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Columbia Restaurant Oral History Project  
Oral History Program  
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Interview with: George Guito (GG)  
Interview by: Andrew (Andy) Huse (AH)  
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**Andrew Huse:** All right, well it's October 17. I mean November 17, 2006. I am here with George Guito (pronounces name Gweeto). Is that how you say it, or is it (pronounces name Geeto)?

**George Guito:** Geeto.

AH: Geeto. Okay. And you are the general manager of the Ybor store right?

GG: Right.

AH: Okay, first of all tell us just a little bit about, where were you born? Where were you raised?

GG: I was born here in Tampa, Florida.

AH: Okay.

GG: And I was raised here in Ybor City.

AH: Okay. And when were you born?

GG: August 24, 1947

AH: Okay. And how is it that you got to the Columbia Restaurant? Tell us a little bit about that.

GG: I started working here at the Columbia Restaurant when I was fifteen years old. And I started working here by coincidence. I got in a little bit of trouble and I came to

the restaurant and I came to talk to Mr. Gonzmart, Richard's father and Casey's father. And I told him that I needed a job, which he did give me a job and then at that time they had—it's not like now where they have managers and they have general managers and stuff like that. At that time it was all Mr. Gonzmart. He only had two people working with him as far as—we used to call them maître d's and stuff like that. They were like managers, but the actual manager was Mr. Gonzmart. He would come in every day at eleven o'clock and stay from eleven o'clock to eleven o'clock at night or twelve o'clock at night. At that time it was the time the restaurant used to close. But, I started working here cleaning the restaurant, making thirty-five dollars a week.

AH: Okay.

GG: And started—in forty-eight hours a week I mean it was really a job to do. And I started to get to know Mr. Gonzmart pretty good. And then Richard and Casey are basically my same age. You know, Richard being younger than myself and then Casey. I am just about the same age as Casey. Casey's birthday is in June and mine is in August. So I mean we are pretty close in between our age group there. But Mr. Gonzmart started and he says, "Oh, you shouldn't be doing this type of work." I said, "Well I really need to work." So then I started to become a busboy and started to work here being a busboy and cleaning the tables and doing odd jobs around the restaurant. Then he told me, "Maybe you should go to school and learn something that would be good for the restaurant." So then I said, "Well I can't afford to go to school because I have to work."

AH: Yes.

GG: So then I went and I started [school], which he paid for. I went over to school and I became a butcher, which he sent me to school. And then, after that, I started cutting all the meats for the restaurant.

AH: So where did you go to school?

GG: There was a butchering school here in Tampa they called, the Tampa Butchering—I think the name of the school was Tampa Butchering Professional Meat Cutting Association and stuff like that.

AH: Okay.

GG: That was years ago. But then, anyway, I've got a certificate that says I'm a certified butcher. And then I started working in the kitchen. And at that time, there was many folks working in here. And I worked there for a long time in the kitchen. For twenty-five years I worked inside the kitchen and I became like the steward of the kitchen. I was in charge of a lot of purchasing for the restaurant and doing stuff like that.

AH: Okay, now let's just back up just for a second. You got a job here just because you came and asked and you needed one.

GG: Yes, I was recommended to come and see Mr. Gonzmart.

AH: Okay. And then, it seems like over time, he kind of took you under his wing right?

GG: Yes.

AH: And why do you think that is?

GG: First of all I think it was because basically I was Richard and Casey's—basically the same age and—

AH: Okay.

GG —you know and they were accustomed to a different type of living than I was at that particular time. And he told me that you know that if I would take care of his business and help him out then he would help me and put me in the right direction and help me out.

AH: Okay.

GG: Which he did. I mean he was like a dad to me.

AH: Yes. So your family was struggling financially?

GG: Yes, my father was a cigar maker and my mother was cleaning a restaurant. Not a restaurant, but cleaning a hospital. They used to call an assistance to the hospital which she was making like twenty dollars a week.

AH: Yes.

GG: So I mean—

AH: Yes, so your father being a cigar maker, was work tough for him to find?

GG: Yes, it was really tough for him to find. Then, as a matter of fact, after that he started working in a place also cleaning. He would make cigars in the daytime and go in at night and clean a restaurant. Not a restaurant, a bar they used to call The Yellow House Café and The Greenhouse Café.

AH: Okay, interesting. Okay, so Cesar kind of took you under his wing and you got some education in butcher school. For a young man at fifteen years old, what did the Columbia represent to you? I mean—

GG: Well, I was really amazed when I first started to come here and started working here. I mean, first of all, I've seen all the good food that they had here and I was really amazed. I said, "Man! And at that time, they still, they would let you eat whatever was

there in the lines and stuff like that. And there were certain times of the day that you could eat, which it is the same way right now. But I was really amazed, you know.

AH: Yeah. And I mean the décor and everything, was it just kind of like a palace to you?

GG: Yes. Well when I first came to this place here I said, “Jesus Christ!” You know, what a beautiful place this was at that particular time and it is today! And it’s constantly changing and they try to upkeep it. I mean it’s, you know—the restaurant to me, it’s not mine because I can’t say that it’s my restaurant I mean. But it’s—I care for the place because—

AH: Oh yeah.

GG: —I’ve been here all my life.

AH: Yes. So was the Siboney room in yet when you got here?

GG: Yes. The Siboney Room was built already.

AH: Okay, and was the stage built too?

GG: Yes, the stage was built.

AH: Okay.

GG: Nineteen fifty-six was when they built that particular room in there and they had the stage in there.

AH: Okay.

GG: And I remember every Saturday night, Mr. Gonzmart, in that particular room there, they used to perform there every night. And at that time, when they had violins going through tables playing and they would do a bunch of stuff and they would do a show in there. And they had some really big people come in here and do some performances in the Siboney. They would have a lot of people. I remember [John F.] Kennedy coming here and visiting here in 1963.

AH: Yeah, a week before he died right?

GG: A week before he died, right. I remember that.

AH: Yes, and what do you remember about that night? Was it crowded?

