

Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library

University of California  
Berkeley, California

Christopher Lee  
Bay Area Restaurateur

Interviews conducted by  
Kirstin Jackson  
in 2004

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Christopher Lee, "Bay Area Restaurateur," conducted by Kirstin Jackson in 2004, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2006.

Interview #1: October 28, 2004

[Audio File 1]

01:00:00:03

Jackson: Okay. It's October 28<sup>th</sup>, I'm at Christopher Lee's house. We're doing an interview for the Regional Oral History Office. Good morning!

01:00:00:14

Lee: Good morning.

01:00:00:15

Jackson: Okay. So, can you explain what Eccolo means?

01:00:00:19

Lee: Eccolo means here it is, and it's a really commonly used phrase in Italian. Ecco is 'here', and people say that a lot, and 'lo' is the masculine article, so it gets combined and you say 'eccolo', here it is. And if it were you coming in the door, you'd say eccomi!, or if they were coming in the door you'd say 'eccochi', eccovi, so it's just taken from that, and I like the sound of it.

01:00:00:55

Jackson: That's why you chose it?

01:00:00:50

Lee: Yes.

01:00:00:49

Jackson: So we're going to talk about your background now. As a chef many of your influences are a result of the experiences of your youth. So we're going to talk about that. Your earliest memories of food and eating?

01:00:01:09

Lee: Okay.

01:00:01:13

Jackson: Start with your family. Where did you grow up?

01:00:01:13

Lee: I grew up in Chicago, where I lived until I was 25, or so, 24, actually. We lived in the city, Chicago proper, right out on the south side. At that time, wasn't really heavily developed like it is now. When I was 8 we moved to a suburb on the north side of Chicago called Glenview, where my mother lived until this year, so it was quite a long time there. And that was really countryside when we moved there.

01:00:01:52

Jackson: And when was that?

01:00:01:52

Lee: 1960. It was the edge of farmland.

01:00:02:01

Jackson: Did you see that change while you were there?

01:00:02:01

Lee: It changed when I was there, but really in the last twenty years—I've been gone from there for about 25 years, a little more than that, 28 years. It's really different, it's unrecognizable. It was really farmland, once you got out of the little town, cornfields and soybean fields and all that kind of stuff. Farming is a dying art, if you want to say that. Families aren't farming anymore and kids go to college and become doctors and lawyers and cooks. So that farmland is now houses and hospitals and mini-malls. Shocking. I went back there with my family a few years ago, 10 years ago, and we drove in from the airport, coming in off the freeway, and it's a few miles into the town. Honestly, I was disoriented at one point, because I thought I remembered certain areas and this is where we went fishing, and this is where we went hunting.

01:00:03:15

Jackson: Did you get lost?

01:00:03:15

Lee: I didn't get lost. But I wasn't sure anymore if that was just because it was all built up. It looks like El Cerrito Plaza. That was a shock. It was a big shock.

01:00:03:32

Jackson: It makes you wonder if some of the big farms out there are just owned by one large company, now, too.

01:00:03:36

Lee: That's farther out though now. There's no farming in that area anymore. It's all residential stuff, and small businesses.

01:00:03:44

Jackson: Where did your parents grow up? Where were they from?

01:00:03:44

Lee: They're from Chicago. They were both born there. Well, my mother wasn't born there, she came there as a very young child. My father was born there.

01:00:04:00

Jackson: What's your father's name and your mother's name?

01:00:03:59

Lee: My father's name is Armand Lee. He's gone. He died in 1991. My mother's name is Francis Griffith Lee, and she was from Ohio, outside of Cleveland. They moved to Chicago around 1921. They were both born in 1920. In the Midwest. My father's—parents came from the South, originally. My father's father was from Birmingham, Alabama, and my father's mother was from Greenville, Mississippi, which is a little Delta community. They moved to the North in 1920, the family did, no it was 1917. A lot of people were leaving the South at that time. They headed north for a better life, work, things like

that. Interestingly, I have kind of looked into a little bit, and I finally realized that there was a train line that came right up from the Delta, it went to Chicago. It went to Tennessee. In Illinois it was called the Illinois Central. So people could take two train rides and be in Chicago. They could get out of the station, which was on 11<sup>th</sup> Street, south side. That's how the black community was born on the south side.

