you want to translate that, it literally means "the regulator."

AH: Okay.

DF: Why they called it that, I don't know. And he was in business with his brother for quite a number of years, and then they sold it. And my grandfather, and also his brother, the year after, they went back to Spain. He took his family with him, which was my mother and my uncle and his wife. And they spent about six months in Spain. And then they came back. This is [in] 1929.

AH: Okay.

DF: But he had a clause on the sale of the previous company that he couldn't be in the coffee roasting business for five years. So he had a friend of his that taught him of all things, to go to Tarpon Springs back in 1929, and open a Spanish Restaurant in Tarpon Springs.

AH: (laughs)

DF: And they died of hunger, okay!

AH: (laughs)

DF: But, there used to be a cigar factory in Tarpon Springs, and they catered to feeding the people that worked in the cigar factory. But that wasn't enough, and they finally gave up and came back to Tampa, of which—a little antidote here—I have in my living room today, a huge seashell, which was my grandfather's, and we always had it in the living room. And ever since [I was] a little boy, that shell always intrigued me, because you put your ear to it, you hear the ocean. And when my grandfather died, I asked my mom if I could have his shell. And the thing that the shell represented to him was, "Do not get involved in a business that you don't know anything about." And he didn't know anything about restaurants. And that's what the shell represents.

AH: Right.

DF: I still have the shell today.

AH: Okay.

DF: But I thought that was cute. So he came back to Tampa, and he started Naviera Coffee Mills back in 1921, by himself. Not with his—no, with his brother was with him too. And his brother-in-law. In fact I have a picture of it over there.

AH: Okay, so the Regulator then—

DF: He had sold it.

AH: Yes, but that was when? What year? Do you think?

DF: It was, got to be before 1921. So it's got to be—

AH: Okay.

DF: In the nineteen-teens—

AH: Yes, probably—

DF: Around—

AH: Five years, at least five years—

DF: Right.

AH: Before.

DF: Before.

AH: Okay, gotcha.

DF: And his brother decided he was going to go to New York City and open up another Naviera Coffee Mills in New York City, which he did. But that didn't pan out, and he had to come back to Tampa. But when he came back to Tampa, my grand—he did not come back to Naviera Coffee, he went to the cigar factory. So my grandfather was alone in the company. And ever since then, my grandfather, his son worked in it for a while. Then my mom worked in it for a while. And then my grandfather passed away and my mother stayed with the company. And then after my mother, I came into the picture. Back in 1959, I went to school at University of Tampa but there was no University of South Florida. So when I graduated they asked me if I would come and help them, which I couldn't refuse because they had paid my education. So I said, "Sure."

AH: (laughs) Yes.

DF: I says—if your mom and your dad want to go to Spain, because my father, who was born in Spain hadn't seen his sisters in thirty years—

AH: Wow.

DF: And they said, "Look, you know, if you come over for six months, they'll go to Spain and then you can venture to what you want." Which, at that time I thought I was going to be a lawyer—

AH: Okay.

DF: But anyhow, so I came. Those six months and the longer I stayed in the six months—I've been helping ever since, because I never left.

AH: (laughs)

DF: I said, “You know, I can make this thing work, I can”—you know, “We can make a living here.”

AH: Yes.

DF: So that’s what I did. And I stayed, so I been here since 1959.

AH: Okay.

DF: And now my son, who is now thirty-eight—but he’s been working here since he’s been out of school. So he’s the fourth generation to—

AH: Great.

DF: Carry on the business.

AH: Yes.

DF: But it’s been a good life, it’s been a good life. Lot of hard work.

AH: Yes.

DF: A lot of determination. I remember when we started to venture out of Tampa. Which at one time, all we used to sell was in Tampa. In fact, when I started in 1959, there were ten independent coffee roasters here in Tampa. Now there’s only two of us. But it was a challenge. It was a challenge. And then we ventured out of Tampa. We started with Miami, and then we went up north and were in Philadelphia and New Jersey, New York, Boston—

AH: Wow.

DF: So, it’s done all right.

AH: Yes. Well, I want to talk about that expansion and your role some more, but before we do that I just want to go back to your grandfather for a second. You know you talked about, and I didn’t—he said, “Never get in a business you don’t know anything about.”

DF: Right.

AH: Did he have previous experience with coffee roasters?

DF: Well, he did when he had the other one, yes.

AH: Okay, yes.

DF: But when he started—

AH: Okay.

DF: He didn't have any previous knowledge—

AH: Yes.

DF: Of it.

AH: Yes, yes.

DF: But coffee was always a very intricate part of the cigar makers.

AH: Yes.

DF: Because while the cigar makers were working, they would have their coffee break while they were working.

AH: Yes, the *cafeteros*.

DF: Right. And he would go up and down the aisles, and he would pour you a little shot of coffee, and you'd be working, and sipping your coffee. In fact, the coffee companies used to—you know the little tickets they give you—I don't know if they do it today in the theatres or not, little red tickets? There were two parts. As the *cafetero* went down the aisle in the cigar factory, he'd give you a coupon for every time that you took a cup of coffee. So at the end of the week when you got there, he collected his money. He wouldn't collect it during the week—

AH: Okay.

DF: But he would collect it at the end of the week. You give him the ticket, he had so many tickets that he gave you and you had the corresponding number of tickets and you pay him. So coffee was always very important for the cigar factory industry.

AH: Yes, well one thing—I was kind of wondering about that. I mean I know, one of the first coffee mills, I believe it was called La Norma? Opened in the 1890s?

(telephone rings)

DF: The one that opened, and I don't know the name—

AH: Okay.

(telephone rings)

DF: Or the year. The oldest one that I was told—

AH: Okay.

DF: Was Modelo.

AH: Okay.

DF: Okay?

AH: Yes.

DF: La Norma came later but I don't know when.

AH: Okay.

DF: Yes, but you know, it's one of those curious things that I mean—a reporter, I think in the twenties, right around the time your grandfather was getting into the business was—couldn't believe how much coffee was drank in Ybor City.