GG: Yes, it was really crowded. There were a lot of people here and you know I’m just like remembering him. He was really, really young at that time. He was a young guy. He

just, he had just gotten elected. He hadn't been president more than maybe a year or something like that, you know?

*pause in recording*

AH: Okay, so we were just leaving off with Kennedy. But one of the things I wanted to ask you about to kind of rewind just a little bit is you told me about your first impressions of the Columbia when you first got here. What about Mr. Gonzmart? Did you know him at all beforehand or did someone like a mutual friend recommend you?

GG: No, I didn't know him. This person that was working at another place knew this Mr. Gonzmart. And I needed to try to find a job so he told me, "I'm going to take you over to the Columbia and then I am going to introduce you to the owner of the restaurant. And so I said, fine." So he brought me over here and I started talking to him and he told me, "But you're too young to be cleaning floors and doing stuff like that. You should be doing other stuff." And I said, (laughter) "I need really to work and you know, if you give me a chance I'll show you that I can do whatever these other guys can do." And once again there was—his name was Henry Garcia. He was like the daytime manager or the head waiter at that time.

AH: Okay.

GG: And I remember that they were—he says, "Hey listen I can only start you off at thirty-five dollars a week." And I said, "That's fine!" You know and he said—the pay at that time I think was like forty-eight dollars or something like that. And he says, "I can't start you off at the same thing that the people that are already working here. You know, I can start you off at that and if you do good then eventually you'll get to make the same amount of money as the other people that are working here." And I said, "That's fine!" So then, that's the way that—and every day Mr. Gonzmart would come and tell me how was I doing and that's the way I became friendly with Mr. Gonzmart.

And also there was Richard's grandmother, which was Carmen Hernandez. And she used to—they used to buy a new Cadillac every year—two or three Cadillacs at that time. She didn't drive but the lady that she had with her at the house like doing the cleaning of the house and cooking for them because there were like three or four sisters that lived down here on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Central right across the street from the old St. Joseph's Hospital. And what we used to do is go and her sister would drive. Carmen Hernandez's sister drove, but she didn't drive at all. And then, the lady that was taking care of them and helping them out with the cooking and the cleaning of the house, she would drive us a lot of times. They would bring her here and I remember I used to have a 1950 Plymouth which I paid thirty-five dollars for at that time.

AH: (laughs)

GG: And then, I would take her home and she would give me like five dollars. In fact, back then, five dollars was a lot of money.

AH: Yeah.

GG: Then she would tell me, “Oh, come in and have something to drink and eat something.” All the Hernandez's, especially Carmen Hernandez, Adela Gonzmart and Cesar Gonzmart, they were all really down to earth people. I mean, he was the boss, but I mean he took care of his business. I mean, they were really nice people.

AH: Yes, so what were your impressions of him when you first met him? I mean did he have a reputation? Did you already know of him? You know when you met him—

GG: No I didn't really know—

AH: Okay.

GG: I mean there was—I remember that people used to say that he was a real strict guy to work for, I mean, but a nice, really big heart which was true. Once you got to know Mr. Gonzmart, I mean, if you would take care of his place and take care of him as far as business-wise and stuff like that, I mean, he would do anything for you, help you out in anyway. People that were working here, he was always asking them about the family and if they needed something. I mean he was a really nice person as far as treating people and helping people out and all that. I remember a lot of times people used to come up and they would come to the front of the restaurant there. And once again I was talking to you—I am talking to you about years ago, they would come here and they used to say, everybody used to call him "Cesa."

AH: Okay.

GG: And they used to say, “Oh, Cesa I'm hungry. I haven't eaten nothing all day long and is there any way that you can help me out?” And he would sit down—people that he didn't even know, and sit them there in the café and get a waiter and say, “Hey listen take care of this gentleman here and you know give me the bill.” I mean he did that a lot of times you know. People would come and ask him for money because they needed it for h [their] family. Then he would give them the money, and then he would forget about it or, you know.

AH: Yes. So, you know, some people kind of characterize Cesar as being kind of a star in Tampa.

GG: Yeah, he was.

AH: And so, you realized that after you started working for him right?

GG: Yeah, yeah. I mean he was—

AH: When was the first time you saw him perform, or the first time you realized how prominent he was?

GG: Well, the first time I've seen him, I was really amazed with, you know, being fifteen years old, sixteen years old at this time and coming into a place this size and as beautiful as it was or is. And then, besides that, you go and the gentleman that's in charge of the whole operation, he's performing here nightly and he's going through the tables. It was really amazing, you know? People knew Cesar that were—he was a well known person and a well respected person here in Tampa. And he knew a lot of people. He knew a lot of people that came from—like Carol Burnett was here. Bob Hope has been here. Frank Sinatra has been here. Who else? [John F.] Kennedy has been here. I mean a lot of big people—Liberace has been here. A lot of big, big, big people. People that represent Spain and people that have come from different countries. We've had kings here. We've had queens here. I mean it's been a long time, but I remember all this. The people come here from all parts of the world. I mean a lot of German people come here, or have come here—French people, Italians.

AH: Okay. So it was in the early sixties that you first started working here.

GG: Yes.

AH: And then, when did you—you talked about started going up, kind of, the ladder a bit.

GG: I remember when I started working here. I started working here late sixty-two, sixty-one, whatever.

AH: Okay.

GG: I remember when they had just come out with these pocket radios. I don't know if—a lot of people don't even know what that is. But, they would work off of static electricity, which at the time we would put a little clip on—have you ever heard of that at all?

AH: Yes, I've head of pocket radios, yeah. I didn't know they ran off static though.

GG: Yes, they would put them on anything that was metal, and then, they had like a little earphone.

AH: Okay.

GG: And then, they would go—I would be cleaning the restaurant and I would have one of those in my ears. And then I remember when they first started talking about Kennedy and all that. The old television sets were all black and white. There was no color television at that time. And it [Kennedy's assassination] came over the thing. And first,

they started talking about it on the radio, and then, we went upstairs and we had a big old television that started when they shot Kennedy you know in Dallas.

AH: Okay.

GG: And we started watching all that and everybody was stunned.