01:00:06:26

Jackson:

In the forties they would have moved there, right?

01:00:06:26

Lee:

There was another big flow again in the forties. First, there was a big flow just around 1917, 1920, late teens. They came from the South. I don't know much about my mother's family, nor does she. Except that hey did come from Ripon, Ohio, which I said is outside of Cleveland. And she didn't know her father, so I don't know much about him. Her mother died when she was very young. Her mother died at 40 years old. So my mom was 20 at that time. My mother's mother had been bedridden with a kidney disease that was called Bright's disease. I don't know what it's called now. So she kind of grew up young. She took care of her family from age 11 to 20, and then she got married and took care of that family, I guess.

01:00:07:41

Jackson:

Not much of a break.

01:00:07:41

Lee:

Not much of a break. But, I don't think my father's family was poor, but they didn't have a lot of money. I believe his father worked in the post office. So he could read and write. My mother's mother never worked, and they were pretty poor. Not destitute poor, but they didn't have much money. Her aunt was fairly well off and she helped them a lot. So my mother was the most frugal person you've ever met, never spends a penny. They always ate well. By that I mean they ate food that was cooked at home.

01:00:08:40

Jackson:

Your mother's family?

01:00:08:45

Lee:

Yes. That was way before junk food and all of that kind of stuff. I remember now, I hope I'm not losing you in this line, but my father's grandmother—my father's mother's mother—lived not far from them. It's hard to paint this picture. She had an enormous garden in the back of her house.

01:00:09:07

Jackson:

Did you visit it?

01:00:09:07

Lee:

We did visit it. She was funny. She was a religious woman.

01:00:09:13

Jackson: What was her name?

01:00:09:13

Lee: Well I don't remember her first name. I always remembered her as Grandmother Moore. I could probably find it out. I have a wonderful Bible that my aunt, my mother's sister sent me after she died. It recorded a lot of people in the family. In the old days you wrote down marriages and deaths in your Bible. Maybe her name is in there. We always called her Grandmother Moore. She was my great-grandmother. I'm jumping around a little bit. I remember a photograph that my mother had that had everyone from my brother—I had an older brother—my brother's children to Grandmother Moore, six generations. It was remarkable, she died at 96 or something.

01:00:10:07

Jackson: Was she gardening until late in her life?

01:00:10:09

Lee: She was gardening. She was pretty good until her last few years. She didn't drive, she paid all her bills in cash. She went on the bus down to the phone office, the electric office. Didn't ever have anything like a checking account. But she had this big garden, I remember we always had to work in that garden in the summertime.

Jackson:

You had to work in it, you mean you didn't like it then?

01:00:10:37

Lee: Well, I was a kid. I was seven or eight years old, but we had to help her, so, therefore she always had fresh vegetables and things like that in the summertime, and she'd can all this stuff for the wintertime, jar it, you know. We always had fresh fruit. My mother never worked, so she was home and cooked us food. I remember much later, some of the kids I knew when I was a teenager, after we had moved out to the suburbs, they hadn't seen some of this stuff. They're mothers got packaged food, frozen food.

01:00:11:24

Jackson: When was that?

01:00:11:24

Lee: That was in the sixties. One boy, David, they would have things like Pop Tarts for breakfast. One time my mother made pancakes. He had never seen someone make pancakes.

01:00:11:41

Jackson: Not even from a mix?