DF: Oh yes.

AH: He said that he probably—per capita, they drank more than you know, almost anywhere else in the U.S.

DF: Well you drink what they called a *bochito*. Which is a little shot—

AH: Yes.

DF: Okay? Which comes from the culture of Spain and also Cuba. Yes, funny that you mentioned these two companies—I mentioned one, which is La Norma and the other one—La Norma you mentioned and I mentioned Modelo.

AH: Yes.

DF: We bought out Modelo in the 1960s. And then we bought out La Norma in the 1970s.

AH: Oh wow. Okay.

DF: Yes. So that's part of our expansion.

AH: Yes, well you've got a lot of heritage under the one roof now.

DF: Yeah.

AH: Yeah. So what is it about Spain, Spaniards and Cubans, that makes coffee so important. I mean I know, one of the things I was curious about, I'm not—I don't know if you know anything about this, but of course Spain was occupied by the Moors for a very long time, for many centuries. And they were probably—

DF: Introduced coffee.

AH: Yes, introduced a coffee long before the rest of Europe ever heard of the beverage.

DF: Exactly.

AH: So do you think that has something to do with the love of coffee?

DF: Oh I would imagine. And then also it was kind of a—they—the café became a social gathering, okay? Like a café today in Europe is completely different than a bar here in the United States. The café or the bars in Europe are more family oriented than they are here. They do sell hard liquor but they also sell coffee, they sell foods—it's like a bar and grill. But it became a way of socializing. And just sitting out and talking and drinking coffee was a way of seeing your friends and knowing what's going on in town and all that kind of—

It's the same thing happened here. They just brought that culture over with them, and they used it.

AH: Well it seems like with the café that it's different than say, a restaurant or bar and grill here in the states is that you could stop by many times a day. You know? Sometimes—or sometimes, while away many hours talking to your friends like you were downstairs. And so there were many more cafes here early than restaurants were in Tampa, say.

DF: Yes.

AH: Because you could support more of a business because, well, it wasn't so expensive. You get a cup of coffee and a pastry or maybe some bread, and—

DF: For a nickel more than likely.

AH: Yes. And then maybe after work you'd stop by again, or—

DF: But I think that the difference was the culture in itself, that it used the café as a form of socializing whereas downtown Tampa didn't.

AH: Yes.

DF: They just went, drank coffee and left and went to work or do whatever they did—

AH: Yes.

DF: But they didn't use it to socialize and in Ybor City they did.

AH: Okay.

DF: Yes.

AH: So did the Great Depression have an impact on the business? I mean obviously—

DF: Oh, I imagine—

AH: People are still going to drink coffee, you know, but—

DF: Yes, I mean you know, I heard—I was born in 1938, so I heard afterwards.

AH: Okay.

DF: Oh, I—we used to deliver house to house. And people would owe my grandfather money during the Depression. He'd always leave the coffee, whether they paid or not, he'd always leave the coffee.

AH: Okay.

DF: And he would tell me later on, many families that paid him like two or three cents a week—

AH: Yeah.

DF: You know? And in order to pay their back-balance and all that kind of stuff. So it was a unique area, and in unique times. Where you have to realize, that because it was an ethnic area, everybody helped each other. Like at that time there wasn't those social or welfare programs that there are today, so they did help each other. One of the ways they helped each other was by these clubs that they organized, which was either Centro Asturiano or Centro Español, Cuban Club, and the Italian Club. Which all ethnic groups belonged to it. Now, I assume you're going to ask me, why do the Spaniards have two—the Centro Asturiano and the Centro Español?

AH: Yes.

DF: Even though they all—were all Spaniards, but they brought their— Again, they brought their thinking from Spain which was, the Centro Español were *gallegos*, which was Galicia. And the Centro Asturiano were from the Asturias—[they] were supposed to be "uppitier." Okay?

AH: (laughs) Yes.

DF: Not that they had any more money or anything, they just thought that they were.

AH: Well they were proud because they hadn't been conquered by the Moors, right?

DF: Exactly.

AH: Yes.

DF: There's a saying in Spain, like my ancestors, a story—

AH: Okay.

DF: So there's a saying in Spain where it says, "*Asturias es España*"— Asturias is Spain. The rest of the provinces are conquered territory.

AH: Yes.

DF: Because the Moors never really conquered Asturias.

AH: Yes.

DF: And the reason they didn't was because of the mountains.

AH: Yes, of course.

DF: I mean they are not going to run over it. Then—

AH: (laughs)

DF: So that's the reason they didn't do it.

AH: Yes, of course.

DF: But anyhow, there was that kind of—I don't want us to call it animosity, but there was that kind of—a little bit of friction.

AH: Yeah, pride.

DF: So that's why you had the different club.

AH: Yes.

DF: And then those clubs, they had their bars and they had their cafés, and they had—they played pool, they played bowling. It was a social gathering. So coffee had a lot to do

with it. I remember. The Centro Español, here on Seventh Avenue, where the Center—Ybor Center now is?

AH: Yes.

DF: Good, I remember taking them one hundred pounds of coffee a week. Just to that one location.

AH: Wow.

DF: Yes.

AH: Yes, that's what I was about to ask. So the coffee mill obviously, you roast coffee, you know, you get the best you can find and you roast it. Now who are the clients early on? Like—

DF: Early on they were restaurants—

AH: In your grandfather's days—

DF: Cafes, restaurants—

AH: Okay.

DF: Cafes, restaurants. People at home and also grocery stores.

AH: Okay.

DF: Yes.

AH: Oh, grocery stores here?

DF: Yes, in the area.

AH: Okay. Yes.

DF: In the area. Here and in West Tampa.

AH: Okay.

DF: But I remember when I started in fifty-nine [1959] we were still doing the house-to-house delivery. You'd go to a house, you'd deliver a half a pound of coffee on Tuesday, a half a pound of coffee on Friday, and then you'd go back Saturday to collect.

AH: Oh, okay.