AH: Well, it must have been especially strange since you just saw him so recently, right?

GG: Yes. But anyway, then I just, I worked cleaning up right after that and then is when I started to work in the kitchen. And I worked a long time in the kitchen. I worked and worked and worked.

AH: And what did you do in the kitchen? Did you cut meat or—?

GG: After that, I went to butchering school and I became a butcher and I started cutting all the meat for the restaurant. Then there was a chef that had been here for years and years and I started to work in the kitchen. And I worked in the kitchen for a long, long time.

AH: Which was the chef that you worked with?

GG: I worked with the chef Sarapico.

AH: Yes, okay.

GG: Vincent Perez and they used to call him Sarapico. And I worked with him a long, long time. And then, I was like in charge of receiving all the merchandise and—like a kitchen steward is what they used to call it. And I would have to receive the merchandise, put it away, take the stock that was in the freezer and rotate the stocks and stuff like that. And then, we would do inventory once a month and we would have to take all of the stuff out of the freezers and inventory it. And then—

AH: Now, how much of this, when product was coming in, how much of this was like quality control? Did you do a lot of that?

GG: Yes, we were always doing quality control here at the restaurant. You know, we would make sure that we would try to get the best of everything that was available at that particular time.

AH: Yes.

GG: And we used to get, like I say, we used to get all the tenders in, whole tenders. And I used to cut the whole tenders and we used to get the ribs. We had—

AH: You mean tenderloins right?

GG: Yes.

AH: Yes.

GG: Beef tenderloins.

AH: Okay.

GG: And we would get them and peel them and (speaks with a co-worker in Spanish)—

We would, at that particular time, we would bring in the rib eyes and we would bring in the sirloins and we had a lot of different types of cut meats. And we would bring in the bottom rounds and the top rounds and we would do all of this meat cutting. That's what I went to school for.

AH: Okay.

GG: And we had a big band saw back there and we would have big rib eyes and the sirloins and the (inaudible) ribs and we would cut them into steaks. And then the tenderloins—they would bring a big cap of fat on them and we would take all the cap of fat off. We would take the side strap off and clean them and cut them. As a matter of fact, I showed a lot of people there how to cut meat at that particular time.

AH: Okay.

GG: I mean I really enjoyed doing that.

AH: Yes. And what—it seemed there were more cuts of meat that were being used in the restaurant back then. Is that right?

GG: Yes there was. We used to use a lot of different stuff that is not being used today because of the changing of the menus and the type of stuff that we do. And we do more now I guess like towards more of the old type of stuff that we used to do here years and years ago. Like the time I'm talking about was, we had sirloins on the menu. We had rib-eyes. We had a lot of meats at that particular—the trends have changed now that [we] didn't use that type of meat. They used that type of meat in other restaurants like in steakhouses and stuff like that.

AH: Sure. Well it just seems like the range of meat that people eat these days is much narrower than it used to be.

GG: Yes, it is.

AH: I mean, even during the war and before the war, there was a lot more of your, you know, liver and kidneys. I mean, you just don't—I mean, in 1940 brains and eggs were on the menu here.

GG: Right, right! That's true!

AH: Yes.

GG: You know like we're trying right now like—we're going to be doing a function and we are going to do part of the old type stuff that they used to use years ago like oxtails and pig-feet, red beans and rice. And another thing they call Congri which is like a mixture of black beans and white rice and is all cooked with pork and—

AH: Congris it's called?

GG: Congri

AH: So is that C-O-N-G-R-I-S?

GG: Congri, yes.

AH: Is there an S, or is there no S?

GG: No, there is no S.

AH: Okay. Congri. Okay.

GG: And then, I remember the time we were making here like yellow cornmeal and fresh crabmeat and crabs and all that. And I mean, that was a delicacy. It is a delicacy.

AH: Oh, yes.

GG: I mean it is really expensive these days because first of all you can't find any blue crabs and stuff like that, but at that time it was really inexpensive to do. And we used to do tripe. We used to do oxtails. We used to do pig-feet. We used to do like a (inaudible) sirloin. We used to do everything. We had—

AH: Were there any brains here when you first got here or no brains here?

GG: No.

AH: Okay.

GG: We weren't doing that at the time I got here.

AH: (laughs) Okay. All right, so then, you were a meat cutter, and how long did you do that?

GG: Well I worked in the kitchen cutting the meat and working in the kitchen. I don't know. I cut meat for a long time, for at least maybe ten years.

AH: Okay.

GG: Twelve years. And then the cook Sarapico had gone and left and started to get sick and stuff like that. So basically that's when I took more control of the kitchen and became more active in the kitchen. And I would do all of the hiring in the kitchen.

AH: Okay.

GG: And I would do—make all of the schedules in the kitchen. And do everything basically.

AH: So, spending so much time in the kitchen cutting meat and helping you know [your way] around the kitchen and everything really put you in a place that you were able to make these kinds of decisions and take that kind of responsibility right?

GG: Oh, yes.

AH: Because you kind of knew it inside and out by then right?

GG: Oh, yes.

AH: Yes.

GG: I mean, my strongest point of the restaurant—I mean, I've managed the restaurant now for a long time, but I would say that—which is basically what I started in. Basically what I've done since I was seventeen years old, eighteen years old, is I started working in the kitchen. I would say that I know the kitchen inside and out. I mean, I can do anything that has to be done there in the kitchen. I mean I can cook. I can do basically anything. I can order the stuff. As a matter of fact, I've shown other people how to order merchandise and how to get stuff done and do scheduling. Remember, this time that I'm talking to you about now, it was completely different than what it is now. But I've done a lot of stuff here.

And then, when Mr. Gonzmart started to get sick, he would always say, "Oh, I want George to manage the restaurant." And that's basically the way I became, got more into working outside here and to be doing stuff like that. And then, I started to work here. I mean, you know, there's a lot of stuff really that—it's a constant learning. I mean you learn something new here every day. You know, it's a really, really—every day, every day there is something different here. I mean, I look forward to coming to work here.

