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Columbia Restaurant Oral History Project  
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Interview with: Jim Garris (JG)  
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**Andrew Huse:** Okay, it's December 7, 2006. It's Andy Huse here continuing this series of interviews for the Columbia restaurant and the University of South Florida. And I have Jim Garris here with me today. Thanks for being here.

**Jim Garris:** Thanks, glad to be here.

AH: First of all, how'd you get to the Columbia?

JG: Well, kind of through the back door, I guess kind of. I worked in Sarasota as the food and beverage director at the Harley Sandcastle at Lido Beach and I met Casey there. Casey used to come to the Sandcastle often when he was running the restaurant in Sarasota on the Circle [St. Armand's Circle] and particularly during the race weekend when they had the boat races.

AH: Okay.

JG: He used to rent out the fourth floor of the Harley and I got to know him pretty good down there and when I moved from Sarasota to Tampa and they had a—

AH: When did you meet him? I'm sorry, but what year was this?

JG: It would have had to been probably 86, 87, 88, in that area.

AH: And when did you move to Tampa then?

JG: In 89.

AH: Okay.

JG: And it was at that point in time they were opening up the Sand Key restaurant. I saw an ad in the paper. I sent my resume along with the fact—I mentioned Casey's name and I got an interview and I got the job. I started out as an assistant manager at Sand Key when they opened up in December of 1989.

AH: So, did you start there after they opened?

JG: No, I was on the opening team.

AH: Okay, great.

JG: Yes.

AH: Now before we go there, where were you born? Just give us a little background.

JG: I was born in Johnson City, New York, which is in the Triple Cities area, Binghamton, Johnson City, Vestal on the southern border of New York state.

AH: Okay.

JG: That's where I was born. I went to school at the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut, played Division III college football there on scholarship and then after graduating came down south to Tampa and actually started out here in Ybor City believe it or not.

AH: Really?

JG: In 1977 I think it was.

AH: Where was this?

JG: Rough Riders restaurant in Ybor Square.

AH: Okay. I'm familiar.

JG: I had some friends down here that were working there already. I came down and got a job as a bartender there and actually became friends with the daughter of the owner, Harris Mullen. And my wife right now, Susie, and his daughter Nancy Mullen were best friends and went to school together and [I] developed a relationship with them. Worked for him for probably about three or four years and then went to Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Actually, went off shore and worked off shore for awhile—

AH: Oh wow.

JG: —in the catering business on a construction ship that built oil rigs out in the Gulf of Mexico.

AH: Interesting.

JG: Yes, it was kind of interesting.

AH: So what were your gigs at those restaurants? Were your managers there? Or purchasing or—

JG: In Rough Riders?

AH: Yes.

JG: [At] Rough Riders, I started out as a bartender and eventually became an assistant manager there—

AH: Okay.

JG: —and did a little bit of everything, yes.

AH: Ok, so now we're back to getting you at Sand Key then and tell us a little bit about what it was like, first of all, just being kind of a newbie at the Columbia and what it was like opening up a restaurant for them.

JG: Well, it was interesting. I worked—was hired by a gentleman by the name of Brian Otel who my understanding of his background a little bit was that he worked with Richard when they opened up St. Augustine. And then, when they came down to open up Harbour Island, Brian was the general manager at Harbour Island. And then I guess Richard had confidence in him and decided to use him to open up Sand Key and Brian hired me. I remember having to interview with Cesar before I got the job.

AH: Okay.

JG: Up on the balcony here over the patio and it was interesting. But anyway, after getting the job—

AH: Wait, before we go, there tell me about your first impressions of Cesar. I mean you probably knew of him already.

JG: Yes, I knew of him already. It was very interesting because he, of course, always left an impression. You know, anytime you met and sat with him it was an impression. Not that I had many individual sit-down meetings with him, but the interview thing was kind of neat because he didn't really ask me a lot of real pertinent questions. I think he was more trying to feel me out as to what kind of person I was and why did I want to work with the Columbia restaurant and then of course I listened to a lot of what he, his idea what it was all about. So that was basically what it was about with him.

AH: So you had already interviewed with someone else.

JG: I interviewed with Brian.

AH: Okay, that's right.

JG: Yes.

AH: So then he kind of covered the pertinent stuff.

JG: Right, exactly. Brian probably found out and decided that I was a guy that he wanted to work with him in opening this restaurant, but yet he had to get the blessing—

AH: Yes.

JG: —for me to be hired.

AH: Okay. So how much do you remember? Do you remember what Cesar said to you when he gave you the idea, you know, This is the Columbia.

JG: Not really word for word other than talking about the family and the tradition and the fine dining portion of it and what they tried to get across to the guests and the relationships that they had. So that was basically all I remember from that.

AH: Okay.

JG: It didn't last very long. It was only about fifteen or twenty minutes.

AH: All right, so you're opening Sand Key and tell us were there any snags, any mishaps?

JG: Not really any snags or mishaps. I do remember that when we opened in December, that was the year that we had the brown out [power outage] down here in Florida. And we were actually closed for two or three days because we had in and out power out on Sand Key and I think everyone did in this area when we had that cold snap and there was a little bit of snow and that type of thing. That was one thing I remember that was unique about the opening, but other than that no real snags or nothing. I remember us working out of the Radisson Hotel at the time doing our interviews and trying to get the staff set up and everything and then the actual, you know, tables and chairs going into the restaurant and the setting up of the kitchen and all those different things that we had to do to get ready to open.

AH: Okay. So opening a restaurant for the Columbia, did that present anything new for you or was it stuff that you hadn't done before?

JG: Not necessarily. I had opened a restaurant once before and I had also had experience in being in charge of a restaurant as a GM and also as a food and beverage director and had banquet experience and so forth. So basically, my duties when we opened up the Sand Key restaurant was Brian put me in charge of liquor and beer and beer and wine purchasing and setting up everything in the inventories and the stocking and getting the bars ready and stuff like that. And I was also involved in the helping of the training of the service staff.

AH: Okay. All right, great. So you open up Sand Key. How long were you there?

JG: I was there probably about total a year and a half, two years and about six to eight months into my experience at Sand Key the General Manager [GM] gave his notice, Brian Otel.

AH: I see.

JG: And they offered me the position so I took it. And I was the GM there for probably, maybe a year and a half. I think it was six months or eight months and then for about a year/year and a half after that I was the GM there.

AH: Okay. And how long were you there in that position?

JG: Probably about a year and a half, like I said.

AH: Oh okay, okay. Sorry.

JG: Yes, probably about a year and a half and I think it was about six to eight months to get that spot and then it was about a year and to a year and a half after that because I stayed there until they got ready to do Daytona. And it was shortly before they decided to do Daytona that I was selected to go into a divisional manager's position for the Columbia restaurant.

AH: Okay.

JG: Kind of like what Curt does now only it wasn't as sophisticated back then. They had never had that position before and it was like a first time thing. And I think mainly it was done to help open up the Daytona, the expansion part.

AH: Okay. Now let's talk about the duties for a little bit. When you are a general manager was that basically an expansion of your duties before as far as training and things like that. Tell us a little bit about what you do.

JG: Well in the general manager's position you are responsible for the overall operations so you have to be responsible for everything that goes on. Overseeing all the purchasing, make sure it's being done properly even though it's maybe delegated and then

responsible for making sure all of the scheduling is done properly. And then of course you have your profit and loss responsibilities as well.

AH: Yes.