DF: Which you're talking about collecting, what? Fifty-cents?

AH: Yes.

DF: They were twenty-five cents each.

AH: Yes.

DF: I mean, you know, we gave that up back in 1965 we gave that up. You know, people started moving out of Ybor City, gotten further and further away. The drivers wanted to make more money, gasoline prices, the truck prices—

AH: Oh, yes.

DF: Everything went wild. And it was not affordable anymore to do it.

AH: Sure. Yes, well back in the days of Ybor City when everyone was living so tight-penny, you do it with the bicycle.

DF: Oh, like I would park a truck in a block, and I'd put about ten or fifteen pounds in my arm, and I'd walk from house to house to house to house. By the time I walked back, I had sold all my coffee.

AH: Yes.

DF: And then you go to the next block. But when they started to spread out, you had to crank back up and go five miles, and then it didn't pay.

AH: Yes. I gotcha.

DF: But it was me, because yes, we sold them coffee, but also you just didn't knock on the door and say, "*Cafetero!*"

AH: Yes.

DF: You had to come inside and drink coffee with them, socialize with them.

AH: (laughs)

DF: They'd tell you their problems—

AH: Yeah.

DF: And all that kind of stuff. So it was really neat. And it was really sad when we had to close it, because you made a lot of friends.

AH: Yes.

DF: You made a lot of friends.

AH :Yeah.

DF: But it happened. Well like you used to have the iceman, the bread man—

AH: Oh yes.

DF: Milkman. The coffee man delivered to your house.

AH: Yes.

DF: The vegetable guy used to go up and down with his truck. So it was unique. It really was.

AH: So—

DF: But it's—it's times gone by.

AH: So now the logic of delivering twice a week, is that—

DF: So they get it fresher.

AH: Yes, they wouldn't grind it at home, you would grind it for them?

DF: Yes.

AH: And bring it?

DF: Yes.

AH: So and then of course you want to drink that—

DF: As soon—

AH: As soon after—

DF: As close as you can to grinding it.

AH: Yes.

DF: Once you grind coffee it starts deteriorating.

AH: Yes.

DF: You can vacuum pack it, like we do now. (coughs) But actually, the gasses in the coffee are accumulating inside that can or bag, whatever. But because you vacuum pack it, it has room to expand inside the can or the bag and the freshness stays in at as much as it can.

AH: Yes.

DF: Where back then it was in paper bags with tape on top. And that would last, really and truly, it would last a little bit longer, but that aroma of getting the bag and smelling it would only last a couple of days.

AH: Okay.

DF: Okay.

AH: Now let's talk about the process then of what Naviera does. First you know, how do you select your beans? And I don't want you to give away any trade secrets here—

DF: No!

AH: But you know, where do you—how do you go through the selection process, and do you tend to stay with the same—

DF: Yes.

AH: Folks? Okay. So you—

DF: The same—

AH: Have consistency.

DF: If it ain't broke don't fix [it].

AH: That's right.

DF: And through the years, we've come up with certain blends, okay? And which we knew were good. We do not—each blend that we made, which we make several, each blend has two or three or four coffees in it—

AH: Okay.

DF: So in case there is a time in the year where this coffee's not available, so you have to substitute it with one like it. But since it's only 25 percent of your blend, you won't notice a difference. If you use it 100 percent or 75 percent, then you will notice the difference.

AH: Yes.

DF: So that's why we use three or four different blends of coffees in each blend.

AH: Okay. So then, you select your beans—

DF: Yes.

AH: And you have them imported here. What's the next step?

DF: Well, we go through a broker.

AH: Okay.

DF: A green coffee broker. But we have been doing business with that green coffee broker for years and years and years and years.

AH: What's the name of the broker if you don't mind me asking?

DF: No, I don't mind telling you. Great, now I draw a blank.

AH: (laughs).

DF: Westfieldt.

AH: What's it [called]?

DF: Westfieldt Brothers out of New Orleans.

AH: Westfieldt?

DF: Westfieldt. W-e-s-t-f-i-e-l-t-d.

AH: Okay.

DH: D-t.

AH: D-t. Okay.

DF: And we've been doing business with them for years, they know what kind of coffees we're looking for. So when they get—when it's available they call us, and we cook it.

AH: Okay. So then what's the next step? When you get the green—

DF: It's been a lot of trouble when—

AH: Oh, the hurricane?

DF: Katrina, yes.

AH: Oh man, I—

DF: Yes, because we had a lot of coffee we bought at New Orleans, and Katrina, you remember, before it got to New Orleans, went across Miami and flooded Miami.

AH: Yes.

DF: And we had coffee both in Miami and New Orleans. And we had about a—I want to tell you, about six weeks that we couldn't get coffee!

AH: Oh wow.

DF: I mean, it was hard.

AH: Yes, I bet.

DF: Yes

AH: So what happens after you get your green beans in then?

DF: After we get our green beans, then we'll blend them.

AH: Okay.

DF: While they're green, and then we put them in our roasters, and we bring it to the color that we want, or the color that years of experience taught us to do. Of which today is not like it used to be. It used to be all by sight.

AH: Yes.

DF: The guy that was roasting would let it out when he saw the colors, of which you could get little fluctuations here or there.

AH: Yes.

DF: Today it's preset, I mean, a guy turns on buttons and when it finishes it shuts itself off. It'll throw water in so it quenches the roaster so it won't over-roast.

AH: Okay.

DF: And then it comes out into a cooler. And from that cooler, after it's cooled, then we turn it up to air through our tanks, and then we grind it.

AH: Okay.

DF: And then after you grind it, you put it in another storage tank for twenty-four hours to let it air out. Because if you try—if you pack it, if you vacuum pack it—if you pack it the day that you grind it, that thing will explode like a balloon!

AH: Okay.

DF: So you have to let it air out, and then pack it the next day.

AH: Okay.

DF: And then after that, we put it in palettes and ship it off.