You know, I get up in the morning and I come to work at about seven o'clock. Today I got here at seven o'clock. And I stay until eleven, ten or eleven o'clock every night.

AH: Yes.

GG: You know, I've been doing that for a long time.

AH: Okay. So a lot of things have changed that you mentioned like now you guys don't cut your own meat anymore right?

GG: No.

AH: Okay.

GG: The only meat that we cut basically is we bring the palomillas. But all the steaks come in portion control, which is we have a person who is in charge of quality control that can make sure that we are getting the best quality meat that's out on the market that we can bring in here and into the restaurant. And I mean, everybody has—all the restaurants have to go through that particular item that we get from different people. And, if it doesn't meet the standards of the restaurant then we make sure that we are getting the best quality that's out there.

AH: Okay.

GG: But I mean everything is portion controlled now.

AH: Yes. Okay, let's talk about some other things [about] the way the restaurant has changed. I mean a totally different kitchen right?

GG: Yes, a lot of the kitchen. When I worked in the kitchen, the kitchen was like maybe a third or a quarter of the size of the kitchen that it is today. I mean, it was really crowded and it was really an old kitchen and I worked—I mean there was nothing wrong with the food. I mean the food has always been good in quality. But I mean the kitchen certainly. We built a kitchen that I remember years ago where the kitchen is at today there was a Tropical Ice Cream and then there was an old ice plant that was back there. And for years after Tropical Ice Cream went out, that was the first part that Mr. Gonzmart bought. It was adjacent to his building which is around 22<sup>nd</sup> Street. And then, they came in and the building was all dilapidated and the windows were all knocked out of it.

And everyone we knew tried to come in at that time to try and rehabilitate Ybor City and to start doing stuff in Ybor city. And then, I remember that they bought the old ice plant back there and they tore it down and they just kept the land for a long, long, long time. And then, when they decided to build the brand new kitchen, [which] today we still call the "new kitchen." But the kitchen now is not new anymore. It's been there a long time. You know what I'm saying?

AH: Yeah. Well, it's been like five years now?

GG: Yeah, five years and I mean the kitchen stays immaculate. I mean you can go in there anytime. And we've got people constantly keeping it up and cleaning and stuff like that. But we built the kitchen from 22<sup>nd</sup> Street all the way back over to 21<sup>st</sup> Street. I mean it's a humongous kitchen. Basically it's like four kitchens in one. And now we do all of our—everything is done to order. Everything is done fresh every day. All produce comes in fresh daily. Our meats come in all portion controlled daily. And then, also the fish comes in. It's all new fish, fresh fish and stuff like that. And we have people putting it into the coolers and putting ice on them and rotating it.

AH: And you were talking about—you know the era of urban renewal in the late sixties and everything. That was a pretty rough time I understand for Ybor City—

GG: It was.

AH: —and the Columbia.

GG: Yeah it was a really rough time because what happened was there used to be a lot of people that were in Ybor City and there were a lot of old houses and stuff like that. I lived right there on 15<sup>th</sup> Street between 15<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 15<sup>th</sup> Street.

AH: Okay.

GG: And I lived there for a long, long time. My uncle and my aunt lived next door. And I used to ride a bicycle from there over to here and stuff like that. And urban renewal came and especially here in Ybor City they started taking all of the houses out because it was all down and out. And for years and years there was only land that was here at that particular time. And then, all of a sudden, one guy I remember coming in and one guy just got this idea to put one nightclub in here and this and that.

AH: Okay.

GG: And all of a sudden Ybor City starts taking off again.

AH: Yeah.

GG: And they bring all these people back in. People [are] moving in again. And now in Ybor City again, there are always people outside here. There are a lot of old houses they've renovated. As a matter of fact, my family, we still have a house here in Ybor City that I rent out. All of the people right now in Ybor City—I mean, you walk here at night, and there are people all over the place. And people every day move into Ybor City. On 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue they've made all of these apartments and condominiums—

AH: Yes.

GG: —and all through there. And you go up here to 21<sup>st</sup> Street and you go left and you see all those little houses that they put in there. I mean it's really, really neat.

AH: Yeah.

GG: Yeah.

AH: Well, another thing at the kind of the height of the urban renewal age, Las Novedades went out of business and was bought by the Columbia.

GG: Right.

AH: And do you remember anything about that? Did you have anything to do with the restaurant?

GG: Yeah, I remember that it was right down 15<sup>th</sup> Street and—7<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 15<sup>th</sup> Street. And then that was run by the Garcias. And at that time I remember that the Gonzmart family had gone and they had bought up Las Novedades. As a matter of fact, I think that we still have the name of the Las Novedades. I'm not sure about that.

AH: Yeah, the name was bought too.

GG: Yeah.

AH: Yeah.

GG: And then, we bought the name and stuff like that. But we started there and then, right when urban renewal came in, then there was—they sold it to Steak and Brew or Steak—

AH: Yeah that didn't last long.

GG: That didn't last long, no. But—

AH: And then it became a gay bar later right?

GG: Yeah, it became a gay bar and stuff like that afterwards.

AH: Yes.

GG: Today, as far as I know, it's still there, the actual building—

AH: Yes.

GG: —and stuff like that. And I understand they really do well there now as a bar or whatever and a restaurant.

AH: And what was I just thinking—Oh, and there were also plans for a Spanish walled city—

GG: Yeah, as a matter of fact—

AH: —and the bullfights.

GG: Right. Years ago they had gotten this idea of bringing a wall which they're doing now, but not with the bullfight. I think years ago they were talking about putting a city within a city and they were calling it the "walled city" and they were thinking about putting [in] a bullfight arena.

AH: Like arena, yeah.

GG: An arena for bullfighting there. And they had gotten the law passed and then afterwards, after they had gotten the law passed, and then the thing about the people being cruel to the animals and stuff like that. They had a big issue with that.

Ah: Yeah.

GG: And it went under, and then they got another law passed where they were bringing bloodless bullfighting—

AH: Yes.

GG: —to this part of the city. And then, they did away with that also.

AH: Yes.

GG: But if you look today [at] what they talked about doing years ago, they are building a wall around the city of Ybor City today.

