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Justine Miner

FROM CULINARY INSTITUTE TO CHEF, RESTAURANTEUR, AND  
*SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE* “RISING STAR”

An Interview Conducted by  
Paul Redman  
in 2004

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Justine Miner, 2004

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## Cultural Terroir: California Regional Food and Wine

ROHO Food and Wine team members are documenting individual stories of people that have helped spark the development of a “California cuisine” and “California style of wine.” In the latter half of the twentieth century many Northern California food and wine pioneers first developed a regional identity and then exported their ideas and products to national markets and subsequently to the global community. Also included in the series are farmers, marketers, shop owners, writers, critics, workers, and educators that helped implement what many have referred to as a “Food and Wine Revolution.” Significant new historical literature on human foodways has reevaluated traditional anthropological and geographic paradigms by placing more emphasis on interdisciplinary studies that evaluate the individual’s “identity” as it relates to food and wine as interpreted through varying societal belief systems based on race, class, gender, ethnicity, geography, politics, and economics. This series will help document and define the development of a cultural *terroir* or in the words of wine writer Matt Kraemer “somewhereness” for Bay Area communities.

Nineteenth-century American immigrants used food and alcoholic beverages as one means to identify themselves in their new homeland. As a result, by the twentieth-century sayings such as “American as apple pie,” “she’s a dish,” “two chickens in every pot,” “real men don’t eat quiche,” and “apple of my eye” provided the nation with a mixed bag of images meant to separate Americans by race, class, and gender. Added to these ingredients were the intervention of two world wars and a depression that together with the Cold War baked up an American alimentary tradition built on science, the car culture, ease of cooking, and consumer wealth. The 1950s national age of consensus grew new foodways that glorified consumption of hot dogs, hamburgers, French fries, Jell-O salad, Miracle Whip, and Spam in what has been labeled as the fast food movement. Yet, at this very same time radical movements (American Indians, Mexican Americans, women, gays and lesbians, the new consumer middle class, and environmental and lifestyle concern activists) consumed the sixties and seventies with an anti-science philosophy and antiauthoritarian spirit that rejected the larger society’s absolute faith in science and big business/government.

The Bay area of California served as a focal point for much of this radicalization as these rebels struggled to create an identity for themselves and their region. From these radical activists emanated a philosophical foodway that drew heavily from anti-establishment political beliefs, the democratization of class, multiculturalism, and gender and sexual freedom. Hippies on communes and mainstream rebels grew, sold, processed and consumed certain foods from small organic farms as a red badge of courage in their resistance against the system. From the greater struggle activists identified certain gastropolitics and started a food revolution that defined a new cuisine in what many historians would eventually label “California cuisine.”

At first these food and wine pioneers established specialty restaurants and wineries that took regional fresh produce and ethnic cuisine and fused and intellectualized them into a new cultural *terroir*. These frontline warriors of renegade chefs, restaurateurs, farmers, suppliers, winemakers, and writers embraced a 1960s through 1970s counterculture that matched the needs of their local communities by blending common people’s diets and ethnic peasant foods with an abundance of regional fresh fruits and vegetables. They then designed dishes that enhanced the health

advantages of the Mediterranean diet and wine culture and gave birth to a democratized *haute cuisine*. As more and more middle-class and wealthy Americans ate their culinary creations they attempted to replicate their favorite recipes at home and, as with many movement concerns, these new food ideas became mainstream in the eighties and nineties. Old World peasant foods with a California twist became the rage. Amazingly, at the same time the fast food nation grew as many middle-class and poorer Americans found McFood.

The question for food and wine historians is to first document this shift in cultural *terroir* during the sixties and seventies and then analyze the interplay between those of the fast food culture and the acolytes of the California cuisine. Research questions include investigations as to how foodways develop amidst continuing concerns of overpopulation, agribusiness, scientific or “book” farming, global warming, and globalism. Always keeping in mind the use of food and wine as one means to identify oneself and create a regional cultural *terroir*.

## INTERVIEW WITH JUSTINE MINER

[Interview date: March 1, 2004]  
[minidisc 1]

01-00:00:00

Redman: Okay, so I am here with Justine Miner, RNM restaurant. So the first thing I wanted to talk about was, as a chef, many of your influences are a result of the experiences of your youth and childhood, and I was just wondering if you could talk about some of your earliest memories of food and eating.

01-00:00:20

Miner: Well, while I was growing up my mom was an amazing chef, and when she left home when she was young—she is from England and she moved to France—and was an au pair for a family where the woman taught her about French cooking. So that is where she started.

01-00:00:44

Redman: So your mom was born in England?

01-00:00:45

Miner: She was born in England, yes.

01-00:00:48

Redman: And when did she leave?

01-00:00:55

Miner: She left home at sixteen, actually. She had three other siblings, and my grandmother got a divorce and it was hard for her to take care of all of them, so she left and went to France and made money as an au pair and started to get into cooking that way. And then eventually she moved to Italy and learned cooking there, and then she went back to Paris where she met my father, and they got married and had my sister.

01-00:01:21

Redman: What year was that when they got married?

01-00:01:31

Miner: Well, I guess it was about thirty-four years ago, so—do the math [laughs].

01-00:01:31

Redman: Probably in the fifties, she was in France at the time.

01-00:01:35

Miner: Yeah. My sister was born there. My dad was an American who was living in Paris, fixing bugs on computers for the French, and they met, fell in love, had my sister. Then my dad was offered a job back in America again, so they moved to Washington D.C., Bethesda, actually, in Maryland, where they had me.

01-00:02:02

Redman: And you were born what year?

01-00:02:05

Miner: I was born in 1973 and my dad was working—I can't remember the name of the company—but was working for a computer company where he met Larry Ellison, and they both decided that they wanted to open their own business database company, and my dad had been to San Francisco and loved San Francisco, so he convinced my mom to move to San Francisco. So when I was eleven months old, my sister and me and my parents, we moved to San Francisco, and I have been there ever since. But while I was growing up, let's see, I went to French American International School through the fourth grade and then my parents thought I was learning too much French and not enough English and so they wanted to transfer me to a private school that focused mostly on English.

01-00:03:06

Redman: Did your parents speak English to you at home?

01-00:03:11

Miner: Oh, yeah. But, I guess at this French American school, half a day is all French—French math, French history, all that, and half a day is English, and I guess my grades were suffering in the English part but they were better in the French part. It's weird, I know, [laughs] but my dad thought that it wasn't the right school for me.

01-00:03:32

Redman: What was the name of the school?

01-00:03:34

Miner: French American International School.

01-00:03:36

Redman: Okay. That was here in San Francisco?

01-00:03:37

Miner: Yeah, it's still here, actually. My sister has a little boy and he is about to go there next year. So. So I transferred to the Hamlin School, which is a private all-girls school, and I was there fifth grade through eighth grade and then I went to University High School, which is a private, small college prep school in Pacific Heights. And then from there I went to UC Davis.

01-00:04:11

But to get back to the cooking question—it started when I was very young. My mom, that was her joy in life, was cooking. And when we were at school she spent all day cooking these elaborate meals for dinner, dessert included, slaving away at the stove, and when I was really young I was like, "Yuck. I want a hot dog. I want some pizza." And my sister and I used to moan all the time. My mom would make steak and kidney pie because she is English, and we would be



like, “Eww.” And she would make us educate our palate and make us eat it. And then she put crazy things in my lunch like [laughs] brie sandwiches and, I mean—you name it. Just crazy stuff that—everyone else had peanut butter and jelly, and I had this Tupperware lunch box [laughs]. Any time I opened it, it was crazy imported cheese, everyone was like, “Eww, yuck.” It was kind of embarrassing because, you know, I was a little kid. But anyway, I thank her now. She educated my palate. She succeeded. I guess when I was in high school we went to Europe for the first time. My parents took all of us kids. My brother was born five years after me in 1978 in San Francisco. When I turned about fifteen, my parents decided to go on the family vacation to Europe.

01-00:05:30

Redman: So wait, that would be about 1978 or something.