AH: Okay. So I know I've done some reading about, you know, coffee roasting and everything. And like you said before, they did it all by sight, or they feel with their hands over the coffee beans and there was a lot of pride attached to it, "I don't need a machine to tell me."

DF: Right.

AH: At what point did you guys go ahead and convert—

DF: Get away from it?

AH: Yes.

DF: We got away from it—I got away from it when our volume had increased, we couldn't have just one roaster doing it all the time. So we had two roasters now, more volume, and so then you had to preset it. Now in presetting—I don't roast anymore, I haven't been there in a long time. But when we set up these roasters—yeah, I roasted at first. And I told [them], "Here's the color we want." So that they will get it. As long as you put the same amount of coffees in it, volume-wise. Because if you put more volume, you're going to get a lighter roast. If you put less volume, you're going to get a darker roast. So you got to put the same amount of weight, open the valves to the preset number, you're going to get the same position and roast all the time.

AH: Okay.

DF: Okay? Which really [is] a lot better than before. Because before—one day you're not feeling too good, and your eyesight's not that good, and you'll fluctuate a little bit. Or, like everything else human, it slipped by you a couple of seconds.

AH: Yes.

DF: And now you're off.

AH: Well and that can—I understand just a—you know, a minute can make a big difference.

DF: Oh sure.

AH: Yes.

DF: Yes. I mean you, that—the temperature inside of the roaster reaches about four hundred and fifty [to] four hundred and eighty degrees. So it can slip away from you real fast.

AH: Yes.

DF: Okay? And then what happens at that heat, and that concentrated heat inside the tumbler, it'll shoot up real fast. And you'll have to be very careful—

AH: Okay.

DF: Not to bring it past, like—you want to call it a flash point.

AH: Yes.

DF: So you have to be careful. But that's why you cut it off before. That's why you quench it. Because if you stop the flame, it will keep on roasting by itself. Because of the concentrated heat, and how hot it is. So that's why you want to quench it, in order to get it out and don't let it go above that.

AH: Now what happens to the beans? I mean you put a green bean in there, what does it do?

DF: It actually expands.

AH: Okay.

DF: It loses its outer-parchment skin, and it expands.

AH: I see.

DF: And all the moist air that's in the bean is dehydrated.

AH: Okay. And I guess the next thing is, coffee making is obviously very elaborate. You know, for someone—let's say, when Europeans outside of Spain, you know, first

discovered it, you know, they noticed that the people from the Middle East and everything, they had slaves to do all these steps for them, you know? Because it's a very intense you know, process. I guess— How long did it take for you to kind of master these different steps and everything? I mean obviously, you were kind of came into the business because it was your family. But how long did it really take you before you really knew that you had it down?

DF: I still don't know that I have it down.

AH: (laughs) Yes.

DF: I'm always learning something!

AH: Yes, that's true.

DF: You know?

AH: Yes.

DF: But you know, you never have anything down perfect.

AH: Yes, of course.

DF: I mean there's always some things you can do. For instance, in brewing coffee, if you're using an espresso coffee maker, which we use downstairs, I don't know what I'd do and I don't know what my son does. But he'll brew you a better tasting cup of coffee than I do and we're using the same coffee—

AH: Yes.

DF: In the same machine! I don't know what the hell he does. But he does do something that his coffee tastes better than mine!

AH: Yeah.

DF: So that's why, in every restaurant, they can all take the same amount of—same kind of coffee—but it's either the water, it's either the heat in the machine, it's either they don't clean the machines, or whatever. You're going to get a fluctuation in any restaurant that you go to. You say, "Well, this restaurant makes a fantastic (inaudible)."

You were talking about the Columbia Restaurant, which we've been serving for years—

AH: Yes.

DF: My son, the other day had a seminar with all the managers of all the Columbias all over the state, emphasizing coffee. You can walk into the Columbia and have a fantastic

dinner. And the last thing you'll have in your mouth is a cup of coffee. And if that coffee isn't good, you forget about the whole thing. So he was trying, because I asked him to tell the manager, because they were kind of getting, you know, they wouldn't put the attention that they should on coffee. To keep the equipment clean, to make sure that the grind of the coffee—because they, most of them all grind their own coffee. Like if the grinder's right, that—for the sake of airing up a brewing of coffee, know—a brewing of an espresso coffee is going to take one point seven seconds or something like that. Sometimes waiters are fast or what they do is they don't pack the little cartridge enough, so the water just goes through real quick. But what do you got?

AH: Yes.

DF: You got a weak espresso. So I was telling them all of that, and you know—but it was funny because it was, he went over there and he showed them all how to do it, and all that kind of—

AH: Who is this Richard you mean?

DF: What?

AH: Was this Richard Gonzmart? Or who was telling them this?

DF: Richard [Gonzmart] asked us to go tell—

AH: Okay.

DF: The managers.

AH: Yes, okay.

DF: Of all the restaurants.

AH: Okay.

DF: In other words, to put the proper concern on brewing coffee.

AH: Yes.

DF: Because he understands. You know, both he and Casey [Gonzmart], they understand—

(telephone rings)

DF: That coffee is the last thing that you put in your mouth!

AH: Yes.

DF: And if it's bad, the whole meal was bad.

(telephone rings)

AH: Yes.

DF: So they understand that it's important.

AH: Sure.

DF: And not just get it out of the way real quick, you know?

AH: And the Columbia of course has a reputation to uphold, not just for the food, but the coffee too.

DF: Absolutely.

AH: I mean, if they're synonymous—

DF: Absolutely.

AH: With Ybor City, you cannot serve a weak cup of coffee.

DF: Yes.

AH: Now how—I know there's a few differences between the way the American roast is usually done, as opposed to what people know as a café con leche.

DF: All right. It's the amount of roast that you do to it. We keep it longer. A normal roast would take about seventeen to twenty minutes.

AH: Okay.

DF: An American-style coffee will take you fourteen to fifteen minutes.

AH: Okay.

DF: So you're roasting it longer. I mean shorter.

AH: Yes.

DF: Also because you're roasting it shorter, you have more caffeine in American roast than you do in dark roasts.