AH: Okay, interesting.

GG: If you go and you look—like if you go right down the street here, you go and you see that there's a bunch of arches being built. There's a wall that's gone up.

AH: Okay.

GG: I mean it's really spectacular.

AH: Yes.

GG: Yes. And you go further down and there's a wall going around the city here. I mean—

AH: Yes, interesting. Well, you know, it seems like even Cesar's plan didn't work out you know, at the time. That really, St. Augustine was in many ways, the Spanish walled-city he had dreamed of, you know.

GG: Right.

AH: When he moved there, and became a part of all that new development that was really—it seemed like what he had envisioned for Tampa. But the timing just wasn't right, right?

GG: Right, that's true. At the time I think Cesar was too far ahead of his times.

AH: Yes.

GG: I mean, he envisioned, you know, stuff that other people didn't envision. People would say, "[Who is] this guy?!" But he did. Like all this land across the street here, you know years ago it was all, buildings all messed up and then we were having a problem with parking and he was in all that. And he bought all of that across the street there and he tore down all the things there and he built a brand new parking lot there. And then, he got the land across the street and he did the same thing and then when the building across the street where (inaudible) is at. I mean that was stuff that they would say, "This guy is crazy!" But he had seen stuff that he has done [for] years when nobody thought of the future, he was already thinking about the future.

AH: Yes. Well, and today, on a good night there's still not enough parking.

GG: Yes.

AH: Yes.

GG: Every night we are having a problem, not a problem, but I mean we do have, that we could use a lot more parking.

AH: Yes. So yeah, it shows that his vision, you know, wasn't unfounded then.

GG: Yes, you know, I got to know Cesar and I mean, once again him and Mrs. Gonzmart they would treat me like I was their, like if I was one of their kids. I mean, every Christmas I would go with them. When I got married, I remember Cesar gave—he had gotten a brand new—I was already making money then—

AH: Yes (laughs).

GG: When I got married I was—I got married when I was twenty years old, eighteen years old. And he gave me the wedding here and we had a big wedding reception here.

AH: Oh, wow!

GG: And he paid for all of that. Then he sent me—he gave me his Eldorado Cadillac.

AH: Okay.

GG: And then he gave it to me and he says, “Here take it and the week that you’re going to be out you take it.” And he gave me his credit card at that time. It was weird!

AH: Yeah. (laughs)

GG: And I went to Miami and every place I would go, “Oh, no. Mr. Gonzmart is taking care of it.”

AH: Okay.

GG: See, I went to a lot of places there in Miami.

AH: Was this your honeymoon you mean?

GG: Yes.

AH: Okay, yes. Great!

GG: And every place I would go, everything was paid for. He sent me to a bunch of places in Miami that were famous and are probably still famous today. (inaudible) is there and then there was another restaurant called (inaudible). And, oh—and I don’t remember.

AH: Versailles maybe?

GG: Versailles, yes.

AH: Yes, okay.

GG: And I would go there and everything.

AH: Yes, so was—

GG: I went to and stayed at the Fontainebleau hotel there.

AH: Oh, wow!

GG: Yes. (chuckles)

AH: And some of this must have been kind of an education for you too. You could see how other restaurants were running and stuff.

GG: Yes.

AH: I mean, even though you were having fun, you still must have been kind of watching everything right?

GG: Yes, this place here and other places that you go to, you always watch and you always try to learn different stuff. And it's a constant learning. You never, never, never know enough about it.

AH: Yes.

GG: You know. I tried to talk intelligent, you know, to most of these people.

AH: Yes.

GG: And one thing I've learned with Mr. Gonzmart. Mr. Gonzmart always used to say, "If you talk intelligently, you sound intelligent. If you talk dumb, you sound dumb."

AH: Yes. Absolutely.

GG: Yes.

AH: So then I guess we're going into the eighties now, kind of where, you know, we're past the age of urban renewal. And by the eighties you become the manager. Is it in the eighties or the nineties?

GG: The nineties.

AH: The nineties? Okay, because he started to get ill then right?

GG: Right.

AH: Okay.

GG: So then I, you know I was working here and they had a manager here. And at that time they already had managers—

AH: Okay.

GG: —in place at the restaurants. And I remember Cesar used to say, "Oh I want George to manage the restaurant. He's been here so long" and this and that. And I mean by that time I had already been there a long, long time.

AH: Yes.

GG: I was already here for 30 years or something like that. So then you know they said, “Yeah we’re going to let George start learning how to manage the restaurant.” And then I started managing and working more here. And I used to come to work in a shirt and pants and stuff like that. (music starts playing in the restaurant) And then—that’s the music.

AH: Yes.

GG: But, like I said, then one day, they tell me, “You’re going to have to start wearing a suit.”

AH: Okay (laughs).

GG: So then every day—And then I remember Cesar used to have this thing that he wouldn’t allow any of the managers to be in the dining area without a jacket.

AH: Okay.

GG: And that was one of his big things, he always used to (imitates Cesar), “Hey! If you are working in one of the dining areas, then you have to have a jacket on!” He would go through the dining areas all the time. And the only time you would see Cesar without a jacket was when he was sitting down to have dinner or something like that that he would take his jacket off.

AH: Okay.

GG: He always had his jacket on. Or, when he would go upstairs to sit down to sign the checks and all that. That was one of his big things.

AH: Okay. Is there any way you can turn the music down a bit?

GG: Yes.

AH: Could you ask someone?

*pause in recording*

AH: We’ll start to wind things down, but all right. So you became the manager then and obviously new responsibilities, you have to wear suits and a lot of other things. What were some of the challenges for you then, kind of adjusting to that role? I mean was it an adjustment that you had to deal with the front of the house too?