JG: You know producing the profit and loss statement at the end of each month and being accountable for that.

AH: Okay. So how did the Sand Key do when it first opened?

JG: It did very well.

AH: Okay.

JG: It did very well. It was well received out there and did very well in the first couple years.

AH: Had the Pier already been opened at that point?

JG: Yes.

AH: Okay. All right so—

JG: I think the Pier might have been 86 or 87 or something like that.

AH: Yes a few years before, Okay. Now in terms of volume how does it compare to the other restaurants say today or then?

JG: Well, then and probably today it's one of the lowest volume restaurants that they have.

AH: Yes, but it's not quite as big as a lot of the others is it?

JG: No, it's not.

AH: Yes, ok it's a smaller one.

JG: No it's not. Sand Key can fit into the Siboney room here basically.

(laughter)

AH: Okay. All right, so the sort of divisional manager thing was new. What was it like filling out a new position like that?

JG: Well, that was different for me because I hadn't done that type of thing before and basically I was under the guidance and direction of Danny Mans\_\_\_ who at that time had

been, he was like Guy Campbell is now at Cha-Cha Coconuts only there was more Cha-Cha Coconuts at that time and then they took him from that position and put him into a director's position that oversaw Cha-Chas and the Columbia.

AH: Oh wow.

JG: So he was like a Curt Gaither overseeing both divisions.

AH: Okay.

JG: He chose me to be the divisional in the Columbia and he chose a person called Jodie Jensen to oversee the Cha-Chas side. So Jodie and I kind of worked together over across the street and setting up budgets and things like that for the restaurants which hadn't really been done before—

AH: Oh I see.

JG: —you know because it was really a mom and pop operation most of the way along. And you know trying to do whatever the Gonzmarts wanted us to institute restaurant by restaurant. At that point in time we didn't have recipes. We still had the commissary running in Ybor City. So like us and Sand Key, when we were in Sand Key at that point in time, we got our linen from Ybor City. We got our produce from Ybor City. We got our soups and sauces from Ybor City. So that's how in lieu of not having recipes, that's how they kept things consistent in the Bay area.

AH: I see.

JG: But then out in Sarasota where Casey was, I guess he oversaw all that and kept that the way he thought it should be and in St. Augustine was another animal out there too.

AH: Okay. So there, things hadn't been rationalized yet and I had talked to Richard about this, that there was kind of a fragmentary existence there for awhile.

JG: It definitely was and at that point in time each restaurant had its own characteristic should I say. Even though we were the Columbia restaurant and we both serve, and we all serve roast pork and boliche and yellow rice and all that, you would have somebody come from Sarasota and say, [the] Caldo Gallego is not the same as it is in Sarasota.

AH: Yes.

JG: But I like this better or I like that better, whichever. You know, so everybody had their favorites on what it was like whereas today it seems to be more consistent from restaurant to restaurant because we have the recipe system.

AH: Oh and I know that is one of the big challenges for a system like this. Okay.

JG: Oh, yes. Sure.

AH: So, yeah I talked to Richard about some of the dark days there when, you know— first of all before we go there, before Cesar passed what were some of your first interactions with Richard. Tell me a little bit about that, about your relationship with him. Did you interact with him much when you [were] over in Sand Key?

JG: No.

AH: Okay, so when you became kind of the divisional manager for the Columbia did that change then? Did you see much of him?

JG: Well, you know, my interactions with Richard were, and I guess I say no because I'm so involved with him today because he is across the street.

AH: Yes.

JG: As what was going on back then is nothing near what it is now, but yet when he did pay a visit you know he was in particular and Cesar used to pay visits out there quite often in Sand Key too because that was one of his favorite little spots to go. But most of the conversations with Richard were over the phone and then when he would come and visit, and they used to come mostly at night and they would come as a family, Richard and Cesar. Casey not so much because he was in Sarasota, but Melanie would come and Adela would come. And we used to have Spanish chefs back then. I had one in particular named Guillermo Galera?? that Cesar was particularly fond of you know, and he would always cook something special for Cesar and the family that wasn't on the menu—

AH: Yes.

JG: —and it was always you know a big to-do, you know. And they would sit around and judge the restaurant in that fashion. I guess they would take a look and see how the business was, how we were serving, the cleanliness and those types of things. And then we would hear things or comments back the next day or so as to how it was going and what they thought and that type of thing.

AH: Okay.

JG: And then, of course, judged by our profitability and stuff like that too. But I remember many times when--particularly in the summertime, when sales weren't so good and it was difficult keeping good staff on and everything, Cesar would call and he would try to encourage me to not get discouraged.

AH: Yes.

JG: You know what I mean and, [Cesar] Don't worry about [it,] it's going to come around and keep on plugging and doing the job you're doing and things like that. And he was very encouraging in that way. But in the same token I remember times when he would dress me down in the dining-room too.

AH: Okay.

JG: You know, for having a matchbook underneath the table leg.

AH: Oh yeah.

JG: You know I'd get it right there in front of everybody. I remember one time particularly when he came by on Easter and we, and one of our specials was ham. And the chef Guillermo had, anticipating how many reservations we had, cut some of the ham ahead of time and put it in a pan and put it on the steam table and they were serving the ham out of the steam table onto the plates to make up for the ham dinners that were selling like crazy.

AH: Okay.

JG: And he [Cesar] went nuts when he came in there and saw that we weren't carving it to order. And he stopped everything in the kitchen and it really ruined our Easter day because we got way behind because no food came out of the kitchen—

AH: Yes.

JG: —until Cesar was through telling everybody the way he wanted it. And he was right, we should have been carving it to order probably, but I guess the chef took the liberties of trying to speed the process up to get everything going quickly and keep the tables turning and everything. But that is a day I will not forget.

AH: Well that's one day that Cesar wasn't too fond of that chef then I guess.

JG: No, he wasn't and I stayed out in the dining room that day too. But yeah, that was interesting.

(laughter)

AH: Well, you know, tell me a little bit more about the dynamics of the family and meeting them too. Adela, what were your impressions there when you saw her?

JG: Adela was a lovely woman. I mean she was very, how do I want to say? I think she had an air about her too that she always wanted everything to be great. I remember when I came here to work in Ybor City the first time. This is my third time working here, but the first time I came to work here New Year's Eve and she bought, not bought, but rented all the managers' tuxedos and wanted them in tuxedos for New Year's Eve because that

was the Columbia restaurant. You know and some of that stuff has gone by the wayside as the years have gone by, but she was very particular. She was always concerned that we would have a jacket on in the dining room and a shirt and tie and how the food was and things like that. So she really, more so even than Cesar, had a lot to say about the food and things like that.

AH: Okay. And then Melanie?

JG: Melanie is a sweetheart. I really didn't get to know her real well the first couple of years I was there. I mean we were cordial with each other over in Sand Key, but as I got over into the corporate office I got to know her a little bit better and then I'll never forget one thing that resonates to me about her. We were in Daytona and we were opening up Daytona and in the madness of opening three restaurants at one time Maggiano's, Cha-Chas and Columbia all at the same time, all in the same week and everything. We had been there, we were living there, myself and Danny and Jodie and Danny's wife Kathy who was the sales person at that time and a lot of other hats.

And we were living in Daytona and I had been there I think for four weeks, four and a half weeks and I hadn't been home. And we had opened up the restaurant and they had come over to see, it was one of the grand opening things like that. And I saw Richard at the door and Melanie at the door and went over to give Richard a handshake and Melanie a hug and she looked right at me and says, "When was the last time you've been home to see your wife and kids?" (starts to tear) I'm breaking up a little bit about this. [Jim] "I haven't been home in about four and a half weeks." She looked right at Richard and she goes, "Send his ass home tomorrow." And I was home tomorrow.