AH: Yes, yes I heard about this. So the—you roast it longer and it breaks down the caffeine then?

DF: Right. And people think that because it's a stronger brew—

AH: Yes.

DF: That it's going to keep them up all night. And it's completely the opposite.

AH: Yes.

DF: It has less caffeine and you can go to sleep like a little baby after.

AH: Yes well, and everyone always says, "Oh I had three café con leches, and I'm jumpy."

DF: No.

AH: But they just—it's all in their head.

DF: It's up here (motions to head).

AH: Yes, that's right.

DF: It is.

AH: Yes. So another thing you're talking about how important it is for the Columbia coffee and everything. And I part of it is—I just want to talk to Dan Fernandez as a philosopher just for a second, because what is it really about coffee? I mean, Ybor City would not be the same without Naviera here doing the roast, because the smell, I mean you smell it everywhere, and it's such a wonderful smell. What is it about coffee?

DF: When I was a little boy, ok? You came to Ybor City, it was a living, thriving community. You'd smell the coffee roasting—

(telephone rings)

DF: You'd smell the Cuban bread baking. You'd smell, in the grocery store, the cod fish hanging, and you had twenty thousand different smells. And we don't anymore. That's why we need the A-burners, and we had to put the afterburners on the roasting. It kind of made me laugh, you know? Because I mean that's what we were known for, was smelling up all of Ybor City!

AH: Yes! (laughs)

DF: But they call it progress (laughter). So we had to put the afterburners in.

AH: Okay, but thankfully some smell still gets out there.

DF: Oh no, the smell, you can't get away from, okay?

AH: Yes, yes (laughs).

DF: What you're doing is getting away from the smoke.

AH: Okay.

AP

DF: Okay? And then when nightly— That's one of the things we said to the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] for two or three years, and then they finally told them, "Oh, you got to do it."

AH: Yes.

DF: Which is, the smoke that you're getting mostly out of the roasting is at the end when you quench it.

AH: Yes.

DF: Turns into steam. And that's the puff of smoke that you see.

AH: Yes.

DF: But right now there's a progress and capacity law so we had to put it on.

AH: Oh man, okay.

DF: Okay.

AH: So but, I guess what I'm trying to get at is, you know, what is it—there's something kind of dark, mysterious, maybe even romantic about coffee. I mean, I don't know—

DF: Romantic, I haven't found it!

(laughter)

AH: What is it though? There's something about coffee that's elusive, you know? And people, you know, there's Starbucks, and all the factory stuff out there and everything. But there's just something about it that's hard to just to sum up into words. You know, that—why people love coffee so much. I mean, what is it to you?

DF: Well, I think it's a form of relaxing. A cup of coffee in the morning will relax you. Or even after you had dinner, it'll help you digest your food, or so you think.

AH: Yes, yes.

DF: Okay? But I think it's like the final touch of a good meal is a good cup of coffee.

AH: Yes.

DF: You know? And also then you can sit down with your friends, and you talk. The meal isn't completely abruptly finished. You get time to talk drinking a cup of coffee.

AH: Yes, because while you're eating, you're not talking so much—

DF: That's right.

AH: Because you're busy.

DF: Exactly.

AH: Yes.

DF: But when you're drinking, you can sip a little bit and talk a little bit.

AH: Well and it's also a stimulant rather than like, sitting around and drinking alcohol, it's—something that sharpens your mind a little bit—

DF: Yes.

AH: Yes.

DF: Yes. When you drink alcohol, then you start talking junk—

AH: It starts going downhill!

DF: Yes.

AH: Tell us just a little bit about some of your blends. You said you have a few different kinds, so what are some of your signature blends? What do you call it? Or what is the flavor like?

DF: The flavor.

AH: (laughs)

DF: For instance, let me explain—say this much.

AH: All right.

DF: When we were in Tampa alone, we made a blend for the Tampa people of which is familiar, okay? It was a dark roast, drip grind, not espresso. Drip grind—and on some occasions had some chickaree. You know what chickaree is?

AH: Yes. But explain for the record.

DF: All right. Chickaree is a root. Of which they roast, chop it up and grind it up. And it is what you can call an extender. Chickaree is seven times more soluble in water than coffee is. Then we go back to the history of Ybor City which is cigar makers, of which people didn't make a lot of money. So they were looking for—

(telephone rings)

DF: In anything, whether it be coffee, bread, or whatever, something that would stretch—

(telephone rings)

DF: They wanted to stretch a pound of coffee. So in order to stretch a pound of coffee, they would put chickaree in it, so that way when you made it, and most of them drank it with milk. So when you put the coffee in the milk, it would darken the milk, and you wouldn't use that much coffee to brew that coffee with chickaree, because of the seven times more soluble than chickaree is. So it was more like—to make the coffee last long, that pound of coffee last longer. Or to get more brews out of it. So we were used to roasting for them. And when we got out of Tampa, which we went to Miami first—

AH: Okay. Now, when you say you went to Miami—

DF: Yes.

AH: Did you open a new mill there? Or did you just distribute it?

DF: We did it here, but we sent it down there.

AH: Okay.

DF: Here we found the Cubans, okay? Now they don't like chickaree. They don't brew their coffee with drip grind, they brew it with espresso. So and also it's a little lighter roast. So we had to readjust our blends in order to sell coffee in Miami.

AH: So the Miami roast is a little lighter?

DF: Yes.

AH: Okay. So I'm—

DF: Finer ground.

AH: And when you roast it even longer than and it's darker than, then it's kind of part of stretching it to? And it provides more flavor?

DF: Yes.

AH: Yes.

DF: Yes.

AH: Okay.

DF: Yes.

AH: So that's the difference for the Miami roast then?

DF: Right.

AH: Okay.

DF: Same thing happened with Cuban bread here. The Cuban bread that is made in Tampa is unique to Tampa.

AH: Yes.

DF: Not even Miami has it.

AH: No they don't.