01:00:11:40

Lee: Not even from a mix. They had put everything in a toaster. That was an extreme, but I'm just trying to highlight that we had cooked food. My father cooked a little bit. Of course he always carved the turkey and all that kind of

stuff. He had a Webber BBQ with huge flames coming out of it [laughs]. Outside of that, he always made pickles, dill pickles, kosher pickles, he made sauerkraut. He would sometimes on Saturdays—my grandfather had a business in Chicago—it was a custom picture framing business. It was pretty interesting, the craftsmen. It was a pretty big business, and it was only for designers and museums and things like that, collectors, you know. They did high end, special stuff. It was pretty fascinating, I realized later. They closed early on Saturday, my father would often bring stuff home. He had some friends, he had a really close friend who worked for him, who was a Polish man, whose brother had a sausage factory, so he would bring home these wonderful sausages and things like that, which, you didn't really get out in the suburbs. In the Jewish communities, there were a couple nearby, Skokie Illinois is a largely Jewish community, there'd be some stuff nearby, but they were all beef sausages and what not. So he would bring home some really crazy stuff, like blood sausages. I didn't realize how unusual that was until much later. He loved to fish and eat seafood. And he'd sometimes bring some of that home. Saturday was a little thing.

01:00:14:07

Jackson:

Did you barbecue them on the Webber?

01:00:14:06

Lee:

Sometimes. That was pretty exciting. He was also a hunter and a fisherman. He was a very good fisherman. We had that kind of food around too. And that was unusual. He didn't hunt for deer, mostly wild birds. Pheasants. This was corn country, and that's their feed, so there were pheasants, wild pigeons, and there were doves, sometimes duck, but mainly those other birds.

01:00:14:49

Jackson:

So you'd been eating these way before it became fashionable.

01:00:14:49

Lee:

Yeah, yeah. That was pretty great—rabbits—we sometimes ate rabbits. After I got a little bit older I would go with him. I remember sometimes if a bird wasn't dead—a little gruesome—I being a kid was the one who had to go and wring the bird's neck, and kill it. We had birds around and rabbits, as I said.

01:00:15:26

Jackson:

Did your mother cook at home mostly?

01:00:15:28

Lee:

She did most of the cooking, she had about 12 recipes.

01:00:15:35

Jackson:

She wasn't cooking much variety?

01:00:15:36

Lee:

No, she wasn't adventuresome. Culturally, my family is mixed, black and white and all kinds of stuff from the South. They weren't very sophisticated people. They weren't college-educated. They had traveled a lot. They didn't

live that kind of life where you learn about Julia Child. That didn't come along until my generation, but she did cook. We always had on Friday night something fried, fried chicken or fried fish, and I always loved that. In the old days you just had a pot with the oil in it, and you would just fry that way. One of the secrets was that a lot of families, especially from the South, would keep a little coffee can under the sink of the bacon drippings, you add a little of that, and that was the secret to the chicken. Fridays we always had something fried, Saturdays we wouldn't have much because it was just a low-key day, maybe sausages on Saturday afternoon. During the week we had roast beef, you know, pretty simple stuff. And it was recurring, every couple of weeks we had roast beef, spaghetti every couple of weeks, so it was a limited repertoire, but it was good food. My mother use to make something on Saturdays, and this was a really special treat, she called it cannibal sandwiches, which were really steak tartar, because it was raw, and you'd smear it. She would get some special loaf of bread. It was really cool, very thinly sliced red onion on it. It was really pretty delicious. Some of my friends thought it was perverse. Our household didn't revolve around food in any way, but there was always good food. She didn't let us, me—I had an older brother who died of cancer in 1994. And a younger sister who was ten years younger. He was ten years older, she's ten years younger. We were really spread out. She didn't let us eat junk food. Pretzels was her idea of junk food.

01:00:18:44

Jackson: That is considered health food now.

01:00:18:44

Lee: I know. So it was pretzels because they weren't made with all kinds of fat, they weren't fried. They didn't have a lot of preservatives in them. So pretzels was the big thing, everybody had potato chips and things like that. She also made a lot of cookies, which were really good. My mom made a lot of cookies. My grandmother was a really good cook, too. When we lived in Chicago we lived in a two flat apartment below them—they lived upstairs. That was pretty great, because my grandmother would cook often, and being upstairs I could just go up and sit and have breakfast with my grandfather, typically, every morning before he would go off to work. That was pretty special. When we moved away we lost that.