01-00:05:35

Miner: Yeah. And it was actually one of the first times I met a lot of my mom’s family. We hadn’t really met them before. They couldn’t afford to come to America and we couldn’t afford until that point to go Europe. So I met a lot of my English family.

01-00:05:54

Redman: So that they still lived in England?

01-00:05:56

Miner: Yeah, they still do right now.

01-00:05:58

Redman: Oh, they still do now?

01-00:06:00

Miner: Yeah. My parents decided that they wanted to go back to France and see France and Italy and so for three summers in a row while I was in high school we went to Europe and we traveled for six weeks and saw—all over. We went to Sardinia, Austria, all over the place. So that was really great. And the French countryside, we went to Bordeaux and I got to taste all kinds of food. By then I wasn’t picky at all. I was really excited. Bread and cheese. And it was really an eye-opening experience, something that I will never forget.

01-00:06:40

Redman: So you liked, at that age, you really enjoyed the food?

01-00:06:44

Miner: Yeah, I did actually. Suprisingly enough. But yeah, it was great. We would go to the cheese shop and get cheese and then go to the charcuterie shop and get meat and then a loaf of bread, and then just go sit somewhere in the French countryside and have lunch. It was really cool. So I would say that those vacations definitely influenced me.

01-00:07:00

And in high school I had a few part-time jobs to make extra money so I could shop and do whatever I wanted [laughs] and not have to ask my parents. So I worked in coffee shops, and I worked in a patisserie and I just really loved the restaurant business. I loved the energy, I loved socializing with people, all that kind of stuff. It was really interesting to me. But when I graduated from high school and I got to UC Davis I majored in things I was interested in, and like I said before, I was really good in French for some really weird reason. So I decided to major in French and economics. I started with my French major and then I was taking a bunch of other classes outside my major that I had to fulfill and I was really interested in economics. It was definitely more challenging for me than the French was, and I just liked it. So I decided since I had credits to use up, and I didn't just want to take anything, I decided to double major. But while I was in college I really didn't do any cooking [laughs]. Rice-a-Roni. Pizza. I did have part-time jobs, but they were office jobs. I just spent most of my time studying and hanging out with friends and stuff like that.

01-00:08:38

Redman: Actually, I want to move back just a second. Did you spend any time in the kitchen with your mom when you were a teenager? Did you ever have any interest in cooking?

01-00:08:44

Miner: Well, my mom, I have to say, was in control of the kitchen. And that was her thing. That was her domain. If I wanted to help out, I could peel carrots, or dry dishes or something like that. And me, I am very stubborn. I was like, "That's lame." Either I get to cook the entire meal or screw that. I am not going to sit here and be your slave. So, yeah, half an hour before dinner when I was dying of starvation, everyone is, we would always hang out in the kitchen and try to steal a carrot here or a cucumber there. And I would watch my mom cook, but I didn't spend a lot of time, no, because she—that was her thing. And she was proud of doing it and—then I was in high school and I had better things to do. But I was very interested in food. I loved food. But no, I hadn't really cooked. I hadn't cooked a meal at all, actually. She wouldn't let me [laughs]. She was afraid I was going to screw it up and dinner would be ruined for everybody.

01-00:09:49

So, like I said, in college I basically knew very little about cooking. I guess I probably absorbed a lot that I wasn't aware of, but you know, it's college—Rice-a-Roni and stuff. Nothing elaborate. Especially in Davis, it's not like you can go to Brian's like you can here and get fresh fish and stuff like that, which is, you know. Anyway, so I graduated from college in '95 and, like I said, I had really loved the restaurant industry. Somebody had talked to me about the Culinary Academy and how it trains you—I was very interested in restaurants. I knew that I wanted to be involved in a restaurant in some way, shape, or form—either manage one, or be a cook—I didn't know. But I heard that the Culinary Academy trained you in all ways, and if all else failed, at least I would know basic cooking techniques. So I went there and I checked the place out and I was

like, “Wow, this is cool.” I don’t know, I was just totally overwhelmed by it. I thought that it would be a really fun thing to do for a year and a half, whether I became a chef or not, it was just really exciting to me.

01-00:11:08

Redman: What was it that was so exciting—what was it that made you want to work in restaurants?

01-00:11:14

Miner: I loved the energy, I loved food, I loved socializing with people. I just liked the whole feeling of—actually, what I really loved about it was it is a place where you can go at the end of your day and enjoy good food and good company and just forget about your problems for a couple of hours. I always thought that was great, and I also had really fond memories of my family at Christmas time and my family in general, just always every single night at 6:30 having dinner together. I think it is really important and I think it is a great thing for people to have that available for them—to be able to relax and enjoy themselves for a little while and have somebody else cook and somebody else pamper them for a little bit. I always enjoyed that so I was really interested in creating that. And then when I got to the Culinary Academy, I just thought, “Well, this looks cool. It looks fun! This looks like a fun thing to do.”

01-00:12:12

Redman: What did you expect to get out of the culinary school?

01-00:12:19

Miner: I expected to get basic training on cooking techniques and cuts and then also management skills. Stuff like that. I am really glad that I went, I don’t think that it’s necessary to go to culinary school in order to be a great chef at all. I think you can learn as an apprentice at restaurants and work your way up. But, if financially you can afford it, and it looks interesting to you, I think it is a great thing to do. But I think that if financially you are working your butt off and you are dead tired, like people at school were going to school for eight hours and then working on the line for eight hours and doing it day and day out. They were just dead. They couldn’t get out of school what they should have been able to get out of school because they were so tired; they were constantly dropping out and coming back, because they couldn’t pay off their bills and at the end of the day, to me it just didn’t seem worth it.

01-00:13:21

Redman: What would you say that your biggest influence was in school, whether it was a person or if there was a certain kind of cooking technique, or philosophy, or something that happened to you during school that you think was influential?

01-00:13:43

Miner: I have to say there was no one teacher that I particularly was drawn to or that particularly showed me anything that inspired me to become a chef at culinary school, unfortunately. It was when I got out of culinary school that my mentor

appeared. But I enjoyed school and I liked all of my classes equally. I really liked the regional classes—the French regional, the Italian regional—I really liked the wine class, because at the time I knew absolutely nothing about French wines and how to read the labels, and varietals in general.

01-00:14:35

Redman: Were you able to taste wine in the class?

01-00:14:37

Miner: Yeah. It was one of those—it was a wine and food pairing thing. Things have changed now, that I have heard. But it was like two weeks—no maybe one week—of just intense learning all about French and Italian wine and stuff like that. I liked the baking classes but I am not as into desserts as I am savory cooking and I really loved actually the bread making class, that was good.

01-00:15:11

Redman: Did you participate in any clubs or after-school activities, or sometimes people do culinary teams and competitions, or anything like that?

01-00:15:40

Miner: I did not. But I did volunteer for events, like Macys Passport, little events that were on the board that you could sign up for if you wanted to get a little more experience. I also had a job for half the time that I was there because I wanted to have hands-on experience. I had never worked in a professional kitchen before. I worked at Gordon Biersch, actually, in San Francisco. I was their pantry line cook.

01-00:15:55

Redman: And when was that actually that you were in culinary school, if you don't mind me asking.

01-00:15:59

Miner: Let's see, I graduated in '97, so I think I started January of '96. I waited tables six months in between leaving school in June of '95—

01-00:16:12

Redman: Leaving UC Davis?

01-00:16:13

Miner: Yeah. And then starting culinary school in January of '96. So I was there from January of '96 and I graduated in April of '97.