GG: Yes, it was an adjustment to do, you know. Once I came out of the kitchen I started coming in here more and more and more and more you know. First of all, I guess at that

particular time I was kind of shy meeting people. And I had to train myself I guess to know how to talk to people and more of a challenge is not only to the general public, but the people you have working with you in the particular restaurant. Each person that works or each person you talk to, it's a different world. So you have to judge yourself—you know some of the people that you get and power goes to some peoples' heads. And maybe, when I first started, it took me a long time to adjust myself to try to work with people and to try to do whatever. First of all whatever was good for the restaurant, but at the same time you have to adjust to people and you have to learn how to treat people you know. A lot of people you have to talk to people in a different manner. Some people they scream at people, which I've done myself.

AH: (chuckles)

GG: But at the same time, I've learned how to adjust and try to talk to people and lead them into the best direction possible. And I mean, I could talk to, at that particular time, it was kind of hard, but today I can sit down and talk to anybody and feel pretty intelligent about what I talk about. And I guess this is one thing I learned from my father. My father wasn't an educated man, but he read a bunch of stuff. I mean he used to read all the time. He used to stay up until two or three o'clock in the morning and read and read and read and read. And he used to tell me, "If you read a lot George, you can talk to people about anything because reading shows you and gives you wisdom." So, I mean I read a lot.

AH: Really? You find the time?

GG: Yeah, I read a lot. I read especially at night.

AH: Okay.

GG: Every morning I get up early and I read in the morning. I read the papers and I read whatever is happening and magazines and I get a lot of magazines here. And at night, at night, I go and watch television, and I read.

AH: Okay.

GG: I like to read.

AH: Yes. So, it must have been an adjustment too because you were talking about how to deal with people and talk to people. In the kitchen it's almost like the army right?

GG: Oh yeah!

AH: I mean you just grunt stuff out and, "Do that, do that, do that!"

GG: Yeah, yeah, yeah yeah!

AH: Now here you have to be more sensitive because you probably have more ladies waiting on tables and things like this right?

GG: At the time when I came out here there was hardly any waitresses. Today you know we have a lot of people who are female workers here. And they are different type of people. Once again, each person is a different world. And you have to learn how to treat everybody different and how to try to consult with them and talk to them and—

*Tape 1 side A ends; side B begins.*

AH: It's a balancing act. There's a lot of considerations right?

GG: Yeah, you've got to take people into consideration and what type of people they are. And at the same time, try to get them to do what you want them to do, you know.

AH: Now, lately the Columbia has been getting awards that it hasn't gotten in many years. Like the Golden Spoon Award from *Florida Trend* and things like this.

GG: Right.

AH: And, you know, it seemed like with the urban renewal age and things like that and entertainment being more a part of the business, that quality kind of went down a little bit and that now it's really, it's just gone, shot right back up.

GG: Yes, well—

AH: Can you give us a little insight there? Because I know I have talked to other people about it. And Richard, you know acknowledges that, for awhile there was a little bit of a dip there because it was so hard to keep up with everything. Tell us a little bit about that.

GG: The food here at the restaurant has always been good.

AH: Yeah.

GG: First of all, it's always been a family owned restaurant. It's always been where some people make the decisions, and possibly one time it slipped away a little bit, but I mean, today we have first of all, big, big quality control. People come here and they just rave about the food. And taking it back up to the next level, and we're constantly there trying to better it at all times and always trying to get the quality that the restaurant deserves to serve to the quality of the people that we get here. So I mean, I think that, first of all, I think that the food is outstanding right now and it has gotten much better and we continue to try to better it as we go.

AH: Absolutely. Well, and the wine is a much bigger, especially Spanish wine, is—

GG: Right.

AH: –a much bigger thing than ever before right?

GG: Yes, as a matter of fact last night we had the people here that were from Torres Wines and we did a Torres Wine dinner here last night. And I mean, the gentleman who represents Torres people came in especially from Spain to be with us here last night and he did demonstrations on his wines and stuff like that. And I mean, you know Richard has one of the finer, I guess, wine rooms or wine cellars in the country. I mean he really, really drives them on quality control as far as wines are controlled and stuff like that. I mean we have got the largest Spanish wines, you know here in the United States.

AH: Oh, yes.

GG: I mean Richard—as a matter of fact he came not too long [ago] from Spain, and he's always trying to bring in all kinds of wines. And, you know, something that's not where it takes the people that want to come here to the restaurant and want to have good wines and good food. I think that we do a great, great, great job.

AH: Yes. Well, and this is a good time to talk about you know Cesar, he died in ninety-two?

GG: Yes, ninety-two.

AH: Okay, so by then you were the manager right?

GG: Yes, I was already the manager by then.

AH: And tell us a little about the next generation. I mean Adela was still here so she kind of, you know, there was a bit of a transition there, but you know the everyday management was taken over, or ownership was taken over by the brothers and—

GG: The two brothers, right.

AH: Yeah, and what were some of the changes that you saw when they took over?

GG: Well, you know, it changes when they took over. As far as Richard and Casey, Richard being more of like the overall person that was looking towards trying to better the restaurant, and trying to do more stuff for the restaurant and trying to control the restaurants. And I remember that we had a restaurant in Harbour Island and we left there because we wanted to try to put our focus on this restaurant here. And then we brought other managers in here to work with me and we started controlling the restaurant and trying to do—of course Richard was here at that time, [and] he was there day and night also. And between him and myself and Casey was in Sarasota. And then, Casey finally, afterwards came down to Tampa, and he moved down to Tampa. And we started working and [were] trying to always improve the restaurant. We took the restaurant and

the first thing we did was build a brand new kitchen and then afterwards we took each particular dining room and we restored them. And we took the Café, and we restored the Café. We took the Don Quixote and fixed it all up and made it brighter in the daytime where more people would come at daytime because a lot of people like to be—especially lunch business, want to be where there is a little daylight sort of.

AH: Yes.

GG: And we made it real with a bunch of lights and we changed all the colors in that particular room. The patio was all redone all over, and all the painting was done, and the Siboney was redone. Basically the whole restaurant was refurnished and redone over, and all new painting. The structure part of the buildings and stuff like that has always been the same, but like we've taken one room at a time and now we're constantly all the time changing, you know up-keeping it. I mean, it's a constant battle, and people really enjoy coming here and we try to be friendly with them and all that and you know.