(laughter)

AH: Well that sounds like Melanie. She is a sweetheart. All right, so when did Daytona open then? What year was that?

JG: Let me think. It had to have been 93 or 4, 94 maybe?

AH: Okay, so this is, that must have been right before Cesar passed then right?

JG: Yes. No, Cesar might have already passed. I think Cesar had already passed.

AH: Okay.

JG: Yes.

AH: And I get the impression when I talked to Richard that Daytona was kind of a bridge too far. That it didn't work out. Maybe it was trying to do too much. What are your recollections of Daytona? I mean, what happened?

JG: Daytona is a very strange market, very strange market.

AH: Well other big restaurants have failed there too.

JG: Yes and you know that's biker heaven. That's where they die and retire. You know they remember it and that is what Florida is to them and that's the type of clientele that you're dealing with all the time. Not that they're bad people, not that they don't have money but they do watch it. They do watch their expenditures and they're very particular and they're really looking for a deal. And we might have been overpriced for that market.

AH: Okay.

JG: And then I think the other part of it that I am kind of cognizant of is that I don't think we cut a real good deal on the building and everything.

AH: Oh, I see.

JG: And it kind of made it difficult for us to survive over there—

AH: Yes.

JG: —with the nut that we had and so that's kind of what I know about it. I know we did our best over there. We did a great job training people. We had a decent staff. Some of the operational things we had to overcome were a little difficult, but we were able to do it. You know we shared facilities with (inaudible) and Jerry's upstairs in the kitchen and cooler space and we shared a liquor room and everything with all three restaurants. It was kind of a commissary thing that got dished out. Richard's comment about Daytona was we were going to operate it like a hotel without any rooms.

AH: Okay.

JG: You know, so it was just like we were one big building—

AH: Yes.

JG: —and there were three different restaurants in there and we were all operating basically out of the same kind of space almost.

AH: Okay.

JG: I mean Cha-Chas had their own kitchen and everything like that. Penjari's?? had the display kitchen out front, but the back kitchen that tied up with our back kitchen where all of our food came out of that they did their prep-work and stuff and we shared some equipment and stuff like that.

AH: Okay. So it was right around the same time then that Cesar passed. And talking to Richard, some really dark days followed.

JG: Yes.

AH: And he mentioned to me last night when I was interviewing him just like we are today that you really stuck by him.

JG: Yes.

AH: And he felt like a lot of people were turning their backs. You know, he says, “When you’re doing great everyone’s good to you, but when you’re not doing well a lot of people turn their backs.” And he said you were really loyal and you stood by him.

Now, let’s just talk a little bit about those kind of dark days. I mean we already talked a little bit about the fact that things weren’t rationalized. There weren’t recipes. There were a lot of leaks in the tubs sort of speak as far as just operations and everything. Tell us a little bit about the difficulties there and then how you saw them being overcome and what role you played.

JG: Okay. Well, I guess first of all I would say that when Cesar passed away I don’t think Richard or Casey really had a clue as to what was going on in the company because I don’t think they really, I might be wrong in saying this, I don’t know whether they paid enough attention to what was going on in the operations of the company.

AH: Well according to them, they weren’t always—

(technical difficulties with recording)

AH: We almost lost it for a second. Okay.

JG: But anyway, what I recollect is that Cesar kind of kept most of the numbers part of it to himself and kept it close to the vest and I think there might have been a lot of things in the closet. And I know that there was a point in time in this company and another problem with the company in that point in time, I think they called them, I don’t know if they called them a chief financial officer at that time or if they called them an auditor or whatever, but Jay Ostro really didn’t know what he was doing. And I could see that from my standpoint. We went, I think I remember one point in time, maybe six or seven months without P and L [profit and loss] statements.

AH: Wow.

JG: You know, I mean how the hell? And the excuse was that well they were trying to clear up Cesar’s death and everything and all this and that. And I just think basically probably Cesar was telling Jay what to do and after Cesar died Jay didn’t know what to do.

AH: Wow.

JG: And you know it really was a mess from what I understood. And at that point in time is when the boys I guess got together and Casey came down to Sarasota to help his brother here after his dad died and they hired a manager for Sarasota and that is when they decided to get the help. And that was the smartest thing they ever did was when they brought Lee Sanders in here and he evaluated the place and then we did a menu change. I mean we used to not charge for the 1905 Salad. We used to give it away with the entrees.

AH: Oh, okay. (laughter)

JG: Come on.

AH: Yes.

JG: You know?

AH: Yes.

JG: People pay dollars to have it. I mean we were kind of backwards in our menus and the way we ran the company and everything and we owed a lot of people a lot of money. We were in a lot of debt.

AH: Yes.

JG: And that was the major part of it and at the same time that was going on when Cesar passed and then we had the Daytona nut hit us. And that was a failure all the way around unfortunately.

AH: Yes.

JG: And then we had all that on top of us too. So we started to run into problems with creditors and I remember lots of times in the summertime when I couldn't get fresh fish unless I had cash.

AH: Wow.

JG: We were on C.O.D. with accounts—

AH: Yes.

JG: —because we were so far behind and things like that so it became difficult to operate the restaurants. And I got concerned at that point in time and thinking well you know maybe I should start looking around because maybe my paycheck is going to be next.

AH: Yes.

JG: You know that type of thing, but I liked it, the family and the company and at that point in time I was in the divisional manager's position also. So I said, well you know it will be hard to find another spot like this and this and that so let me just stick it out and see if I can help them make it better. It was when things really started to go bad, when I knew they started to go bad, was when they hired the, I want to say that when they hired Lee Sanders was when they busted everyone back down into positions. And when I say everybody I meant myself and Jodie—

***Side 1 ends; side 2 begins***

AH: Okay. Sorry about that.

JG: I came, they took it—in other words they decided to eliminate the divisional manager positions and the director's position because basically we didn't have, we couldn't afford it anymore.

AH: I see.

JG: You know so we all went back to operational positions in restaurants.

AH: Okay.

JG: Jodie, I think went, I don't know where Jodie went, he might have gone over to Harbour Island I think at Cha-Chas there. And I came here to Ybor City and worked with George Guito who is the general manager here.

AH: Okay.

JG: I wasn't in charge at that time. I worked under George Guito at that time after going from divisional manager to under George Guito.

AH: Wow.

JG: And then Danny I think was bouncing around from a couple of different restaurants and he was at the Sand Key Columbia for awhile and I think he was eventually going to be on his way out and that eventually did happen. At that point in time in my life it was a little difficult because they really didn't change my pay structure or anything, which I was appreciative of that. I was still making the same money, but yet Ybor City was a wreck at that point in time.

AH: Okay.

JG: The building was falling apart, you know. We had leaks everywhere in the building, ceilings were coming in, the kitchen was falling apart and there was no money to fix it. There was hardly even any money to buy glassware and things like that.

AH: Wow.

JG: It was crazy. So we were band-aiding everything up and there was really no leadership here, management-wise. George is a great guy and everything like that, but he is not a real good planner and leader. He's a great soldier.

AH: Yes.

JG: And he can do a lot of things and he has got a lot of great personal qualities, the mayor of Ybor City in my eyes. And he knows everybody and can get a lot of things done and that type of thing, but from the standpoint of leading and running something, he isn't really that good.