DF: Okay? Why? Why is it long and narrow? Well, it's simply (coughs), an illusion. If I gave you a loaf of bread that big, little fatter, or a I gave you a real long one, a little thinner—

AH: Yes.

DF: You think you're getting more out of the long one right?

AH: Yes (laughs).

DF: So it was all illusion.

AH: Sure.

DF: And then the bread here is not made with milk, it's made with water.

AH: Yes.

DF: So that makes a difference. Different texture, different taste. Which is unique to Tampa.

AH: Absolutely.

DF: They call it Cuban bread, but really isn't Cuban bread, it's Tampa bread.

AH: Yes. Well just like in Miami, they don't really know what a Cuban sandwich is either.

DF: Well, they know what a *bocadillo* is, or a *media noche*, which is half the night. (coughs) Ham, cheese—here they would put salami, pork. Ham, cheese, and pork is a *media noche*. Salami is Tampa. Lettuce and tomatoes is Tampa. So that's the difference.

AH: Okay. So what are some of the other, you know, you started expanding distribution more, so the only coffee mills that you actually roast at are here though, right?

DF: We do all our roasting here.

AH: Okay. And so when did you start the expansion process then? Like, was Miami the first one?

DF: Yes.

AH: Okay.

DF: 1960s.

AH: Okay, that makes sense.

DF: I came in fifty-nine [1959]. So in the 1960s is when it started.

AH: Okay.

DF: And my mother, God bless her, (coughs), she was—

AH: Oh, she was there?

DF: What?

AH: You said—what'd you say?

DF: She would tell me at the time.

AH: Okay.

DF: She passed away already.

AH: Yes.

DF: She would tell me, Dan, “You know, why do you want more?” And I told her, I said, “Back in the 1960s, it’s not that I want more. It’s that if we don’t grow, we’re going to die.” Because I could see it, that if you didn’t achieve volume, the suppliers wouldn’t sell to you. I mean, when they had the business, you could order fifty bags of this kind of coffee, twenty bags of that kind of coffee. And they ship it to you. But today if you don’t buy trailers at a time, they won’t even sell [to] you. Coffee bags, at that time, when you used to buy coffee bags already made, they would sell you ten thousand coffee bags. Today, if you don’t buy a million impressions they won’t even talk to you. We make our own coffee bags. We buy the roll sheet with the print on it, and we make our own bags. So I could see that that was coming. And I said, “If we don’t create a volume here, we’re not going to survive.” And it happened. I mean, like I told you, from ten we went down to two, and that’s it.

AH: Yes.

DF: If you don’t have a plus also—you know, you have your workman’s comp, you have your insurances, you have people [who] want to make more money. So if you don’t have a volume to cover it—

AH: Yes.

DF: Then you’re gone.

AH: Well, and at the same time in that, you came in fifty-nine [1959], and Ybor City was in steep decline then. Urban renewal—

DF: It was declining already.

AH: Yes.

DF: It was declining already.

AH: Urban renewal was right around the corner.

DF: Exactly.

AH: Did that have any affect on your business?

DF: Oh sure it did.

AH: Yes.

DF: Because, well, really and truly, what had the most effect on Ybor City and also our business, was World War II.

AH: Yes.

DF: Because after, when the boys came back, they found out that there was a world out there besides Ybor City. You didn't have to stay in Ybor City, because you didn't have to be a cigar maker only.

AH: Yes.

DF: That there were other things that you could do. And then, if they were fortunate that they got their GI Bill of Rights, they learned other trades, they started moving away from Ybor City—

AH: Yeah.

DF: So, Ybor City became in a decline. When we bought this building—talk about urban renewal. We were, what today is the pick up window for Tropicana Sandwich Shop—we were there. And urban renewal came, and destroyed that building. They said it had to come down, so we came and bought this one. And when I bought this one, and I told my friend, “Yeah, I bought a building a block and a half east.” And he said, “You're crazy.”

AH: Yes.

DF: And it really was crazy!

AH: (laughs)

DF: Because I mean, Ybor City was bad.

AH: Yes, yes.

DF: And I said, “No, this business has always been on the avenue, and I want to keep it there.

AH: Yes.

DF: So I stayed there. And then that—two years later, I bought the corner building. But I'm glad I stayed. I really am.

AH: Yes.

DF: I mean, now it's turned around, now it's worth a lot of money, you know that kind of good stuff. But back then, yes, kind of—you had to watch where you were.

AH: Yes. Okay.

DF: Back at that time, we used to come—but we used to pack all our coffee the day before. The day that we would deliver the coffee! We'd come in at four-thirty, five o'clock in the morning—

AH: Okay.

DF: Pack all the coffee, and then go out in the trucks and deliver it. So yeah, it was kind of scary sometimes.

AH: Okay. So—

DF: It changed a lot.

AH: What's that?

DF: It's changed a lot.

AH: Changed a lot.

DF: Yes.

AH: Yes, sure has. I mean, even since I've known it. I came here first in the late eighties [1980s], and it's changed a lot since then.

DF: Yes.

AH: Yes.

DF: And you know, some people say, "Well, it's not the same." No. It's not going to be the same!

AH: Yes.

DF: I mean, I remember in the fifties [1950s], when the cigar factories were operating, about three or four o'clock in the afternoon when they'd let out. All the people were just like—a cloud of people walking into the avenue. And they would still do like they do in Europe, which was, everyday shopping. And where we were, we had a grocery store in our right hand side, a bakery on the left hand side, fish market across the street. So they'd come to all of them and buy their goods for that day, and then come back tomorrow again. But that's all gone.

AH: Yes.

DF: I mean now it's supermarkets, and you go once a week and that's it.

AH: Yes, sure.

DF: Yes.

AH: So, well are there any aspects of the business we haven't talked about? Is there something you want to say for posterity? Or—

DF: What do I want to say for posterity?

AH: (laughs)

DF: Like any business, if you take care of it, and you work hard, and you don't look at the time clock—

AH: Yeah.

DF: You'll succeed.

AH: Yes.