01-00:16:24

Redman: And did going to college, I mean in Culinary school, people come from a lot of different backgrounds, and do you think that having already gone to a university helped you at all, or—did you feel that you were more mature, or—

01-00:16:39

- Miner: Yeah. I have to say. I mean, there were all walks of life there. There were fifty-years-olds and then there were like eighteen-year-olds. I was glad that I went to college, I thought it was helpful. I thought that a lot of the younger people were just a little immature and didn't really know what to expect from the world and were, I don't know—thought that they were better than they actually were and basically had no idea what the real world was going to be like in the kitchen, but were, "Well, if I am on the honor roll, then I am the best cook around." Which is not necessarily true. Or, "I had a mystery basket today and the chef thought my sauce was amazing." So, I don't know, there is attitude involved with that one. I guess you are a little younger and a little less mature. I was glad I went to college for sure. I think it helped. It helped take in the experience, in a way.
- 01-00:17:48  
Redman: Okay, do you just want to go on and then maybe talk about what you did after school.
- 01-00:17:51  
Miner: After school?
- 01-00:17:54  
Redman: After culinary school, like when you graduated.
- 01-00:17:55  
Miner: Oh, sure. The first place I went to work was the Globe restaurant. It is still open. It's down in the Embarcadero. This is where I really found that I truly loved cooking. Joseph Manzare was and is the chef and owner, he was my mentor. He was a great guy. I had no experience pretty much, but I was really excited to learn, and he basically took me under his wing and I was cooking on the hot line in no time, and then I was doing all the ordering, and then I was doing all these specials, and he would go on vacation and I got to be in charge. It was really great. I had a really good time.
- 01-00:18:38  
Redman: What kind of restaurant was that?
- 01-00:18:42  
Miner: It was rustic Italian. It was mostly Italian—lots of grilled items, rotisserie items. Very rustic Italian food, with a little French influence, but mostly Italian.
- 01-00:18:57  
Redman: So you said you started there in the pantry?
- 01-00:19:02  
Miner: I started in the pantry.
- 01-00:19:04  
Redman: Making salads and—
- 01-00:19:06

- Miner: Yeah, making salads, plating desserts, and then eventually I was working the hot line and I just worked—there was a grill station and a sauté station. It was a really small kitchen and I just did—
- 01-00:19:19  
Redman: So hot line, you were cooking all the entrees?
- 01-00:19:22  
Miner: All the entrees, yeah. And I worked there for little over a year and then I decided that it was time to move on because I wanted to learn more. I felt like I had learned everything that I could learn there, and I wanted to experience something else, so I got a job at Café Kati, which is an Asian fusion restaurant.
- 01-00:19:45  
Redman: Where is that?
- 01-00:19:47  
Miner: That is on Fillmore and Sutter. Really small. About sixty seats. And because it was Asian fusion, it was a type of cuisine that I hadn't—there was regional classes in culinary school, but I didn't know how to cook anything Asian.
- 01-00:20:07  
Redman: How would you define Asian fusion? Is that a fusion of different Asian cuisines or is that—
- 01-00:20:15  
Miner: Well, Kirk Webber does a fusion of Chinese, Thai, and Japanese cuisine mixed with, I guess you would call it American cuisine.
- 01-00:20:25  
Redman: And was he, just out of curiosity, had he worked in Asia, or was he Asian, or did he—
- 01-00:20:32  
Miner: He isn't Asian. His wife was Chinese. He just has an affinity towards the Asian culture. But no, as far as I know, he never worked outside of the United States. He just learned within the United States. And I think he learned a lot from his wife, too. But I am not quite sure, so don't quote me on that. I don't know. I worked there for a little over a year and I learned a lot about Asian cuisine, but it wasn't really what I was drawn to. I mean, I love to eat it, like on my days off I would go for sushi all the time, but I am not—I don't really have a knack for it. And there are such strong bold flavors, it's—you have to really know what you are doing. You can't just throw things together and expect it to work out. It will taste really bad [laughs]. You know—fish sauce, and all this stuff. You really have to know and you really have to love it, and I like it, but I wasn't really drawn to it like I am with French and Italian cooking. From [Café Kati] I got a job at Postrio.
- 01-00:21:51

Redman: Now, that is Wolfgang Puck's restaurant?

01-00:21:56

Miner: Yeah. And I chose [Postrio] because first of all, Joseph Manzare had worked there, he had worked for Wolfgang for many, many years.

01-00:22:07

Redman: So wait, that is Joseph Manzare, the chef from Café Kati?

01-00:22:08

Miner: From Globe. And I had heard all these great things about the people that have worked there and about how much they had learned and all of this stuff, and because it was more upscale and stuff, I thought that I could refine my skills, because up until that point I had learned a lot about cooking and the basic techniques, but as far as elaborate sauces and stuff like that, I wasn't at all familiar with that. So I really wanted to learn that. So I worked at Postrio for a little over a year until I was offered a sous chef job at a restaurant that was about to open called Dine.

01-00:22:50

Redman: Well, is there anything else you want to say about Postrio? Maybe say what you did there, or who the chef was that you worked under.

01-00:22:57

Miner: Well, Steven and Mitchell Rosenthal are the brothers that are chefs there. But, I worked daytime. So I basically, my sous chef was my boss because they [the chefs] came in the afternoon, I rarely saw them. And I started actually on the pizza station, which is upstairs and learned how to make pizzas and then I went to hot prep which I have to say was the station from hell. It was making—

01-00:23:27

Redman: What was hot prep?

01-00:23:28

Miner: Oh my god, it was so bad I almost quit. I was on that station for like for months. You make all the stocks for the restaurant. I mean, you are basically everybody's little—

01-00:23:38

Redman: Stocks are the broths that they make from bones and vegetables?

01-00:23:41

Miner: Yeah. All the stocks, skimming them all. You are basically everybody's slave. You do a lot of prep for the nighttime crew—just little things. Had to make family meal every day for a hundred people.

01-00:23:56

Redman: Which is the staff meal.

01-00:23:57

Miner: The staff meal. With scraps, leftovers, whatever they wanted to give me. Actually, that was the best part of the job, because I got to be creative and I got to actually cook. And I ended up spending more time trying to make an awesome family meal. Then I was busting my ass to finish everything else because I had to get it done or I would be in big trouble. But I was like [pounds fist on table], “Well, god damn it, if I have to be on this station, I am at least going to make a really good family meal.” So yeah, it was tough, though.

01-00:24:29

Redman: Do you remember anything you made as a family meal there, just curious. Maybe some dish that the staff really liked or—

01-00:24:35

Miner: Oh, god. Well, one time I—this is bad, this is really bad. There used to be a section of the walk-in, a shelf that was just for me—all the vegetables for—whatever it was, stuff. And they used to throw things out like in one service. They wouldn’t keep certain things overnight, even blanched vegetables. They threw everything out.

01-00:25:01

Redman: Which is good for the customers.

01-00:25:02

Miner: Yeah. There was a level of quality at Postrio that like—but I have to say at a lot of other restaurants, there are things that you can save that they weren’t saving that would be perfectly fine. But anyway, there was this shelf that had a bunch of vegetables or whatever, and one day I saw porcinis! And they were in a marinade or something like that, and I was like, “Oh my god, this is so cool!”

01-00:25:27

Redman: Porcinis are the—

01-00:25:29

Miner: Fresh porcini mushrooms that had been grilled and confied in oil. And it’s Postrio, and they throw everything out, so I am like, “Cool. I got some fresh porcinis to use. I am so excited. I am going to make the kick-ass risotto.” So I am making the risotto and I put it out, and I used to work Sunday brunch—and so I put it out, and all of a sudden the sous chef at the time looks at me and he just [makes gasping noise], “Are those fresh porcinis?” I was like, “Well, yeah, they were on my shelf.” He said, “Oh my god, I can’t believe you did that.” It was awful. It was so bad. But, everyone loved it. [laughs]

01-00:26:11

Redman: So there went the food cost out the window.

01-00:26:14

Miner: [laughing] Yeah! It wasn’t my fault, they put it on the shelf!



01-00:26:17

Redman: Is there anything you want to say about Sunday brunch?

01-00:26:19

Miner: Oh.

01-00:26:22

Redman: How did you find that, doing breakfast?

01-00:26:24

Miner: That was not my cup of tea, I have to say. It wasn't terrible, but it was, for example one—it was my birthday and it was Mother's Day. And it was one of the busiest brunches ever, and I was on that hot prep station. And I got there at 5:00 in the morning because I had to make waffle batter for like 500 people. They had fritter batter and all this other stuff. So yeah, it was hard. It was a lot of work. Postrio was a lot of work. I was constantly running around. To the very last minute you were prepping—every single day, because everything was made fresh, every single day.