AH: Well he is kind of the other side of the coin. Richard said, "He's a good administrator, but he is not a good manager."

JG: Yes.

AH: And so George is kind of the other way around right?

JG: Right. Exactly.

AH: Ok, I am sorry to cut you off there.

JG: But, anyway I worked here under George Guito and with a couple of other assistant managers and it was really a nightmare for nine months, eleven months, twelve months I think it was. And I really didn't have any contact with Richard. He never called me, he never talked to me. I just came to work here in Ybor City everyday. If I happened to see him in the restaurant or worked mostly at nights and things like that and then one day I get a call from Richard and he said, "Hey, I want to talk to you about something." And I said, "Okay fine." So he called me over to the office and he said, "Look, I'd like you to go over to Harbour Island and take the restaurant over as the general manager. I've got some problems over there and I want you to go over there and straighten them out." And I said "Hallelujah!" I was so glad to get out of this place—

AH: Really?

JG: —and have my own store and get back to some normalcy. So I went over to Harbour Island. And they had lost the chef over there, who was doing a good job, because he didn't like the general manager that was over there and so I got him back and we got the kitchen straightened out. And we got Harbour Island going. Harbour Island was a good little restaurant for a long while.

AH: That's what I heard.

JG: And we had the buffet on Sundays and everything like that. And I was probably there for about eight or nine months when I got another serious call from Richard. And by this time Lee Sanders was on board.

AH: Okay.

JG: And basically what it was all about was Richard and I had been discussing a new concept over there on Harbour Island. It was going to be like the Columbia Café and it was going to be more tapas and light fare because the indoor/outdoor that we had over there was perfect for that. And I was working on some menu ideas and some different strategies and things like that and I had come prepared to speak with him and Lee at the meeting about the new concept.

AH: Okay.

JG: When I go into the conference room across the street in the corporate office, him and Lee are sitting there and I had all my stuff with me and I started spreading out and they go, "No, Jim wait a minute we have to talk with you about something. And Richard says, Well I wanted to let you know something before it gets out in the public and I wanted to give you an opportunity in case you don't want to stay with us any longer." And I go, "What do you mean?" And he goes, "Well we're going to close Harbour Island." And I said, "Holy shit. Why are you going to close Harbour Island?" And I guess they just decided that the management over there wasn't giving them what they wanted.

AH: How long were you there at that point?

JG: At Harbour Island?

AH: Yes.

JG: Probably a year or less.

AH: Okay.

JG: But it was coming up on the end of their ten year lease and they were getting ready to sign a new lease. But they weren't going to sign a new lease without some concessions. The kitchen over there was horrible. It was like the size of my arms spread here to there, to there, to that wall. That was the size of the kitchen over there.

AH: Oh my.

JG: And it was a mess, you know. And there were situations where I heard they wanted to take more space over there because they had kicked out Blueberry Hill. They had

kicked out the other restaurant at the inn and they were looking for new restaurants to come in and revitalize the place. And a lot of the upstairs that used to be a mall was going to become offices.

AH: Okay.

JG: And so they were looking for new tenants. And they wanted us to stay and anchor and take more space, pay more rent and this and that type of thing, but they didn't want to give us any build-out money because we wanted to redo the restaurants, you know?

AH: Oh, yes.

JG: And so Richard got pissed at that point and I guess between him and Lee, this is what they told me afterwards, they decided they would close Harbour Island and they would absorb the business over here in Ybor City, big enough and large enough to do that. So, at that point in time he says to me, he says, "Look it," he goes, "We're going to close Harbour Island," he goes, "You know I wanted to let you know so if you want to look for another job you can and you have an opportunity to get yourself going and everything like that." He goes, "But I also have another proposal for you." And I go, "What is that?" And he goes, "Well I would like to have you go back over to Ybor City and get it straightened out."

And I looked right at him and I said, "First of all before we go any further I said, I'm not going over there and working underneath George Guito. If I go over there I'm going to be in charge." And they agreed to that. And then they started to talk to me about a bonus structure. That was the first thing that Lee brought into the company which was probably one of the things that turned this place around upside down besides changing the menus and stuff was having the managers buy in and having a piece of the pie.

AH: Yes.

JG: I mean, goddamn, you tell me if I can get this much carrot at the end of the month if I show you this many carrots, this bunch of carrots, I'm going to get one or two bunches out of the carrot. You know, you got my motor running now and that is what started the whole thing. It was a struggle coming over here.

AH: I mean, at first you must have been a little, like (imitates a sound of distaste) I don't want to go back there.

JG: Well I looked over it. They gave me a chance to look over the P and L statements. They projected for me what kind of money it was going to be possibly and bonuses and things like that. And so I said, "Well I'm going to go for it."

AH: Okay.

JG: You know at that point, that was probably about ten or eleven years ago and so I've been here ever since and it's been a battle. But you know we had to find—first of all we had to come out of debt. We did that by some solid P and L work for the first few years and continued to struggle with building problems, air conditioning, leaks, bad kitchen and all that. And I mean I hate to be cliché, but the rest is history basically.

(laughter)

AH: Yes.

JG: We rebuilt this building and with rebuilding this building it rebuilt the company basically you know by some—and well I have to say this. And I say this to a lot of people. The smartest thing they ever did in this company second to hiring Lee Sanders for advice was hiring Dennis (inaudible).

AH: And what position was he in?

JG: Chief financial officer.

AH: Okay.

JG: Dennis came in here and made everybody accountable and produced accountable paperwork. Took a look at important little things a step at a time like POS systems and you know okay we are going to commit to spending \$60,000 on POS because we need it to be accountable and get our reports and know if we are doing good and bad and you know help with inventory systems and just all those things. And then you know of course developing and running the bonus system and having quarterly meetings and showing everybody where we were at and where we were going and where we came from and just all of that. He is a genius with that type of stuff, a really, really great chief financial officer. And he's a guy who you could talk to too which always helps. You know he is just not a bean counter.

AH: That's right.

JG: That was a big move for them. Because I think if you actually asked Richard about Dennis, Richard has learned more from Dennis than from anybody he has in his life.

AH: Yes.

JG: As far as the financial end which he really didn't have a clue of. I mean he knew how to do a P and L and how to figure out a food cost and liquor cost and how to place out menus and things like that, but the inner workings of loans and depreciation and budgets and all that stuff really was never done. Or not with any quality I should say anyway.

AH: Yes. Okay, so when they offered you the Ybor thing and everything, them saying they were going to fix everything or at least start to try and fix things.

JG: That really wasn't discussed in the beginning.

AH: Oh, Okay.

JG: A grandiose plan was not thrown out.

AH: Okay.

JG: Just go over there, work with George and get the place straightened out because we want to absorb all of the business that we are going to lose when we close Harbour Island.

AH: Okay.

JG: So my immediate task after that meeting, we were closing Harbour Island in two weeks.

AH: Wow.

JG: So I went over there and supervised the closing of the restaurant.

AH: Okay.

JG: All the tables and chairs shipped to different units, the kitchen equipment taken out and put in storage, the actual physical closing of the unit.

AH: Now what was that like to dismantle a restaurant that you had—

(laughter)

JG: I had never done that before!

AH: —that you had spent so much time trying to cultivate?

JG: I had never done that before. It was interesting. It was you know it was—and sad in a way too.

AH: I'm sure.