AH: So obviously, all of the different renovations and in the kitchen especially, cost millions and millions of dollars.

GG: Yes, it has.

AH: It takes a huge investment right?

GG: Yes, it takes a huge investment. You know, Richard and Casey have done what a lot of people never thought that they were going to do. They've been able to do.

AH: Yes.

GG: And fortunately it's great for the company. It's a company, especially for this restaurant. This restaurant has got close to two hundred employees that work here full time. And it's—

AH: And how many people do you seat in here?

GG: Depending on how you seat them. I would say maybe around 1750 or something like that in the entire restaurant.

AH: That's a big restaurant.

GG: Yeah, it is a big restaurant!

AH: (laughs)

GG: There's a bunch of dining areas here in the restaurant and you know. You get to walk in there everyday. And if you have one of those little calculators [a pedometer] you put maybe four, five, six miles, seven miles, eight miles, ten miles—

AH: Sure.

GG: –you know every day!

AH: Well and it seems like you get more and more big banquets and events like that than ever right?

GG: Yeah we have a lot of banquets every day as far as—once again like take today, we're doing like one, two, three, four, like five different banquets without having anything to do with our regular business within the restaurant. And good thing for the new kitchen. Like I said, it's like four kitchens in one, we've been able to do a lot more than we used to do. Now, this coming Saturday, we're doing a catering for six hundred people. It's like taking one whole restaurant out of here and setting it up someplace else.

AH: Yes.

GG: And taking care of that place, plus taking care of this particular place. And besides that we have another banquet upstairs here. You know so I mean we've taken it and done a lot of stuff with catering and a lot of stuff with banquets especially. Once you do good, the number one thing, I've always heard this from Casey too and from Mr. Gonzmart, "The number one thing is to do good food." Once you do good food then you can bring people in and you have a lot of people recommend you to other people. And also the best service possible.

AH: Absolutely.

GG: The rest of it comes by itself. And, you know, I was at the Columbia last night. I was at a banquet there and they were having a banquet for whatever the number is, 50 people or 100 people and (imitates guests), "Oh man! The food is great, the service is great. Oh really? Do they do that stuff?" Oh yeah look, you can call this number here. And then we have people that are just in charge of sales and do promotion and do sales for the banquets.

AH: Like Caroline and people like that?

GG: Yes Caroline and then we have [Lorrie] Hero that works across the street at the corporate office. And then a bunch of people that do different stuff as far as—like Angela. She's in sales too and everything.

AH: Yes. So, in a way, with you becoming manager you know it was right before the torch was passed to the next generation. So, you really got to take part in a lot of this important stuff that was happening right?

GG: Oh, yes.

AH: Yes.

GG: Yeah, it was really you know it was really a big, big, big, big, big challenge, you know, to take over as far as— Not "take over," because there wasn't actually— The running of the corporation is Richard and Casey, and then they have other people that. They have a gentleman by the name of Curt Gaither who oversees all the restaurants and all that. So I mean today it's a big corporation.

AH: Yes.

GG: And they've got a person who checks on quality control not only at this particular restaurant, but all the restaurants throughout the state.

AH: Yes, well you mentioned that you train other managers too right?

GG: Right, we train managers here.

AH: Okay, so you bring them here and then show them the operation.

GG: Right.

AH: Okay, so and I know that that's a real concern of Richard's and Casey's too, is that there is consistency between the different restaurants.

GG: Right, that's the number one goal is to try to have the most consistency of all the restaurants. Like I said, they put everything down and they show the people—they show them videos, they show them stuff the way that it's got to be done, the way stuff has got to be done tableside and all that. I mean, we train them all the time. And we put them through a training course that they've got to—even if you are a waiter that comes into work here, or if you've worked as a cook someplace else, whatever you do, we put them through a training of our own here to adopt to our system here at the restaurant.

AH: Okay.

GG: Managers, busboys, dishwashers. (laughs) Everybody!

AH: Yes. Well, the managers seem like one of the most important things, I mean, besides the chefs, just that you coordinate everything.

GG: Yeah you do.

AH: Yes.

GG: I mean you know we have here in this particular restaurant we have a gentleman that's like the director of operations here that I work with really close. You know he does a lot of stuff here as far as directing the people and stuff like that, but—

AH: Okay. So, you know, now the fifth generation is starting to get involved especially Andrea. I know Lauren is taking part in the specialty gift shop and marketing and stuff. Do you have much interaction with them and Casey's children?

GG: Well, I haven't really gotten—you know I see Angela. As a matter of fact I was talking to her—

AH: You mean Andrea?

GG: Andrea.

AH: Yes.

GG: Andrea. I see her a lot because she's always across the street and coming in here and all that. And then, Casey's kids haven't really—eventually they will be coming in.

AH: But they're still young yet right?

GG: Yeah, they're still young and they're still studying. And Casey's oldest daughter Cassandra, she has managed other restaurants already and gone—And eventually she will be coming to work within the restaurants here. And then, the rest of the kids like Casey Jr., he's still in school and studying and stuff like that, but eventually, they will be coming too.

AH: Well, you know it must be interesting for you, because you're part of a family business. You're not part of the family, but in a way you are.

GG: Yes.

AH: It's like a lot of people talk about—Joe Roman says, "I feel like I could be a part of this family almost." How does that feel?

GG: You know, like Richard and Casey I mean they're like my own brothers because I was raised with them you know. I was raised with them, when Richard was smaller, I remember Richard going fishing over there across the street from his father's house and all that. And I was always there around his father. We would go over there on Sundays, and we would eat there with them. I mean I'm really close to Richard and Casey, you know. And then of course Melanie got married here years and years ago. And I remember that I was cleaning up, we were trying to clean the fountain and I used some, I mixed some ammonia with some other liquid and my lungs collapsed and I was taken to the hospital. And I was in the hospital for five days so I never made the wedding.

AH: Oh! When Richard and Melanie got married you mean?

GG: Yes.

AH: Yes, okay. Well, she has just got such a big heart and seems like—I don't know I mean in some ways she's the axis around which so many things revolve, you know?