01-00:27:08

Redman: Was that a nice kitchen?

01-00:27:10

Miner: Yeah, it was a really nice kitchen. And my sous chef during the day, David Lutz, was a great, great guy. I learned so much from him. Once I got out of the hot prep station I quickly moved up. I went to pantry, and then a month later I went to pasta, and then a month after that my sous chef said, "Whatever station you want—grill, sauté, whatever." And I said, "I want sauté. I want to learn how to make sauces."

01-00:27:40

Redman: So that is a more glorious station, too than hot prep, where you are not actually doing something—

01-00:27:43

Miner: Oh yeah! Hot prep you are lugging stocks around and you are making filling for pastas and yeah—you don't really have much chance to be creative or to really, really cook on the hot line at all unless you are making family meal. So it was the hazing period, like "If you can make it through hot prep, then you are worthy of moving on." So when I worked sauté and I was working sauté for a while, and then I was offered a job as a sous chef at a new restaurant, [while I was working daytime sauté at Postrio. Actually, I had a hard time deciding whether or not to stay or leave, because at the same time they offered me to work on the hot line at night at Postrio instead of during the day. I thought, "Well, I can learn a lot more."

01-00:28:34

Redman: I just want to ask you one more quick question about Postrio. Wolfgang Puck is sort of, well he is a really famous chef, obviously, and Postrio I think is one of

the nicer restaurants in San Francisco. It's defined by its style that was unique when it opened and I think still is. I mean, do you draw any experiences from that, having worked in sort of one of, or for the defining chefs of California Cuisine if you can call it that in the eighties or nineties?

01-00:29:08

Miner: You mean—?

01-00:29:10

Redman: Or just, maybe you know, influences on your food today, maybe today in the restaurant—

01-00:29:13

Miner: Oh, for sure! Definitely. In fact, I just said that to my sous chef the other day. I was like, "It's amazing when I come up with dishes, how many skills I learned at Postrio that broadened my horizons." I can do whatever I want to do because I know all these basic skills that I learned there and only there. I am sure there are a lot of little things that I learned from the other restaurants I worked at, but they aren't as obvious. So yeah, for sure—a huge influence on me.

01-00:29:46

Redman: So you did learn quite a bit from the hot prep station?

01-00:29:51

Miner: Yeah! I did. I did. I learned how to cook for a lot of people every day and make it exciting and different. And then I learned a lot of basic skills. I have to say I learned more on pantry at Postrio, making huge amounts of vinaigrettes—all different types of vinaigrettes and you know, little things like that. Pasta station was awesome too—making all the sauces, bolognese, and making gnocchi, I had never made gnocchi before. Sauté was great because I had to make probably eight to ten sauces a day, and I got to do a special every day [with my co-workers] and so we got to do that. So I learned a lot there.

01-00:30:36

Redman: How about your skills as a cook as far as speed and stuff? I know that is a big restaurant, I don't know, I assume it is pretty busy, but did that improve you a lot as a chef, working at Postrio?

01-00:30:50

Miner: I wouldn't say speed-wise, working on the line was—no. Just because I was working daytime, and it was rarely really, really busy. At Globe though, my very first job, it was such a hot spot—it just opened—and it had got a three-star review, and it was so busy, and he would stay open until one every night. So I worked from two in the afternoon until about two or three in the morning every single day. And it was really busy. We did like three or four turns every night.

01-00:31:24

Redman: You mean, each table was turned over two or three or four times?

- 01-00:31:26  
Miner: Yes, because, I mean, it was open from 5:30 until 1:00 every single night, and everyone was really excited to go there. It was busy all the time.
- 01-00:31:35  
Redman: How many seats were there, do you remember?
- 01-00:31:37  
Miner: Small—like forty-nine seats, something smaller than [RNM]. Smaller than my restaurant. But it was really busy, and I remember Joseph saying to me, “If you can handle this, you can handle anything.” So that really built up my speed from the get-go. But Postrio was more about refining my skills. So, that is what I learned there.
- 01-00:32:01  
Redman: Okay. And then you said you went on to Dine restaurant.
- 01-00:32:04  
Miner: Yeah. And I worked with Julia McLasky, who I hadn’t known before, but a friend of a friend that I knew from actually Café Kati—he was the GM of Café Kati, was doing this restaurant with her. He had moved on.
- 01-00:32:20  
Redman: And what was his name?
- 01-00:32:21  
Miner: Robert Hill. And she had just gotten a three-star review at Universal Café and was a Rising Star Chef. [Julia] and Robert came together to open a restaurant and she needed a sous chef. He remembered me from Café Kati and so asked me if I wanted to meet with her and potentially be sous chef. So we met and we got along really well. We both had the same values about food and freshness and simplicity and work ethic and everything like that—we got along really well.
- 01-00:33:02  
Redman: And when was that that it opened?
- 01-00:33:05  
Miner: That opened January of 2000. Actually, for all the investors, our first time working together was New Year’s Eve of 1999, and it was interesting. It was kind of chaotic, because we had never worked in that kitchen before, we had never worked with each other [before]. We had never worked with the line cooks we had hired. It was just kind of chaotic.
- 01-00:33:33  
Redman: How did it go, did you get along?
- 01-00:33:35  
Miner: Yeah, we got along really well. I worked there for a good year and a half and it was busy. I mean, 2000 was—

01-00:33:40

Redman: So this was right down on Mission Street, and so that was when San Francisco was still crazy with dot-com.

01-00:33:48

Miner: [It] was crazy! It was so busy. Because every had—dot-com, and it was downtown and people would just come after work and start drinking. I mean, we were so busy every single night, I don't think I have ever worked that hard in my life. I would get there at 10:00 in the morning and I would leave at 1:00 or something like that, and for the first six months, six days a week. Because we were open six days and we didn't have anybody else. So I just remember on my days off, I would just be dead. On Sunday I wouldn't even wake up until one, and then I would just do laundry and go back into the same mode. It was a lot of work. But it was fun and it was also a lot bigger restaurant, I was cooking, and I was prepping for the seating capacity of about 150 people.

01-00:34:38

Redman: And how many dinners did you serve at night there?

01-00:34:42

Miner: Oh, god. We probably did about three turns a night. It was a lot of work. But, it was fun, and Julia basically let me do half the menu. So half the menu was just all my dishes.

01-00:35:03

Redman: And what kind of food was at Dine?

01-00:35:06

Miner: [Julia's] food was more of an American bent—very American actually. Because I was doing half the menu, it had a lot of French and Italian influence in it because that is what I like to cook. But her repertoire—whatever you want to call it—was short ribs and pot roast. You know—American food.

01-00:35:33

Redman: So sort of regional American food?

01-00:35:35

Miner: Yeah. And then I was like, “Oh, I want to do gnocchi, and I want to do sautéed fish with lentils,” and stuff like that. So she was totally cool—she let me do whatever I wanted. It was great.

01-00:35:50

Redman: And then after Dine you opened RNM, your restaurant here?

01-00:35:54

Miner: Yeah. After a year and a half, I was just tired. I was ready to do my own thing.

01-00:35:59

Redman: So you worked at Globe restaurant, then Café Kati, then you went to Postrio and then you went to Dine before opening RNM.

01-00:36:06

Miner: Yes.

01-00:36:13

Redman: If you had to cite one of those as your greatest influence, which one would you cite and why?

01-00:36:18

Miner: Oh god, that's hard to do. Well, I would say the two restaurants that had the most influence was Globe, because that really gave me my start. If it wasn't for Joseph I don't even know if I would be here today, for sure. But then Postrio, because I really honestly learned so much there—more than all the restaurants combined. So I guess I would have to say Postrio, I guess.

01-00:36:45

Redman: Okay. And then I just wanted to ask you, are there any chefs that you look up to, either in the Bay Area or even national, internationally?

01-00:36:54

Miner: Well, yeah.