JG: I remember taking the chandelier that's in the Sancho [dining room] down. I used to sit in that big old round tent top in the middle of the Harbour Island. I don't know if you were ever there before—

AH: No.

JG: —but when you first walked in off of the mall there was a big door and there was a big table round table that sat like twelve or thirteen people (inaudible) of course, right next to the cashier's desk basically and then there was that glass chandelier in the Sancho that was hanging over that.

AH: Okay.

JG: That was one of the pieces there. You know just bringing all of the artwork over and storing it over at Richard's house or here and those types of things and moving trucks and vans and kitchen people to take equipment out and all that.

AH: Okay.

JG: Interesting.

AH: So then you started to get an inkling after you got here. Now, first of all, what was your position? What was your title when you came?

JG: Director of Operations as it is now.

AH: Okay, so you were placed above George then.

JG: In everybody's eyes, but George.

AH: Of course. (laughs) I can see that. I can see that.

JG: And maybe even today still, I don't know. But he's a great guy. He and I have really grown up together in the last ten years. And reluctantly George has learned a lot from me. And he'll tell you that to this day I think that he has learned a lot of stuff by working with me, but in the beginning he fought me tooth and nail—

AH: Okay.

JG: —because he didn't want to lose his position and he didn't want to feel like he wasn't in charge. And to be honest with you, I don't know whether this is true or not, but I think George was made the general manager of the restaurant because that was one of Cesar's wishes.

AH: That's what I heard, yes.

JG: And not because of ability or qualifications or anything like that.

AH: Okay.

JG: But having him around here has been a blessing in disguise as well because he saw all of the stuff going on here in the day. He knows how to make the roast pork the way we used to make it back in the forties and the fifties and that type of stuff. And often times Richard would call George and say remember when we used to do it this way or that way? And George would get back in the kitchen and whip it up the way he remembers and yeah that's the way we're going to do it and let's break down the recipe and that type of stuff. And so, you know, from that standpoint, he's a goldmine, you know?

AH: Yes, because he played so many roles here over the years.

JG: When I first met George Guito and came into contact with him, we weren't working together I was at Sand Key, he was in charge of the commissary because we had a commissary here then at Ybor City where the soups and sauces were prepared, the boliche was cooked, the roast pork was cooked and shipped to units in bags and everything like that and the laundry was done and he used to go to the produce market and buy produce and all that stuff. And he was in charge of shipping all of that stuff out. We had a couple of trucks in the company and you know you would send your order to George on Wednesday and it would come on the truck on Thursday, whatever you needed. And we would get three trucks a week over on Sand Key. And that's my first exposure with George.

AH: I see.

JG: And the next time I met him, he was the general manager.

AH: Okay, so that was an interesting drama that unfolded over the next decade—

JG: Oh, yes.

AH: —was your relationship (inaudible)?

JG: Oh, yes. There were many times when George and I, never really got physical with each other, but often times got very pissed with each other.

AH: Yes.

JG: Because it would be, I would talk about doing it one way and then, when I would leave it would go the other way.

AH: Oh, I see.

JG: You know that type of thing, it would get changed back. And I used to hear that happening between Richard and Cesar back in the day too.

AH: Ah yes.

JG: When Richard would try to run the restaurant and his dad would come in at two o'clock or four o'clock and say, "Nope that is not how we are going to do it. We are going to do it this way."

AH: Yes.

JG: So I don't know if that is where George got it or—

(both laugh)

AH: Okay, yes. An impossible situation.

JG: Yes.

AH: Okay, so what were some of the first things—all right obviously you talked about Lee Sanders and Dennis, it seemed like it immediately provided a direction—

JG: Yes.

AH: —that people knew this is what we're doing, these are the carrots that are being held out in front of me, etcetera. So what are some of the things that happened here at Ybor City at this location, physical things that started to change and operational things?

JG: Physical didn't happen right away.

AH: Okay.

JG: Operation started to happen before physical and that was a big challenge because when I arrived here and that was my third time working here, when I came back to be the director of operations, third time in the eighteen years I've been here, there was a union here, a waiters and bartenders union. And that was the biggest issue we had here. Cooks belonged to it also. And basically they ran the restaurant. The managers didn't run the restaurant. You can go into a dining room and tell a waiter, "Hey you just bussed that table over there and you left your tray over there against the wall. Can you take it back to the kitchen?" [waiter] "It's not my job, it's the buss boy's job. You know, and you can tell them, "Look, take that back to the kitchen or you're going to have to leave." He'd go over and call the shop steward and ten minutes later I have the shop steward down here and I'm dealing with the shop steward. You know what I mean?

So one of the biggest things that we did and I don't know whether or not I should say this or not, but I'm going to. We broke the union, basically.

AH: Yes.

JG: And we did that or Richard did that by basically meeting with some of the guys that were in charge and basically kind of not taking care of them or anything, but saying, “Hey look, you know, we want to try to make this restaurant better, you work with us, the union’s going to go away, we have new management over there. Because I’m telling you one of the biggest issues they had over here, why there was a union in the beginning, why I think.

*Tape 1, side 1 ends; side 2 begins*

JG: Laws and that type of thing as far as. So I think a lot of employees felt they needed representation to protect their jobs. So I think after a couple of years, and this didn’t happen immediately when I came over, but after a couple of years and the staff began to see that I wasn’t going away. We brought new managers in too, different managers, a couple guys I had worked with before and Garret is one of them here. And a couple of other guys, Frank came back to work for us when he used to work here before and everyone bought into the new management concept here you know. We were firm and fair. We were writing people up, having meetings with people saying, “Hey look, this happened last night. Why did you do this and that? He said you did this.” Whereas before those things didn’t happen. There was no let’s sit down and talk about it. It was “Okay you’re fired, get out of here,” you know, that type of thing.

AH: Okay.

JG: So, I think after awhile when they saw that the management style was changing, there was less need for a union. And then it became a problem paying dues every month for nothing.

AH: I see.

JG: And then when that started to happen Richard had a talk with probably three or four of the shop stewards that they had here and got them to come over and basically the union disappeared. Nobody joined anymore and it went away and when that happened then we were able to incorporate you know more handbooks, company policies; this is the way we do it. “Okay, I am sorry, we don’t toss the 1905 Salad over there and then walk it over to this table and serve it.” You know, those types of things guys did whatever the hell they wanted to do service-wise.

AH: Yes.

JG: You know so that was a major thing in front of the house. The back of the house was an issue as well because the chef Paco was a tough guy to deal with.

AH: Okay.

JG: And although he put out some good food and things like that, it was tough. The kitchen was a big issue. I mean it was a horrible working condition. It was teeny tiny and the roof leaked and the drains backed up and the dishwasher was too small and it was crazy sometimes. Once we started the rebuilding process and people started to see the money being put back in and the improvements being made then people started to buy into the program even more until we eventually got to where we are today. I mean once the new kitchen went in, that was it.

AH: Yes.

JG: We're real now.

AH: Okay.

JG: You know it's the real deal now.

AH: Okay.

JG: Basically where it's at.

AH: Okay, so basically getting the union out made it possible to rationalize the labor just like you were rationalizing the other systems right?

JG: Yes it made it easier to handle.

AH: Okay, so these things were being tackled when? [Nineteen] ninety five? [Nineteen ninety six?

JG: I think Harbour Island closed in 96 I think.

AH: Okay, so this is even more recent then.

JG: Yes.

AH: Okay.