01:00:19:41

Jackson: How old were you when you moved away?

01:00:19:41

Lee: I was 8. I was born in 1952, and in 1960 we moved out of town. So my grandmother cooked, and being basically a southern woman, she cooked a lot of greens, stuff like that, again nothing sophisticated, but delicious.

01:00:20:05

Jackson: Did she learn how to cook that in Mississippi?



01:00:20:05

Lee:

Yeah, apparently, although she was young at that time, she did. She had four sisters. I have a wonderful photograph of them in about 1920, in the living room of their apartment. They were all dressed up, lined up. Three of her sisters came north to Chicago, and one stayed in Arkansas. I never met her. We never traveled there and she never came up. Interestingly, this is a little bit off the track. The tip of Mississippi is only 150 miles from the tip of Illinois. I didn't realize they were that close until I got out a map and looked at it. Anyway, the four of them were in Chicago. They lived not too far from us, in fact, when we left that flat down below, my grandparents—one of my grandmother's sisters—my great aunt Libby, and her husband, moved in there. We were all kind of close there.

I'm way off the track of food. I wanted to get back to the hunting and fishing thing, because there's a really great couple of memories that I have from those days. So the hunting we have talked about, there was game around, and that was really, really unusual for the kids I knew. Nobody did that or had that kind of stuff. My dad would go on a couple of fishing trips every year to Minnesota with his Polish friend, Mr. Grabowski, Eugene Grabowski. They were Polish immigrants and they lived not too far from us, they lived in a little community called Fox Lake, which had a lake on it—he had a boat, I remember. We would sometimes go ice fishing there. But he would go on a summer trip and a fall trip with this friend of his, up to Bemidje, Minnesota, which is way up north. For several years, when I was 12,13,14, I went along, and we caught a heck of a lot of fish. We would bring it all back, we would never clean anything up there, because the fish would stay fresh longer if you didn't cut it open. So when we came back I was always the one who had to scale them and gut them. I got the dirty jobs as a kid. But I would round up some of my friends and try to get them to help scale and gut the fish. Then we would freeze it, because there was a lot of fish we would have that for months.

01:00:23:52

Jackson:

What type of fish would you catch?

01:00:23:53

Lee:

They were lake fish, so they were mostly perch, smallish, a pound, pound-and-a-half, two pounds if you got a big one. A bigger fish in the same family is called walleye pike. If you were really lucky you would catch a northern pike. A big, voracious fish. They were unusual. And another fish called crappie, which is in the sunfish family. So we caught a lot of those, and they would usually last us until the spring frozen. Good, delicious. That was one of my first forays into cooking. I would cook—I would sort of braise these whole fish in butter, lemon and garlic. That was my thing, I really liked to do that. I would make little foil packages out of a sort of pan. I put it in the grill and it would cook from the bottom. It was great. As a result I learned how to fish, later. I had this buddy David, who I mentioned, I fished with a lot. Two years, I remember pretty distinctly. One year, this man, Mr. Grabowski, whose brother who had the sausage factory came along. He brought all these

sausages. We would have that. They were tiny little cabins, they had no heat. They had only cold running water, no hot water, of course no gas or electricity. We had a potbelly stove as a source of heat. This was usually in October, so it was getting cold. Never any snow, but getting cold. This one year he brought all kinds of sausages and I realized how many kinds he actually made and how delicious they were.

01:00:26:31

Jackson:

How old were you then?