01-00:36:58

Redman: Just mention a couple.

01-00:36:59

Miner: For the longest time. Well, actually when I was in culinary school, I had just gotten out of college, the French Laundry had opened, and my family has a house up in Napa and my parents had been [to the French Laundry.] And they were like, "Oh my god, it's amazing, you should really try it out." So my boyfriend and I went, and I was just absolutely blown away. I have to say that going there and going to La Folie, Roland Passot, all that stuff when I was around twenty-three totally inspired me. I am like, "I really have to learn how to make this sauce. This is awesome. I really have to learn this." And I don't care what it takes. I am going to learn. So yeah, I would have to say that, for sure Thomas Keller, Roland Passot. I had the chance to go to New York a couple of times. I went to Daniel, but yeah, all the great chefs that know how to make great sauces and amazing food, but I have to say that the one guy that I was totally blown away by was Thomas Keller. He is a culinary genius. This is incredible. I have never seen or tasted anything like this before in my life, so I have to say that that inspired me to learn more.

01-00:38:21

Redman: Okay. So the next subject was gender. And I just wanted to find out if there is anything that you think is different about being a woman chef? I mean, I think up until recently the industry for a long time has been dominated by men, and

especially back in Europe and France and stuff. And things have changed, but is there anything that you feel was different about you going through, navigating through the industry as a woman? Did you ever have any bad experiences? Or ever, you know, experience any sexism or anything like that?

01-00:38:57

Miner: I have to say, it was hard. Being a woman in the industry—you don't get the benefit of the doubt, I have to say. You already walk there with a first impression that's like, "She is going to have to prove herself," more so than like—for example, at Postrio, the entire line was white guys, just white guys from New Jersey. And then there was like me. But I definitely felt like I had to double prove myself. Especially on that hot prep station—they kept me on there for four months. They didn't have to do that. Other guys were on there for like two months and then easily were moved. But because they could and they knew that I would probably wouldn't complain or quit, they kept me there as long as they possibly could. And it was frustrating, because I really worked hard and I really wanted to show them that I could cook and that I wanted to cook, and I just had to suck it up and work through it. So I have to say that it is kind of hard and even guys that I worked with said, "Yeah, when we first saw you, we were like—she is going to be here for a week." And I'm like, "Oh, that's nice." But basically that is the impression, that women belong doing pastry, because they can't handle the heat of the kitchen, its heavy pots and pans, it is physically draining, which is true—it's a hard thing. But you have to really want it. You have to really want to learn, You have to really love it, otherwise, yeah, you are going to bail out. So I don't know, I think it is slowly getting better, I don't know, but yeah, I definitely think there is a first impression there for sure that you have to overcome [as a woman] before you move on.

01-00:40:56

Redman: Do you think that your being a woman has had any role in your becoming a chef?

01-00:41:04

Miner: No, I wouldn't say that.

01-00:41:06

Redman: Do you in anyway identify yourself as being a woman chef other than obviously than [laughing] you are a woman?

01-00:41:14

Miner: [laughs] Um, no, I can't say that I decided to become a chef because I am a woman. No, no. I actually never really thought about that. It was just something that I wanted to do and I did it. I didn't really think about the gender part until these first impressions came [about]. My first interview at Globe, I walk in there and the wait staff is like, "So you are applying for a wait position, right?" And I was like, "Noo... I want to try out in the kitchen. And I met Joseph, and he was like, "Are you sure that you want to do this?" And I was like, "Yes!" So I had to

work [hard] for him for two days to show him that I knew how to cook. And then he hired me. So, it's crazy.

01-00:42:09

Redman: Oh, well, I guess one other thing, I can ask you about that. When you were a sous chef at Dine—sous chef is basically the assistant manager, or often times becomes the person who runs the kitchen. So as a woman manager, I don't know what the breakdown was between men and women that worked in the kitchen, but did you ever have any experiences where—sort of similar experiences with people thinking that you weren't capable or, as their manager in the kitchen?

01-00:42:44

Miner: Well, oh—no.

01-00:42:46

Redman: As a woman?

01-00:42:48

Miner: Yeah. No, I wouldn't say that, because it was an interesting situation. It wasn't like the normal sous chef thing. Julia had a lot—Julia and I really worked together, and she had a lot of control. She was there all the time and she was, you know—I was doing the ordering, but the two of us together were overseeing everybody else. So no, I don't, not at all. They had the utmost respect, for her and me, because we worked so hard and we treated them with respect and it was just kind of like a team effort. So no, there was no, "You are a woman, I am not going to do what you say." In fact, it was like the opposite. It was like—I think because there was a lot of respect there for Julia and for the food and for her work ethic, everyone seemed to work well together.

01-00:43:43

Redman: Cool. Okay, do you want to stop there and I will change the tape?

01-00:43:46

Miner: Sure.

[minidisc 2]

02-00:00:00

Redman: Okay, so we are beginning tape two, Justine Miner. All right, so the next section is about your food and influences here in RNM restaurant or just you as a person, and I wanted to ask you, because chefs identify themselves as a person through the cooking techniques they use and dishes they create probably more than anything, who and what is Justine Miner?

02-00:00:31

Miner: [laughs] God, I don't know.

02-00:00:33

Redman: I sound like a talk show host.

02-00:00:34

Miner: I don't know. I actually don't really define myself through my food. I guess other people must, but I don't. I guess everyone has their own flair or their own signature thing that they do. I guess I would say my food is very heavily French, classic French-based with lots of local fresh ingredients, and definitely very inspired by all the produce and [local ingredients] that I can get. That's what inspires me to change the menu—is seasonality. But I don't know, who is Justine Miner? [laughs] I don't know. A thirty- year-old chef and restaurant owner. I don't know! That wanted to create a restaurant that she would like to go to with her friends and her family.

02-00:01:38

Redman: Well, let's talk about the French food. I mean, can you give examples of dishes you have that are French or just based upon the French technique?

02-00:01:52

Miner: Okay. For example, on the menu right now I have sautéed Rhode Island black bass on beluga lentils with a little mirepoix of root vegetables and beurre rouge and then some chicory mix and some carrot chips. So I guess that is pretty classic French, with the beurre rouge and the lentils. The carrot chips are a little different. Chicory mix maybe, other type of fish.

02-00:02:30

Redman: So the beurre rouge is the sauce?

02-00:02:32

Miner: Yeah.

02-00:02:36

Redman: Would you say your food is American as well?

02-00:02:43

Miner: Yeah. For sure. I mean, I have pizza on my menu, which I would say is Italian, but—[laughs] Well, what else do I have? Well, I have mini, well quote “White Castle burgers”—they are not really White Castle burgers and I am sure that I am not supposed to say that. I guess White Castle would get pissed off [laughs] But yeah, my dad is from Chicago, and when I was a kid he would always talk about how him and his buddies would get drunk and then go to White Castle and eat like twenty-four burgers, and I'm like, “What? Twenty-four?” But he would always talk about these tiny little hamburgers. Since I named the restaurant in memory of my dad—he loved food, he loved wine and all that stuff, I was like, “I should really make my own version of mini hamburgers in memory of him.” So that is very American with French fries. Right now I have braised short ribs—Cabernet braised short ribs with truffled mashed potatoes and baby vegetables. I guess you can say that is pretty American, but then I have also done coq au vin with a similar thing. What else? [Seared dayboat scallops with salsify puree and a mache and radish with lemon vinaigrette.]



02-00:04:01

Redman: Well, I know you are, are you of Assyrian descent, or you are part Assyrian?

02-00:04:03

Miner: Yeah, I'm half Assyrian. My father was Assyrian. And I am half English.

02-00:04:09

Redman: Do you have any influences from that on your menu or in the food that you cook?

02-00:04:16

Miner: You know what, I have in the past, when I was at Dine [and at Globe]. I did this dish with dolma and lamb, and rice, [and lentils] which is very—and actually when I was at Globe, I did too. For some reason I haven't done anything very Assyrian on the menu here, for some reason—I don't know why, but I will probably do something with dolma at some point. And I definitely love rack of lamb so I do that a lot as well. So—

02-00:04:49

Redman: Okay. Do you believe there is a California cuisine?