JG: Let me think, isn't that? We're in 2006 now. Maybe it was 95. 95 might have been Harbour Island closing, yes. And then, I came over here in 95 and 96, the summer of 95, yes.

AH: Okay, so then, how long did these personnel changes you're talking about take?

JG: Probably over the next two years or so because we still dealt with a lot of financial issues here for a couple of years until we started operating more correctly and being more accountable with the financials and everything like that.

AH: And of course without money to throw around, you can't do physical things to the building. That's why that waited right?

JG: No, I mean the first couple of years of operation when Lee was here and Dennis came aboard I think it was basically paying down debt.

AH: Yes.

JG: Because we were in debt for, I heard you know like, some food service companies being in debt for a million dollars.

AH: Oh, yes.

JG: You know?

AH: Oh, yes, I was talking with Richard about that last night.

JG: And until you pay that down, no banks were going to look at you. You know when you tried to go to the bank with something to get any money and you say okay give me some back-up. Let me see some financial statements. Let me see, you know, what your receivables are. Let me see what your payables are and when you went to them with that, nobody wanted to talk to you, you know?

AH: Yes.

JG: But after two or three years of getting that straightened around and when that debt started to go away and we started to come up on the other side now the banks are knocking on your door and that's when we started going.

AH: Okay.

JG: You know? So it was basically turning the place around before you could the money to start fixing this place and once they started getting the money to fix this place they also started fixing up other places too. It all started to happen in conjunction. So we started to spend a lot of money again, but the thing about it was is that we had a good financial track record that everyone started to believe in us again that we were viable for that.

AH: Okay.

JG: So, you know, even though we have debt to pay off today, we still have money in the bank and we still have, you know, things going on that is all good. We still profit, so.

AH: So now, to get past the labor thing, the handbooks and getting the policies and procedures down—was that formulated in the corporate office? Was it first implemented here and then elsewhere? How did that work?

JG: There was some sketch-work of that beforehand. Like when I was a divisional manager and I think it was developed in the corporate office by Jay and his crew or whatever. We had a rough handbook and training manuals and everything were basically done in-house at each restaurant, however they felt training needed to go. And then the policy manual was done in the corporate office. There were no recipes at that time. The recipes didn't really get developed until Kirk came aboard and I think we've only had recipes maybe for about seven years, maybe six or seven years.

AH: Which is interesting because that's one of the things—

JG: Or should I say consistent recipes throughout.

AH: Consistent recipes, yes.

JG: Everybody had recipes, but they weren't all the same.

(laughter)

AH: Well, and one of the reasons Richard wanted to take another go at doing a cookbook, not just so much has happened since then, but also that a lot of the recipes in there weren't anything close to what you guys were actually cooking.

JG: Right.

AH: So when someone expected to recreate something at home it was impossible.

JG: Right, exactly.

AH: So that's especially interesting. Now Paco was he the predecessor to Chef Jerry?

JG: Chef Jerry that's here now?

AH: Yes.

JG: No, no. We had one other chef in between Paco and Jerry, John Flarety. He was here for about a year. He did a few things to improve the kitchen, but then really didn't feel he was the one to take us forward, where we wanted to go. I hate to say this again, but we really need Latin influence in the back of the house. And it's hard to be a white guy and run that place back there.

AH: Yes, I bet. So besides, you know, his heritage, what else did Jerry bring to the table?

JG: Well, he's a creative guy. He's a very organized guy. He can run a computer backwards and forwards. He likes to use the computer, ordering online, those types of things. Very good with Excel and spreadsheets and things like that so he can keep track of a lot different things. So he brings an organization from that standpoint that we didn't

really have with any of the chefs we had before. Paco was not a paperwork guy and you know his idea of ordering was ordering enough so you didn't run out. Sometimes you would have too much and that type of stuff.

AH: So really I mean what you're describing is a twenty-first century chef.

JG: Yes, we're taking a leap.

AH: I mean it takes an entirely different skill set right?

JG: Oh, yes.

AH: Obviously, the food is important, but there's so much other—

JG: Oh, Jerry does a little bit more for us here because he helps develop menu items and wine dinners and things like that where, to be quite honest with you, the way the Columbia restaurant is set up we really don't need a chef, we just need a good kitchen manager. We've got the recipes. We're not doing anything fancy. I mean we're even getting to the point now I think where Kirk is coming out with specials with recipes.

AH: Yes.

JG - So that you know the specials are the same everywhere and this is what you choose from for your specials—

AH: Exactly.

JG: —so you're sure each restaurant is doing what they are supposed to be doing and not getting way out of bounds, you know? So from that standpoint basically, of course you need to be a cook, you need to know how to cook.

AH: Oh sure.

JG: You have to. And you have to know how to cook everything on the menu and all the batch recipes and all the soups and everything like that, but basically it's about management.

AH: Yes.

JG: It's management—

AH: Okay.

JG: —because it's not like you're in one of these fine dining houses where the menu changes every day and the chef is creating this and that—

AH: For seasonal menus.

JG: —freshest stuff in produce, you know, and all this and that so we're not that kind of a place. I mean we are fine dining, but we're really comfort food.

AH: Yes. Okay. So really it sounds to me like, I was talking to Jerry about the same thing, about rationalizing your specials so that they're the same all over. Sounds like one of the last stages of this whole thing that you've been doing.

JG: I think so. I think it's just another stage. I mean we have lots of other stages to go to I guess. I don't know whether we will ever get, I hope we don't myself personally, but I don't think we'll ever get, we shouldn't try to take the individuality out of the location.

AH: Sure.

JG: You know? Because each clientele grows to that location and you know even though it sounds like we might be going Applebee's or Friday's or whatever and that type of way because everything is recipe and don't do this unless it's got a recipe or whatever, but yet we still like to know that a customer comes in here tomorrow night and he wants something that was made back in 1975 or something like that and we've got the stuff to do it and we can do it, we'll make it for him!

AH: Yes.

JG: We don't have a recipe for it, but we'll throw it together and try to make it what you remember.

AH: Yes.

JG: You know and that type of thing and that is everybody's individuality I think.

AH: Okay.

JG: And I think each store probably does something like that or does things for their customers like that or their staff does something different or whatever so.

AH: And certainly the atmosphere takes care a lot of that too.

JG: Oh, for sure.

AH: There is a lot of distinctive atmospheres.

JG: Yes, there are a lot of places that don't have this feel of course you know.

AH: Let's talk about the facility some next. What was the first thing to be tackled there?

JG: Well, it was the roofs. The roofs and the air conditioning were kind of at-the-same-time project because all of the air conditioning was breaking down. They were about twenty or thirty years old. They were band-aided together and we started off in the café. It was the first project probably about ten years ago. Tore the roof off of it, put a new roof on it, put new AC in it, took out the interior ceilings, put in a new drop ceiling, put a new bar in the café. The interior part not the outside part we actually hoisted that piece from Cuba from the rafters while the bottom part was being built. And they brought the bottom part in, set it underneath and lowered that back down on top.

AH: Okay. So that piece above is from Cuba then?

JG: That's what I've heard. I heard it was carved and done in Cuba and shipped over here, that 1905 wooden piece up there.

AH: Yes.

JG: And then we had an artist come in and re-antique that and make it look old again and everything and all that. So that was the first project. And then we went to the Don Quixote and redid the roof in there and new air-conditioning and redid the ceiling on the inside.

AH: Okay.