DF: You'll succeed.

AH: And what's it like having the—preserving that family business? I know that must be special for you, to know that—

DF: It is, it makes me feel well. It makes me feel good, let me put it to you that way.

AH: Well, especially that your son can make a better cup of coffee than you can!

DF: (laughs) Yeah. You know—

AH: (laughs) So—

DF: In fact, like sometime—that was grandfather there in the middle.

AH: Okay.

DF: My father on the right hand side, and that's me on the bottom there.

AH: Okay.

DF: And sometimes I'll look at them and I'll say, "You know? We've come a little ways since then!"

AH: Yes!

DF: But hey, that's all right. That generation, coming from a foreign country, not knowing the language, not having much education, they did a hell of a lot.

AH: It's true.

DF: They really did do a hell of a lot.

AH: Yes.

DF: But we tried to pick it up from there and run with it, and do a little bit better.

AH: Well it seems like you've done a great job. When did you open the storefront downstairs?

DF: We always had a little counter.

AH: Okay.

DF: Okay? Even from day one. In fact, you can see it on that left hand picture there.

AH: Yes.

DF: They had a little counter there, already back then.

AH: Yes.

DF: And, but I want to say, now, maybe twenty? Twenty five years ago? My wife who was schoolteacher for twenty-some odd years—

(telephone rings)

DF: She retired from the school system and then she came to work with us. And she started with a little gift shop. And then the gift shop got bigger, and then I want to say, ten years ago, we started with the espresso bar and all that kind of stuff. So yes, it's neat.

AH: And has the—it seems like just in the last fifteen years, ten years, with Starbucks and all these other things, you know, people want good coffee again, you know?

DF: What Starbucks did was educate the American public. Because for a long time, coffee, the brewing of coffee and coffee itself was being bastardized.

AH: Oh yes.

DF: When I started here, we were using—to the restaurants—three houses of coffee to make a glass jar with a half a gallon. It got down to the point where some restaurants were using one and half ounces. Which really, all you were drinking was dirty dishwater. Okay?

AH: Yes.

DF: But Starbucks started educating the people. There is a better cup of coffee. There is a better cup of coffee. And if anything, I would be grateful to Starbucks, it's for that.

AH: Yes.

DF: For educating the public in itself. Because they've done a hell of a job of merchandising, okay?

AH: Yes. (laughs)

DF: But—I think we have a better cup of coffee.

AH: I'm sure you do.

DF: We'll get some people that will walk in and say, "Well, you know, I'm from Seattle and I know an espresso. And I'll look at them and I'll say—and I'll show them that picture up there, especially the one that got the little Ford truck next to the building. I'll say, "My grandfather knew what good espresso was in 1921."

AH: (laughs) Yes.

DF: And then they'll shut up and won't say anything.

AH: (laughs)

DF: I mean they just found out, what, twenty years ago?

AH: Yes, yes.

DF: So—but no, Starbucks, in that sense, helped the whole industry.

AH: Yes, yes. So you say they got down to you know, sometimes one and a half ounces? What's it up to now? How many ounces do you think goes into one of those?

DF: Well, most of—some of them are back up to two and two-thirds ounces. They never went back to three ounces.

AH: Oh, okay.

DF: Never went back to three ounces.

AH: Yes.

DF: And they did it for economics, okay?

AH: Sure.

DF: Yes.

AH: Yes.

DF: One of the biggest, I want to say, biggest influence on bringing it down, was when the office coffee service became popular. Office coffee service people don't sell you coffee by the pound. They sell you coffee by the cup. So if you can put one and a half ounces, and make ten cups of coffee, they made more money.

AH: I see.

DF: Whereas if they have to buy three ounces to make the ten cups, they made less money.

AH: Yes.

DF: They're the ones that started cutting down, cutting down, cutting down, cutting down. And even the—you know what really surprised me was even the big companies, like Folgers and Maxwell House, they fell in that groove. And I'm saying, "What the hell are they doing? They're killing their own business?"

AH: Yes.

DF: You know? You used to use—the norm was, by the coffee brewer was one pound of coffee brewed two and a half gallons of water. Hell, it got to eight ounces of coffee per two and a half gallons of water. You weren't getting a good brew.

AH: No.

DF: That's one thing though, anything north of Washington, DC, you get a better cup of coffee because they brew it stronger than they do down south.

AH: Yes.

DF: I don't know if the heat has to do with anything with it, or what.

AH: Yes.

DF: But they do give you a better cup of coffee.

AH: Well the heat wouldn't make sense when you think about the Cubans, and—

DF: Yes!

AH: You know, yeah.

DF: No—the Cubans are exceptional in that sense.

AH: Okay.

DF: I mean, whether it's hot, cold, or whatever, they want to drink their coffee.

AH: Yes. So, well it's been great talking to you.

DF: Well, thank you!

AH: To learn about the business and everything, and like I said, sometime it might be nice to come down and actually film some coffee being made.

DF: Well, we'll show you part of it.

AH: Okay. Yes—

DF: Okay?

AH: The non-secret parts.

DF: Yes.

AH: And then what about you. What do you drink? What do you like when you drink coffee?

DF: Well, unfortunately I was put on decaf about five years ago.

AH: Oh no, okay.

DF: But no—the decaf that I drink, which is a dark roast decaf—

AH: Yes.

DF: By the way. I guess I've gotten used to it—

AH: Okay.

DF: And I like it!

AH: Yes.

DF: And it just has no caffeine.

AH: Yeah. Before the five years ago, what'd you drink?

DF: Oh, before the five years, I used to drink a dark roast, fine-grind coffee.

AH: Yes, okay.

DF: But my heart was—because of my thyroid, my heart was racing too much. So that's why they put me on decaf.

AH: Okay.

DF: But they got the thyroid kind of leveled out, so I'm doing pretty good.

AH: Good, good. Another question, I did mention the Columbia— when did you start working with the Columbia? When did they become one of your clients?

DF: Oh my goodness, it's been so long ago I forgot now.