02-00:04:51

Miner: Umm—

02-00:04:59

Redman: This is a term that is thrown around quite a bit.

02-00:05:01

Miner: Yeah I know, I don't know, no—I don't really think that there is. I think that there is this thought out there that a lighter style of cooking, with really fresh fruit and vegetable, I mean, that pretty much started down in L.A. I would say—like spa-type food I would say is people's idea of California cuisine. But, in my opinion, there is just a lighter, fresher way of cooking, and the way it is prepared is obviously influenced by American cooking or French or Italian or something like that, so I don't think that there is a California cuisine per se. I think there is a notion that there is. But there is not.

02-00:05:56

Redman: Yeah, and then I mean, there is definitely something, like when you think about starting in the 1960s in Berkeley, there was all these protests, and then there was in the seventies—it kind of turned into a health food craze or craze with natural food or something like that, but I think most of those things had started in the Bay Area though—or several of them had. So there was something going on from the sixties through the 1980s and maybe even today, I don't know. So you don't really identify with those movements in food? I mean, it's a bunch of different things, but it seems like kind of a revolutionary thing, as opposed to middle America, which maybe was eating frozen food or whatever.

02-00:06:40

Miner: Right. Yeah, I definitely think that California, San Francisco in general, goes through lots of food trends. I mean, after September 11, it was all about comfort food. Yeah, there have been trends on simple, simple cooking like at Chez Panisse where it's just the beauty of the vegetable and a little salt, cooked perfectly, and that's that.

02-00:07:10

Redman: Is that something that you try to do at all with your food?

02-00:07:13

Miner: I think my food is—[I] definitely like to use the freshest, most seasonal ingredients, but I also like to add a little more to it than just the basic vegetable on the plate. I think it is great. But that is not really my style. I like to have a little more going on. But I definitely do care a lot about fresh ingredients, cooking them perfectly, not too much going on or too many sauces or vinaigrettes or whatever, but I like a little more than that.

02-00:07:44

Redman: Is trying to use local produce or fish or just local products in general something that is important to you?

02-00:07:53

Miner: Yeah. For sure, and supporting local farmers, because they are doing some really amazing things these days and it is just so exciting that the produce they have—the mini arugula and the different types of citrus, for example. There is so much going on and it is really fun to cook and work with. It makes your dishes more exciting and tastes great and it is just a lot of fun. And I like to use lots of fresh fish—not farm raised. I am not really into that.

02-00:08:32

Redman: Why is that? Why do you want to use fish that is not farm raised?

02-00:08:34

Miner: Well, I have read a lot about how farm-raised fish hurts the environment, and not only that; they are all stuck in one area together, millions and millions and millions of them, and it's just not—they are swimming in their own feces, and it's just not clean and it is just not right. I would rather [cook and serve fish] from the environment that is natural instead of force raised and farmed.

02-00:09:05

Redman: You also said that local products, like local products and stuff because you want to support them, so I mean, is it an economic or even a political statement as well that you want to—

02-00:09:18

Miner: Yeah, I mean, I guess I could say that, yeah, I think it is really important that we support the local farmers and keep them doing what they are doing. I think that is what makes San Francisco such a great place to visit. I think that is what it

makes restaurants help—yeah, for sure. I think it is our duty [laughs]! They help us, we help them, we work together, it is a great thing.

02-00:09:47

Redman: And in that same vein, is specifically organic produce something that is important to you?

02-00:09:53

Miner: I definitely care about it being organic, but these days it is just so much more expensive. It is just like impossible to have everything organic on your menu—you will go out of business in like a second. I mean, for example, regular artichokes are twenty dollars and organic artichokes are like forty. It's absolutely insane. There are some things that aren't that huge, which if it is there and if it is not a huge change in price, I definitely will get the organic, but they are other things—I just can't stay in business with it, unfortunately. So, maybe in the future, I don't know.

02-00:10:34

Redman: Are there any farms or producers that you prefer that you would like to mention by name if there are somebody local?

02-00:10:42

Miner: Well, I use Green Leaf.

02-00:10:44

Redman: What is that?

02-00:10:45

Miner: Green Leaf produce—it's my purveyor. They have all these, you know, Willy Farms and Knoll Farms—they have great stuff. Happy Boy Farms—there are millions of them, and depending on the season, they are there. For example, last year, there is this guy, Jim Cochran, who does these farm dinners, which I think is really cool—where the farmers and the chefs come together and sit outside—like 100 people, and have a five-course dinner that shows off their food, and then the chef gets to show off their skills, and it is just really fun for the community that it is in. And I did it last year at Swanton Berry Farm, down in Santa Cruz, the strawberries are great. For example, Swanton Berry Farm will be around for the spring and then it will be gone. Then other farms that have delicious peaches and nectarines, so they all come around every year.

02-00:12:00

Redman: So is that a strawberry farm?

02-00:12:01

Miner: Yeah, it is a strawberry farm.

02-00:12:02

Redman: And how did you contact them, or did they contact you?

02-00:12:07

Miner: He contacted me. He actually, one of my wine purveyors, Alexia Moore, the wine rep guy brought [Jim Denevan] in here for dinner and he really liked the food, so he asked me to do it. And it was really a lot of fun. I had a really good time. It is just fun to do things different from the everyday sometimes, with your staff, it's like a bonding experience. We spent the night in Santa Cruz and had fun. So it was really a lot of fun.

02-00:12:40

Redman: So and you said, speaking about farm-raised fish, do you feel that there is—are you concerned at all with meat production in America? Do you feel the same way about using meat products? Obviously, everything is farm-raised meat, but I mean—

02-00:13:01

Miner: Yeah, I mean, the less hormones the better. I have to say, I was a little freaked out about the mad cow thing. I think everyone is laughing at me in the kitchen, but “Oh, it's not a big deal.” But I don't know, for me I am like, “I don't want to turn into a mad woman and then die.” That doesn't sound like fun. So yeah, I definitely want to—it has to be a reputable place that I am getting my meat from, and I have to know where it is coming from and know that it is safe for sure. And chicken and oysters, and all that stuff. I used Golden Gate Meats and they are great. They have great meat, great poultry, great game meats.

02-00:13:46

Redman: Okay. So, then I wanted to move on to talking about—we are like doing the video, where you can later come back and talk about [inaudible] and stuff like that. I just wanted to talk about sort of the staff of RNM restaurant, and I don't know, the management and business side for you. And I was going to start by asking you, what is it like to work for Justine Miner?

02-00:14:15

Miner: Oh my god, it's hard to ask me that question! You should be interviewing my staff.

02-00:14:28

Redman: [laughs] Well, let me ask you this, why would somebody come to work for you?

02-00:14:32

Miner: Why would somebody come to work for me? Because they like my style of food and they want to learn something, hopefully, from that. I don't know. Ask me something else [laughs].

02-00:14:51

Redman: I mean, would you say that you are one of these focused, driven chefs, almost mythical, like you hear about French chefs and stuff where they are just—everything has to be done exactly the way that you want it because you have such a clear idea of what it is? Or do you work with people more?