JG: And then, the Patio [Room] was next and then the Siboney [Room] and the King's Room and everywhere we went. And then the phone system got upgraded you know we moved the phone system in the electrical room and actually it was probably right about here, no wait a minute right about here I think it was.

AH: Okay, what room are we in now?

JG: This is where the old kitchen used to be.

AH: And which room is this, the Andalucia?

JG: The Andalucia.

AH: Yes.

JG: Yes this is where the kitchen used to be and right behind the kitchen there was a warehouse which the warehouse is still there behind that wall, part of it is used for retail storage now and the other part of it is used for restaurant storage—

AH: Okay.

JG: —but back in the day there was a set of locker rooms right here and there was a door that you went through and there was a wall right there that was the back wall to the

kitchen and right on that back wall was our phone system. And you opened up these two doors that were about six by six or six feet high and about three feet wide each, you opened it up and here was this patchwork of wires and cables (laughter) and every time the phone man came that's where he went to work.

AH: Yes.

JG: It was unbelievable.

AH: Yes.

JG: So anyway we got a modernized phone system. (claps) We moved our electrical stuff over to the other side so we redid all the electric in the building. Put that over in the commissary where the coolers used to be in the commissary.

AH: Okay.

JG: Boy, I forgot about that. Yes, we had to do that damn commissary area. What year was that? Casey's kid was born and he is eight years old now I think so that would be—

AH: Ok, that would be 98?

JG: [Nineteen] Ninety-eight when the roof in the commissary collapsed.

AH: Oh, wow.

JG: Yes, we had a sudden flash rainstorm and apparently we hadn't kept the drains clean on the roof up there and there was a retainer wall all the way around there and we got like a swimming pool up there and the roof collapsed.

AH: Oh my.

JG: And the water came down into the commissary and flooded out the whole commissary, ran into the Siboney all the way into the patio.

AH: Oh wow.

JG: Yeah and we were out of commission. We lost our laundry room and our commissary for probably six or nine months probably.

AH: Well that must have been a huge disruption in operations—

JG: Oh, yes—

AH: —because you were still depending on that central commissary for all the—

JG: Not at that time, not for everybody.

AH: Okay. Okay.

JG: At that time it was just us.

AH: Okay.

JG: Yes, yes because we first started doing batch recipes for soups and sauces when the first recipes came out, that's when we started so everybody could make their own soups and sauces and become more independent from Ybor City.

AH: Okay. Well thank goodness for that right?

JG: Yes, exactly.

AH: So how did you overcome having your commissary out of commission?

JG: Well, we just started producing stuff in the kitchen and doing all we could.

AH: The kitchen, Okay.

JG: And from our standpoint we were only producing for us thank god at that time. But then having the laundry out was a pain. We had to get a contract from National Linen. And we contracted them for about six months, nine months, whatever it took until we got the laundry back up and running and got a roof on there everything like that—

AH: Okay.

JG: —because the whole roof had to be replaced.

AH: Okay.

JG: Anyway, that's—then what was it? We did all that between I guess, I want to say like 97 maybe and 2000 or 96 and 2000 because it was 2000 when we built the kitchen. The kitchen opened in 2000. So it was that year the kitchen was built and that's basically—well, no then we came in here and did the Andalucia and the Family Room two years ago, the wine cellar a year ago.

AH: It's been like non-stop really.

JG: Yes, really for the last ten years, yes—

AH: Yes.

JG: —and something's been going on the whole time and now we only have really the one project left and that's the hideaways I guess to get done.

AH: The what?

JG: The hideaways.

AH: Okay.

JG: We want to redo or Richard wants to redo the hideaways and bring them back to their former glory.

AH: Oh you mean upstairs.

JG: Yes.

AH: Okay.

JG: And then you know from there it's maintenance from there, after that.

AH: So, in a big way, this place has been reinvented with all the new rooms, the wine cellars, the kitchen and everything else—

JG: Yes, Oh, yes for sure.

AH: —while still preserving a lot of the atmosphere out there in the older rooms.

JG: Oh, yes. People don't realize that this is a new room. It looks like it's been here for fifty years.

AH: Sure.

JG: And so that's the gem of it. And when they went through and rather than call it renovations at the time, we called it preservations.

AH: Okay.

JG: And we were going room to room and preserving history.

AH: Yes.

JG: Because we didn't really change a lot we, you know, on the Patio we scraped down to the old paint to get to the original colors and brought it back to the original colors on the Patio and things like that, but really didn't change a lot. Basically it was coats of paint and patching and new roofs and air conditioning and new electric and now we have

wi-fi throughout the building, we have DSL in most of the rooms and you know people wouldn't know that—

AH: Yes.

JG: You know? Or suspect it, but we're ready for the future now and continue to do as much business as we can. This is a living, breathing animal.

AH: Oh, yes.

JG: It's a living, breathing animal. Part of what I love about working here is that every day it's different. It changes every day. And the other part I like about it is we really have to think on our feet, you know. We might not know what we're going to do tomorrow until we come into the morning. I mean we know what parties we got and everything, but we wait until reservations get to where they're going to be and then we decide okay we have to open this room, okay we're going to move the show over here, oh Caroline wants to book the Andalucia, but we've got something in there can we move them to the King's Room? You know, so everything flows and goes and then after you decide what rooms you're going to open then you decide ok where are we going to put the hostess staff? What doors are we going to use today?

AH: Okay.

JG: You know what I mean?

AH: Yes.

JG: What bars are we going to open today? What bars do we need to open? So everyday it's something different and every weekend it's something different. You know we have a couple weekends coming up here where we only have I think, well tonight's an example I think, we have the Patio for dinner, the Siboney for the show. Everything else is a Christmas party.

AH: Yes.

JG: You know, and this Saturday we have a similar situation, I think we have the Café for dinner and the Patio for dinner and the show is like in the Andalucia or something like that.

AH: Wow.

JG: So, you know we for now, we've got three different rooms that can be a show room and we (inaudible) it around.

AH: Yes.

JG: And that doesn't even take into consideration—of course it doesn't really affect us that much when we go someplace else. When we go to someone's house or Higgin's Hall and do five hundred like we did for the King's party a couple of weeks ago or that type of thing too. That's just a matter of staffing and trucks and—

AH: Okay.

JG: —getting it out the door.

AH: Yes.

JG: You know, so—

AH: I read about the business card being found that Cesar had written on?

JG: Yes.

AH: When was that found? Do you remember that?

JG: Yes, that was during the renovation of the Café.

AH: Okay.

JG: Yes, there was actually right, (walks away from the table toward a door), I want to say right, oh here it was (inaudible) where it was now. That door right there—

AH: Okay.

JG: —had been sealed closed like the other front doors used to be to the Fonda when the Fonda was the dining area.

AH: Yes.

JG: It was sealed up like that. Cesar had put a Chivas bottle and that card behind the door when it was sealed up.

AH: Okay.

JG: And there was like a little note to his kids or something like that.

AH: A full bottle of scotch?

JG: No I think it was empty.

AH: Empty? Okay.

JG: Yeah, I believe it was empty, but they found that when they took that down. And I just happened to be right next to—we used to have a liquor room right here—

AH: Okay.

JG: —before the renovations occurred—

AH: Okay.

JG: —where the new men’s bathroom is now, that was the liquor room.

AH: Okay. Well, that must have been interesting finding that, talking about a living, breathing animal.

JG: Oh, yeah, oh yeah, I wouldn’t be surprised somewhere, someplace there’s something else stashed around here. Who knows?

AH: Well it’s kind of an interesting tradition—

JG: Yes.