GG: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

AH: She's the real anchor I know for Richard and just has so much love you know?

GG: Yes. I mean, they're all great people. I mean they've all got—like I say they—everybody takes care of the restaurant because it's theirs.

AH: Yes.

GG: And you know, the first objective is to take care of the restaurant. But I know that Richard and Casey, they respect the employees. And basically I think that you know, if an employee—they would try to help anybody. And they've done it over and over and over and helped people that have worked for them and you know.

AH: So, what are some of the most unusual things you've seen happen here in your time? Whether as a manager or anything else?

GG: I remember one time we were working here and somehow—this is unusual. We were here and we were closing the restaurant and I remember the ceiling, the water—it was raining and there was a hurricane coming though. And I guess the drains got flooded out and the roof caved in.

AH: Where?

GG: In the attic.

AH: Okay.

GG: That was an unusual thing. And then I have seen other things like the kitchen, the old kitchen years ago, we would—some of the stuff would catch on fire and you know, but it was neat.

AH: Yeah. (laughs)

GG: Then people would come in and I don't know. We had unusual stuff years ago, we had in the Café and stuff like that we used to have a band named Street Beat and people used to come in there and younger kids. I guess that was when Ybor City was taking off again, and we had a band called Street Beat in the Café. And the Café used to get full of people and I mean it was great, you know. And now we've gotten away from that, but—and then we built a warehouse, which I helped build.

I remember that Richard and myself and we had gone over and we borrowed a bunch of old wood and we built the warehouse which was today, at that time it was a warehouse. And then we converted it over to being like, a lounge sort of. Not like a lounge, but like a bar sort of. And we would serve food in there and at the same time, people would come in there and in the back we put an entrance. And we made the walls ourselves, and we got this old type wood and we put it up against the walls. And we decided to call it “The Warehouse.”

AH: Oh, yes.

GG: Yes. Then, we converted it afterwards, we converted it back to a warehouse, and there is where the kitchen is at now in that part of the section there.

AH: What about customers? I mean any strange customer stories? Strange behavior? Big spending?

GG: I remember a lot of people who used to come here they used to be big spenders. Customers would come in here, and we had the Café that we would serve in the morning; we would serve toast and we used to serve like breakfast, eggs, toast, café con leche. People would come in there a lot. People that were like city council, mayors and stuff like that, they would all sit there and read the papers and then go back down to the offices downtown. Mayor Nick Nuccio used to come in here a lot and be there in the Café. And we had a bunch of judges that would come through here, you know. But I remember all that, you know.

AH: Okay, well just a couple of other questions. One is food. If you were to put together a menu of your favorite Columbia dishes—like if you had one more meal or just one thing that you could eat, what would it be? If you could order, you know, appetizers, soup, entrée, the whole bit. What are your favorite things?

GG: I think if I was going to have like that I would probably say Spanish Bean Soup would be a soup I would like to have. As a matter of fact I eat it a lot right now. Then I would say that maybe—this is another thing that I’ve learned, I eat a lot of tomatoes and I learned that Cesar used to eat tomatoes all the time. And I would get a tomato salad. I would eat Spanish Bean Soup. I would eat like, for an appetizer, I would probably order like the little chicken croquettes and stuff like that, which is made with chicken and stuff like that. Then, I would say that as a main course I would probably eat either red snapper, grilled red snapper or red snapper just plain on the grill which is what we have only it’s really, really nice and with yellow rice and stuff like that. Or I would have, if I was really into it, I would probably have Paella a la Valenciana.

AH: Okay.

GG: Which is the national dish of Spain and stuff like that.

AH: And yes, and what to drink? Any cocktails or coffee or what would you drink?

GG: I would probably drink, I don't know, Heineken beer or something like that.

AH: Okay. Huntington?

GG: Heineken.

AH: Oh, Heineken! Okay, yeah.

GG: Or I would probably have, which I do every day, I come to work every day and I have orange juice and a cup of black coffee. Just the coffee, I don't eat or drink anything else until I have something maybe at one o'clock or two o'clock in the afternoon?

AH: Okay. Yes.

GG: Or I probably would have a glass of wine if I was sitting down to eat.

AH: Okay. Any favorite wines?

GG: I probably would have the Don Cesar Red.

AH: Yeah, that's good.

GG: It's a good, it's a good wine.

AH: And then any desserts? Or are you a dessert man?

GG: I don't eat a lot of desserts, but I would probably order the flan.

AH: Yeah.

GG: I mean the flan is really good.

AH: Oh, yeah. Okay. Well, and your wife?

GG: Well, I'm not married personally.

AH: Oh, you're not married. I thought you were married here. Oh, you were.

GG: I was married yeah.

AH: I see.

GG: I have a son that's thirty-two years old.

AH: Okay.

GG: But, I mean, as a matter of fact, you know, I still talk to her and all that.

AH: Sure.

GG: But I mean—

AH: Yeah.

GG: –I’m not married right now.

AH: I see. Well, we covered a lot of ground here, is there anything we didn’t cover? Is there anything you want to add?

GG: No, not really. Like I tell you I enjoy working here and I enjoy looking forward to coming to work here in the mornings. And when I get up, I do my stuff before I come to work at home. And I have a little boy who’s my nephew. He’s been with me now ten years because his parents have passed away and stuff like that. He keeps me company.

AH: Yes.

GG: And my son lives right around the block.

AH: Good, good. All right, well thanks so much for sitting down with me today and everything and sharing your memories for the Gonzmarts. And we really appreciate it.

GG: Thank you.

*pause in recording*

AH: I was asking if you had a nickname. What was it?

GG: Chiquito!

AH: (pronounces it Chick-ee-oh)

GG: It means like “the child”

AH: The Chow? Like the dog?

GG: Yeah.

AH: Okay.

GG: No, not like a dog, like a child, a child like a little boy or a little girl.

AH: Oh, okay!

GG: Like Chiquito.

AH: Oh, okay, got you.

GG: That's what they used to call me.

AH: Okay.

GG: That was a long story though. But anyway.

AH: (laughter) All right.

*end of interview*