AH: Oh yeah?

DF: Yes. It was soon after—they had—let's see, Adela had an uncle.

AH: Yes, Chacho, right?

DF: Well—

AH: Well they called him Chacho, but—

DF: Avelio was his name.

AH: Yes, Avelio Chacho.

DF: And he used to do the roasting for them. And when he passed away and then they came to us and then told us we could do the blend that he was doing, and said, "Sure."

AH: Okay, so they passed, kind of a blend onto you to use?

DF: Yes. Well they told us what they wanted—

AH: Okay.

DF: And we do a special blend for them.

AH: And then, do other restaurants make similar requests?

DF: No.

AH: Okay. (laughs) Yeah, okay.

DF: We do have blends that we sell to other restaurants, but theirs is theirs.

AH: So over the years as they keep expanding, obviously they're buying more product, right?

DF: Oh sure.

AH: Yes.

DF: Right.

AH: So that probably helps a lot—

DF: They're doing—I'm really happy for them. Because like every business, they had their rough times.

AH: Oh yes.

DF: Okay? They had their rough times, and you know, in fact, let me show you something.

AH: Sure, sure.

DF: I'll be right back.

AH: Okay.

DF: (Shows item to AH) The other day they had a dinner for all their long-time suppliers—

AH: Yes.

DF: And they gave us that.

AH: Oh, that's great, let's see this.

DF: And I thought that was real classy of them, and they are people that are appreciative of who helped them out when they needed help—

AH: Yes.

DF: And who stood by them.

AH: Oh yeah.

DF: And, like Richard told me one day, he said, “You know, yes, I get twenty-thousand coffee people trying to sell me coffee, and I tell them, “No, I got to buy it from my cousin.” And I’m not a relative.

AH: (laughs) Yes.

DF: You know, but, [Richard says,] “That’s how I get them out.”

AH: (laughs)

DF: But that’s all right. They’re real fine people.

AH: Yes.

DF: They really are. And I’m glad. It’s just a shame that the dad didn’t last a little longer—

AH: Yes.

DF: You know? But they’ve done real well and I’m real glad for them. There are very few instances where, when it passes from one generation to the other that it doesn’t fall apart.

AH: Yeah.

DF: And I’ve always used them as an example. And there’s another restaurant in Tampa that unfortunately is going to close up in the near future. Which is the Whiteside’s [family] and the Colonnade [Restaurant] on Bayshore [Boulevard]?

AH: Oh yes.

DF: I heard that they sold the property. Which I don’t blame them either. They’re up in their sixties, and why fight it anymore, you know?

AH: Yes.

DF: But I always use them and the Columbia as the generation that did better than the first one that—in their case, they're not brothers, they're cousins. And it's worked out for them. And in this case, brothers, and it's worked out for them, so I'm real glad for that.

AH: Yes. Well and in some ways you're businesses have grown together, right?

DF: Yes.

AH: I mean as you took more volume, they started expanding throughout the state.

DF: Yes.

AH: So it ends up being a really good thing for the both of them.

DF: For both of them.

AH: Yes.

DF: And they're people that don't forget, you know, their roots.

AH: Yes.

DF: That's what Adela—Adela don't forget the roots. And—which is good. Because today everything's gotten so materialistic it's crazy.

AH: Yes.

DF: And especially when it changes from one generation to the—like when my son first started there. I gave him a list of suppliers that we had. And I told him, I said, "Look I don't care who comes in the building, who offers you something cheaper, and better. These suppliers—you stick by them. Because these have stuck with us when we were bad, under, slow, whatever you want to call it. They stuck with it. And I want you to respect that."

AH: Yes.

DF: And he has. And at the time, he couldn't understand it because, you know, "If I can get it cheaper, Dad, why not?" And well, because, "Sometimes cheaper is not the answer."

AH: Yes.

DF: Okay? It's the consistency, it's knowing that you're going to get what you want, whereas another will see you a good crop this time, and a bad one next time. So you—these suppliers, "Keep them." And he has, he has.

AH: Well, that's part of the tragedy I guess of materialism is, at the same time you lose that sense of history. And once you lose that the—

DF: You lost it all.

AH: Yes, a family business doesn't have a chance.

DF: Then you become like everybody else.

AH: Yes.

DF: Okay? Then you become like everybody else.

AH: And then you're no better than Starbucks, and everyone will go to Starbucks.

DF: That's right.

AH: Yes.

DF: That's it exactly.

AH: So—well it's great to see. I was just walking down here from the Columbia's parking lot, and I see the Columbia, I see Arturo Fuente, you know, I see right next door, Naviera. It's really good to see that sense of history, and it's really up at the forefront here on Seventh Avenue.

DF: It's just the same way there tomorrow.

AH: I know.

DF: You know, like I said, I've been on avenue since 1959. I'm talking about—I've been on the avenue longer than that, but working in the coffee business.

AH: Yes.

DF: And the Columbia, us, further up there's Interior Design [Design Interiors Furniture Company], which is a furniture company. Which is the Cadrecha family. Outside of these three, there's nobody else left.

AH: Yes. Yes, was Argintar's gone now too?

DF: That's gone now.

AH: Yes.

DF: So, and then the last one that went not too long ago was Buster Agliano at the—

AH: Oh yes. That's sad, yes.

DF: So I mean, outside of that, out of the old people in the avenue, that's all that's left.

AH: Yes.

DF: You've got the Segunda Centrada [Bakery], the Moré family, which is—but they're off the avenue. That's why I didn't mention it.

AH: Yes, okay.

DF: But outside of that, that's all that's left.

AH: Yes.

DF: And it's sad.

AH: It is.

DF: But it's telling me I'm getting old!

AH: (laughs) But you're also doing the right thing, keeping it alive.

DF: Yes.

AH: You know?

DF: Well we're trying to keep in there.

AH: Yes. Well good for you. Thank you so much, and—

DF: You're quite welcome.

AH: Congratulations on a great business.

DF: Thank you.

end of interview