AH: —it would be interesting if Richard started putting up little cards here and there.

(laughter)

JG: Yes, no kidding, yes but that is the interesting part about it too is that each generation has had a hand in—

AH: Yes.

JG: —something in this building—

AH: Sure and sometimes—

JG: Like their own little thing or their touch or whatever and you know I used to think Richard was crazy about some of the things he wanted to do when we were doing renovations, some of the things he would buy in Spain or wherever, but you know hey, that’s what he grew up seeing happen.

AH: Yes.

JG: So he was just carrying on what he saw.

AH: All right so let’s start winding down here. Let’s talk about the food for a minute. Your favorites. I’ve been doing this with every interview subject. You’re sitting down

and it's a special occasion at the Columbia and maybe you have some family and friends with you. What's your dream menu from start to finish, drinks included?

JG: Start to finish I think that probably we are going to start off with some Mojitos probably. And the Shrimp al Ajillo, have to have the Shrimp al Ajillo. That's a favorite.

AH: Oh, yes.

JG: And the calamari I love also. And everybody's got to have the 1905 Salad if we're going to do it up right. Everybody's going to have their soup out of them all. They're all great soups. And then as far as entrees go I think you know you have to have the Paella, you have to have the Filet "Chacho," the Chicken and Shrimp Barcelona is a favorite of mine. My mother-in-law loves any type of Salteado. Any type of Salteado she loves. Those are basically the favorites. We used to have something on the menu that was fantastic also which we don't have anymore and that was the Australian lobster tail. Oh those things were to die for.

(makes sound of enjoying food)

AH: I've heard stories about that.

JG: Oh boy those things used to come in like this (uses hands to describe size). One pound tails. Oh, man they were huge. (inaudible)

AH: And why were they phased out?

JG: I think availability and price.

AH: Yes.

JG: Because you couldn't keep them consistent. If you wanted to put them on the menu you had to have a constant supply and you couldn't always get a constant supply.

AH: I see. Okay. It's a shame that.

JG: Yeah, no kidding, yes.

AH: And then dessert.

JG: Dessert? The Brazo Gitano for sure.

AH: Okay.

JG: Love the Brazo.

AH: Yes.

JG: The original one of course, we do it different now, the one we have now is different but the original one without the strawberries and everything is what I came to know and love.

AH: Okay and what coffee and that would be it?

JG: Espresso for sure, yes.

AH: Okay.

JG: Café Cesar was one of my favorites. I loved the espresso with the Sambuca and a little whipped cream on top.

AH: Yes, excellent. Well we covered a lot of ground here. Is there anything we didn't cover? Is there anything that you want to add? Sentiments?

JG: I don't think so. I think right now at this point in my life, I'm fifty-one years old. I'll be fifty-two in April. I don't plan on going anywhere else. You know what I mean? I have to work hard. I work six days a week. They take care of me well. It took awhile to establish that, but you know I mean there were a lot of years I worked for Richard where I would have to go beg for a raise and stuff like that (laughs). But now you know you pretty much get taken care of regularly and I make a nice living. My family's comfortable and the fact that you know one of the things always endeared me to them also that even though I was a director of operations here at the restaurant when we were busy as hell and stuff like that, Richard still thought it was okay and important that I went out and coached my son's little league team.

AH: Oh, yes.

JG: You know, that type of stuff. You don't get that stuff anywhere.

AH: No. But that sounds like pure Richard too though.

JG: Oh, yes, the relationship I have with him and Melanie and Casey and all that is something special I think. That's important to me as well as, it's almost like you have to like where you work. The money's not everything. So that's a big portion of it as well. It can be a crazy freaking place sometimes. Sometimes I go home and tell my wife, "That's it! I'm done!" (laughter) You know what I mean? I might say that I don't know maybe twelve times a year (hearty laughter), once a month. But you know, you sleep on it and you get up the next day, you go back in and everything's good again and you have a great night and everything goes well and you're proud of yourself again.

That's probably one of the other things about it too, is that I couldn't have a job I'd be more proud of in saying that I'm a part of—

AH: Oh, yes.

JG: —and whether or not anybody recognizes it or not or whatever because I am not really a guy that runs around trying to say that I did this or did that. But I know what my role was when this went along and everything like that and I am very proud of that. And my wife tells me all the time, “You did this and you did that and you’re the best.” And you know that doesn’t matter. Right now we’re happy you know I am happy what I am doing. We’re happy where we are living and everything is going well and so the rest of it doesn’t matter. It’s up to me to do it and do it well.

AH: Yes.

JG: And that’s basically what it’s all about. You know Richard is completely right when he says, “You’ve done all this and you’ve done all that, but you are only as good as what you did today.”

AH: Yes.

JG: So the fact is when I give orientation to the service staff here and everything and I flat out tell them, “Whether you last a week here or you last ten years here you’re never going to work in another place like this the rest of your life, ever. So for what’s worth. The experience you take from here is going to be something you’ll remember the rest of your life.” I know I will and I know my kids will. And my kids only visit here.

AH: Yes, yes.

JG: You know what I mean. But they’ll remember the times they came to work with Daddy or they came to dinner with Daddy. So it’s a great experience. It’s been a great experience and hopefully it will finish as a great experience as well.

AH: Well as far as not trumping your own achievements and everything it sounds like you have a great team to rely on here too.

JG: Oh, yes I do. And a good testament to that is I just had my hip replaced nine weeks ago now and I was entirely out of work for three weeks. I came in the beginning of the fourth week on a Monday and started to work part time after that and you know a couple of phone calls at home and they would fax me stuff at home and I would keep up on the pay-roll and the labor and stuff like that, but these guys that are here now did it.

AH: Yes.

JG: You know what I mean, call me if you need some advice or something like that, but they’re the main guys. I just basically try to monitor and give them direction and guidance you know and pitch in where I can, but the guys that are here now, I mean I remember when I came back over here when Richard wanted me to come back over here for the third time and help George out as the director of operations, there was myself,

George and two other managers ok and we had a chef in the kitchen. That was it. Now we have myself, George, four assistant managers, we have girls in banquets and catering as supervisors and managers. We have an am dining-room supervisor and a PM dining-room supervisor, chef, sous chef, am and pm kitchen supervisors, office manager. That's what it takes man.

AH: Yes.

JG: That's what it takes.

AH: Yes.

JG: It took awhile for the powers that be to realize you can't run it with three fucking guys. You can't be here all the time. You can't be everywhere and work 24/7. God bless George, he was here from sun up to sun down. He didn't start taking a regular day off, he started taking a regular day off probably about five years ago. But it took me five years to get him to take a day off. You know what I mean?

(laughter)

AH: Yes.

JG: He thought something was going to happen while he was gone. You know he would be out of a job when he came back or something. But now he loves it. He loves taking his day off. He looks forward to it, which is good.

AH: Oh, yes absolutely, yes.

JG: Maybe one day we'll get a chance to take two days off a week, who knows? (laughs) But right now, I mean and I try to get the managers out twice if I can, but a lot of times business dictates being here six days.

AH: Sure.

JG: But that's what it is.

AH: All right.

JG: You're in the hospitality business and I think you understand that.

AH: Yes, definitely. Well I want to thank you for sharing with us. What a great interview.

JG: My pleasure, yes.

AH: I appreciate it Jim. Thanks.

JG: I enjoyed that article of yours in the paper the other day. It was real interesting.

AH: Oh, yes—

*End of interview*