- 02-00:15:07  
Miner: I am definitely not that kind of focused chef, no. I am much more relaxed about things. I guess I am very forgiving. I have been there. I have been yelled at—it's just not productive. I mean, it makes it worse. You need to—I mean, yeah— if it happens time and time again, I am going to get mad. But if you make a mistake and I show you how to do it the right way, then I don't see any point in yelling at anybody. So I never do that.
- 02-00:15:43  
Redman: How do you hire your cooks?
- 02-00:15:45  
Miner: Well, I have been really, really, lucky. Because basically the staff I have now, I had since I opened. So I can't really tell. I have been [knocks on wood], I have been extremely lucky.
- 02-00:15:59  
Redman: So were they people you knew before you opened the restaurant?
- 02-00:16:03  
Miner: No—
- 02-00:16:05  
Redman: You hired them all—
- 02-00:16:07  
Miner: [My pastry chef] I knew before, but I hired all the rest, just hired them.
- 02-00:16:12  
Redman: And had they gone to culinary school?
- 02-00:16:17  
Miner: My sous chef has gone to the CCA, and this is his second job out of school. But he is like one of the people that—you know, you have it or you don't. And he is great. He is really great. He helps me out a lot. My other main guy, my other two main guys have never been to culinary school.
- 02-00:16:41  
Redman: Had they had a lot of experience?
- 02-00:16:46  
Miner: Yeah. They have had a decent, yeah, yeah, for sure. But that is not really a huge main focus for me. I would rather have somebody with little or no experience, really excited to learn and there every day with a good attitude, than somebody who has been working on the line so long that they are really burnt out and they are tired and they are mean and they have a bad attitude. But luckily, I haven't had to face that. But that is what I would—if one of them decides to leave, I would much rather find somebody fresh out of culinary school that really wants

to learn—of course, if it is a main hot line position, I would probably move somebody else up, and move the person I hired to the pantry.

02-00:17:41

Redman: And can you just tell me a little bit like what would a typical work week be like for one of your employees who say, works in the kitchen. Do they work long hours or is it?

02-00:17:49

Miner: Well, the line guys—my sous chef comes in at one. I come in at eleven usually, and then my line guys, one guy, the guy that does all the pastries, comes in at two so he can get them done. And then all the other guys come in at three. And they are done by eleven- thirty or so on the earlier nights—

02-00:18:17

Redman: So it's not like—it's not like excessive hours or anything?

02-00:18:22

Miner: No, no, it's not brutal.

02-00:18:23

Redman: So do those guys come in and do they have to set up their whole station, or do they have guys who—

02-00:18:29

Miner: Well, what I do is, I'm here at eleven and I do mostly all of the prep—me and my sous chef. He comes in at one. And then they come in and do little things like frying the carrot chips, or chopping up some chives, you know—little things like that. And they set up their station. And then they cook on the line and they go home.

02-00:18:48

Redman: And do those guys receive any benefits?

02-00:18:52

Miner: No. Health benefits or anything?

02-00:18:55

Redman: Yeah, or vacation?

02-00:18:56

Miner: No. They don't get paid—when they are here they get paid, and when they are not here they don't.

02-00:19:08

Redman: And do you serve the staff a family meal every day?

02-00:19:09

Miner: I do. Every night after service. Before service I expect them to eat something, because we are already trying to get all the food ready. The last thing we need to

do is start making family meal. Plus, at the end of the night there are certain things that we didn't sell, like purees and stuff like that, that we could feed them, and it all works out. So every night—

02-00:19:31

Redman: So do they just eat on the line when they are done with service? Or do you guys—

02-00:19:37

Miner: Usually it is when most all the customers have gone. In our back kitchen pantry, some people sit here at the counter and some people just hang out back there and just stand up and eat. They can sit down if they want. If they don't, they don't.

02-00:19:54

Redman: So there is a back kitchen back there?

02-00:19:56

Miner: Yeah, it's like the pantry station.

02-00:19:58

Redman: Oh. Okay, so there is a—you use a hierarchy in the kitchen.

02-00:20:04

Miner: Yes.

02-00:20:06

Redman: As I guess almost all kitchens, but you are the chef, but you are here all the time in the kitchen, and then you have a sous chef, and then after that how does it work?

02-00:20:15

Miner: And then everyone is basically the same. I mean, Nick does all the pastries, so I guess you can call him the pastry chef, and then Edwin is my awesome line cook—he is great. Jorge does desserts and salads, and that is basically all I have.

02-00:20:36

Redman: So what would it take for one of these guys to advance, I mean, I know that this is a small place, but how would one of them advance in his career working here?

02-00:20:49

Miner: God—I don't know. Hopefully, learning skills and seeing different ways of cooking food that they haven't before—

02-00:20:59

Redman: So in a small place, they can't really go anywhere—they can't really advance until somebody else leaves.

02-00:21:07

Miner: Yes. That is what happens in small kitchens. For me, I reached a point where I knew that I learned all I could learn from that place [small kitchen], and I moved

on. And I totally support that, I think that is awesome. So when they are ready to go, that is great. I am not going to hold any grudges. I think it is a really good thing to move on and learn. But it all depends on what your ultimate goal is. If you are just cooking for a paycheck—and that is cool, and that is different. But if you really do want to learn and you eventually do want to be the chef of a restaurant or have your own restaurant, then I think it is important to move on, to experience as much as you can until you feel ready.

02-00:21:53

Redman: So, I mean, could someone go on if they wanted to and follow in your footsteps, this would be like one of the kitchens that they work at and learn as much as they could for a year, a year and a half, and then move on?

02-00:22:08

Miner: Yeah. I guess. I don't know.

02-00:22:12

Redman: It is just sort of theoretical.

02-00:22:14

Miner: [laughs]

02-00:22:15

Redman: Okay, well, could you talk about how the front of the house is run, like how the dinning room is run? Have you molded that completely to a specific goal?

02-00:22:25

Miner: Well, I have a general manager. Her name is Francesca. I have known her since we were nine years old. She actually went to culinary school as well, but she found that cooking was not her deal. She cooked in a kitchen for a little while, but she was really more into the front of the house and so—she basically, her and I together hired the wait staff and the bartenders. But that is her deal—their schedule, how everything is run in the front of the house, is basically Francesca's doing. She has done a great job.

02-00:23:13

Redman: Do you guys have a certain style of table service? Formal or casual?

02-00:23:20

Miner: I would say it's pretty casual. I mean, there aren't white tableclothes—no, yeah—that's casual. And it's small plates, so everything is meant to be shared, so that you can experience a lot of different flavors, and you know—

02-00:23:35

Redman: So is it like one waiter per table? I mean, they probably have multiple tables, but—

02-00:23:39



- Miner: Yeah, they have sections. Like, somebody's upstairs and then—on busy nights, for example, on Saturday night we were really busy. So, there was one person upstairs and then two people [downstairs.]
- 02-00:23:51  
Redman: Oh, okay. But I mean, it's not like there is a front waiter and a back waiter —
- 02-00:23:57  
Miner: No, no. Everyone helps everybody. It is like a family here.
- 02-00:24:04  
Redman: Okay. Oh, that is cool.
- 02-00:24:06  
Miner: Yeah, actually.
- 02-00:24:08  
Redman: And then are those—what is the experience level of the service staff? Have any of them worked in—
- 02-00:24:10  
Miner: Oh, yeah. They have been doing this their whole lives, pretty much, all of them. Yeah. That is what they do. And they may have things on the side, like one of my wait staff, she loves to make jewelry, so that is her passion. And actually, another one of my wait staff, she went to culinary school as well, and she does some catering on the side—and yeah, everyone has definitely worked in restaurants before. For a good number of years. They are all thirty and up.
- 02-00:24:49  
Redman: And how do you train them about your food and the wine that you serve?
- 02-00:24:59  
Miner: Well, I have a, I guess you can call him my lead bartender. He and I have wine tastings probably about once a month. Just to change things up, or if we run out of something. We meet with a bunch of different reps, and they give us tear sheets on the wines, so we can remember. And so every time I change the wine list, I bring out all the bottles, open them all up, they get to taste them all. They get to read the tear sheets.
- 02-00:25:30  
Redman: What is the tear sheet?
- 02-00:25:32  
Miner: It tells you about the wine. It tells you about the flavors, the tannins and who made it and where—that kind of thing. So we have a whole book of wine notes. So if they ever forget, they can refer to that. And then as far as the menu, every time I change a dish—I usually don't just change one. I say, "I am changing the menu." Which is probably about three or four dishes. And then I will put all of those out for line up, which would be before service. And one that day it would

be earlier, it would be like 4:45, we put up all the dishes, they taste them all, they ask me questions, and if there are certain culinary terms or certain vegetables that they don't know, then I write that down and I post it over there so that they can refer to it if they forget. But then there is line up every day at 5:15. Because I do a special every single day. And sometimes produce doesn't come in, you have got to substitute it with something else, and you don't want to reprint all the menus, so you have to verbal that.

02-00:26:44

Redman: Okay. Is there anything you stress as important for your service staff when dealing with the customer? Service style that is important to you?

02-00:26:57

Miner: Well, yeah. I just want to make sure that they are happy and that they don't feel rushed. They don't feel like they have to be out of here at a certain time—which has been a problem, actually, with my maitre d' guy that seats people. Sometimes he gets a little stressed out and freaks out that the people are going to come and these people have not even finished dessert yet, and he has been rude to a couple of people. I have had to sit down and talk to him about it. He has been like, "Ah, you know, I need you to get out of your seat now because I told you the moment that you came in here that you only have two and a half hours." And that is just not the way you address people. And they are just like horrified. He was like, "If you want to go stand up at the bar and finish your drink, that is cool, but I need the table." And I am just like, "All right, you can't do that." So that has been—just making sure that the experience from the get-go, all the way around is good. No one feels like they are being pushed out, no one feels neglected—just taking care of the customer. And the cool thing is, it is an open kitchen, so I can see what is going on.

02-00:28:11

Redman: And who are you targeting as your customers? Who would you say it appeals to?

02-00:28:24

Miner: Well, when I first opened, I definitely wanted to be a neighborhood place, where people could just walk down the street from work—not too expensive. And I definitely get that, but not as much as I thought I would. I am definitely getting more people from all over San Francisco, even the East Bay, and Marin. I would say it ranges from twenty-five to fifty, maybe, are the main people.

02-00:28:59

Redman: And do you have regular customers or repeat customers?

02-00:29:02

Miner: Yeah, yeah, we do. We have repeat customers, which is great.

02-00:29:05

- Redman: Okay. Do you participate at all in your community, either in this neighborhood or in the city of San Francisco or Bay Area?
- 02-00:29:21  
Miner: Participate how? [laughs]
- 02-00:29:26  
Redman: I don't know, do you do events? You said you did the farm dinner.
- 02-00:29:29  
Miner: I have done a lot of events. Last year I did like every event that came my way, because I was like—first of all, the cause was important to me, and I also wanted to get exposure for the restaurant since we had just opened.
- 02-00:29:42  
Redman: Which one was that? Was that the farm dinner or was that just all of them?
- 02-00:29:46  
Miner: Oh, I did—all of them.
- 02-00:29:48  
Redman: What all did you do?
- 02-00:29:49  
Miner: I did the farm dinner. I did the American Heart Association. I did something for the Junior League of San Francisco. Oh god—there are so many that I can't even think of. [The Museum of Modern Art, my old grammar school, et cetera.]
- 02-00:29:58  
Redman: You did a benefit for the Assyrian Aids Society—
- 02-00:30:01  
Miner: Yes, I did that at the Ritz-Carlton. I actually also did a benefit at the Ritz-Carlton for the school I went to—French American International School.
- 02-00:30:10  
Redman: And how did you come to participate in all of these events?
- 02-00:30:17  
Miner: Well, they contacted me and asked me to do it. And I was more than happy to.
- 02-00:30:24  
Redman: You were named one on the *San Francisco Chronicle* Rising Star Chefs of 2003. Can you discuss this award?
- 02-00:30:29  
Miner: It was a great honor. I am still really, really excited about it. Yeah it was cool. I guess every year they choose a certain number of people in the San Francisco and the Bay Area that are under thirty, I guess, that they think are up-and-coming chefs. It was cool, they came in here and took some funny photos of me

and asked me my life story and had me cook a couple of dishes and photographed it, and it has gotten me a lot of—the press was great. It really helped bring a lot more people in here. So I am really thankful for that.

02-00:31:17

Redman: Then you also recently appeared on the Food Network.

02-00:31:20

Miner: Yes, [laughs] I did. Yeah—they randomly called me out of the blue and said, “We have read a lot about your restaurant, you sound like an interesting person, we would love to film at your restaurant. We are doing a prix fixe show, and do you have a prix fixe?” And at time we had just started with an early prix fixe during the summer because when it was really light out, we were like dead until like 6:30, and I just wanted to go hang myself. So I’m like, “We got to think of a way to get people in here.” So, I was like, if I do maybe an early prix fixe, than that will hopefully bring people in here. It took a while to catch on, but now it is great, and especially with the airing of the show. So they were like, “Well, I guess that is good enough—your early prix fixe, that is cool. We just really want you on the show, so we can just make it work.” And I’m like, cool. So they came last September and they filmed for like four hours, and yeah. And it finally aired and it’s actually been great. We have gotten people from Chicago, that were like, “We saw you on the Food Network and we just had to come.” So that was cool.

02-00:32:39

Redman: So they were here for four hours?

02-00:32:40

Miner: [laughs] Yeah.

02-00:32:42

Redman: Wow. Because I saw it, it was like—

02-00:32:43

Miner: It was like five minutes!

02-00:32:45

Redman: Yeah. Less than ten minutes.

02-00:32:48

Miner: Yeah. They were like, “We just want to get as much footage as we can, but we are really chopping it down to seven minutes.” I am like, okay. And of course, I invited everyone I know so the place would be packed! [laughs] So it was cool.

02-00:33:01

Redman: And do you do anything with any local culinary schools, or have you gone back to your school and participated?

02-00:33:14

- Miner: You know what? It is funny you asked, I just got approved—I just applied—to get externs here.
- 02-00:33:19  
Redman: Oh, cool.
- 02-00:33:20  
Miner: Externships. And then actually a girl just called me the other day from the CCA that just wants to do a stage.
- 02-00:33:28  
Redman: So can you just tell us quickly, stage—
- 02-00:33:31  
Miner: A stage is just like a brief—it could be a day, it could be two days in the kitchen where you help out and you get to see what goes on in that kitchen. And you get some hands-on experience, but it's up to the discretion of the chef how much you are able to do and not do. But it is a great way to see what goes on in kitchens, and how the food is done, and I think it is a great thing.
- 02-00:34:02  
Redman: And this comes from the French, *stagiare*?
- 02-00:34:04  
Miner: Yeah. So I am more than happy to have people to come in and do that. I think it is a great thing. I think people should do it more often. Check it out and see what is going on. So, she is going to be coming at the end of the month. But that is it so far.
- 02-00:34:21  
Redman: And do chefs in San Francisco Bay Area communicate with each other at any level? Are you—
- 02-00:34:27  
Miner: Only when I do events. Lots of events involve lots of different restaurants and chefs. But that is normally the only time, or if I go out to eat at a restaurant, and I see the chef, and I know the chef, and I talk to the chef [laughs], but other than that—no, I am not calling up chefs, hanging out with them. But then again, I am sure that there is this huge circle of chefs that I am not cool enough to be involved with that hang out together all the time—I don't know.
- 02-00:34:57  
Redman: [laughs]
- 02-00:34:59  
Miner: But I am not hanging out with any chefs [except for the few that I have worked with in the past]. I got to say! [laughs]
- 02-00:35:05

Redman: Do you have a forthcoming cookbook?

02-00:35:06

Miner: No. That thought hasn't even crossed my mind, actually. I don't even know if I would have enough—

02-00:35:14

Redman: If you did, what kind of cookbook would you want?

02-00:35:17

Miner: Oh. I don't know. I don't know. [laughs] Sorry, can't answer.

02-00:35:27

Redman: That's okay. All right, well, is there anything else that you would like to add or anything that you kind of wanted to put out there that maybe we hadn't covered or—

02-00:35:42

Miner: Nope. I think we pretty much got everything. [I would like to say a few things now that I'm not so nervous. Being a chef in California in 2004 has been an amazing experience. The culinary experience I've had has made every day fun and exciting in the kitchen. From beautiful produce, meat and fish that I can cook with my staff, to loyal and gracious customers who enjoy spending time together and sharing a meal together—as it should be.]

02-00:35:45

Redman: Okay dokey.

[End of interview]

[Material in brackets added during editing process]