01:00:26:30

Lee:

I was about 12, 13 so pretty young. I'm putting it in perspective for my son, and I was young to recognize that these were really delicious things. I had an interest in them. It was a funny place, this little group of cabins, and we always went to the same one. I don't know how they knew these people, but the family who owned this group of cabins, I think there were seven or nine. They were sort of in a semi-circle along the edge of this lake, and there was a pier and boats and you went out from there. They were just little boats with outboard motors. The family that owned it was also Polish. I don't know if that was accident or if there was some other connection. Their name was Effie and Wes [Wiesnewski?]. That's how he said it. That's an Americanized pronunciation. And the old guy, Wes, his name was, he never did anything. He had a shed that was his work shed, but really there was a television in it. He drank a lot and watched television. They all drank a lot. They had geese and chickens. And he said he raised minnows, which were the bait we used, these little live fish. You don't have to do anything to raise minnows, the truck comes along and delivers the minnows. So that was his big thing. The minnow tanks were in this other shed. The flock of geese, the gander of the flock was a really mean son of a gun, and he wouldn't let you get near the flock. He'd chase you and try to nip at you. But Effie, the wife, did everything and she would make breakfast, and she had some sandwiches you could take out on the boat to go fishing. He always had freshly made toasts and eggs and pancakes, and all this wonderful stuff. Everybody from all these cabins would come in the morning and have breakfast and go fishing. So the sausage was really big. I remember it was the first time I saw that blood sausage and it was delicious. I had never heard of it. We took it to the kitchen and gave it to her. She was very happy. She knew all about it.

01:00:29:30

Jackson:

Did you know what it was exactly?

01:00:29:30

Lee:

Not exactly, but he explained it, he told me how it was made and everything. It was great, she fried it. It was just the most delicious thing. I remember that year very clearly. I had this uncle, whose name I don't recall, brought all this stuff. The other time, and I remember real distinctly, and I didn't realize how that sat in my mind until many years later, but he—the grandfather came out there, Mr. Grabowski's father, who was a really old guy and didn't even fish

or anything, but he hunted mushrooms. He would go out in the daytime and collect mushrooms out in the woods. This was—you know what northern Minnesota is like, it's all woods and lakes. He would collect mushrooms which I recognize now were chanterelles. He would—it was so beautiful. He was a quiet man and didn't speak English. He would go out and collect them, and I went with him a couple of times.

01:00:30:41

Jackson:

Did he teach you which ones to look for?

01:00:30:41

Lee:

Well he showed me this particular one, the chanterelle, and he would get a lot of them, and he would string them on a garland with a little needle to dry. And he would string these garlands across the roof, the ceiling, of this cabin, which was not as big as this house, maybe two or three of these rooms, a couple of bedrooms and a main room where the stove and water were. Anyway, by the end of the week—it was usually a week or ten days. Ten days because it was two weekends and a week in between. You would see these garlands growing across the room, and they had a fragrance, so you would come into the cabin, and if it was warm with the stove on—you'd come back and he'd fire up the stove and get the place warm before we came in from the boat. He opened the door and there was this tremendous smell of these mushrooms. It wasn't until just a couple of years ago—I hunt mushrooms myself, too, here, the same ones. I walked into a room, and the smell hit me and suddenly I realized that that was my first experience with that. That was the same smell I had here, and I don't know why the light never went on until that moment, but something about the smell that day reminded me of it. So that was really kind of important, and then I realized that was what he had been doing when I was 12 years old. That was pretty cool. He would cook them, they were delicious.

01:00:32:29

Jackson:

Would he cook them fresh?

01:00:32:29

Lee:

Yeah, yeah.

01:00:32:34

Jackson:

Where do you go around here to hunt for mushrooms?

01:00:32:34

Lee:

A lot of the parklands.

01:00:32:37

Jackson:

Like Tilden?

01:00:32:37

Lee:

Yeah, Tilden, Redwood. There are a lot of mushrooms up there, that's pretty great. But those kind of food memories come back to you, and I've started realize a little how it was something I was always aware of, for quite a long

time, and at quite a young age, that's what I mean. So those are my earliest memories of food. I have a friend, Jim who lives on the East Coast who told me the other day that I was always interested in food, and he remembered this one time that we were all out together, and again this was all farmland at this time, so we were all surrounded by farms and corn and vegetables and stuff. He said, "I remember we were about thirteen or fourteen, and you picked up this tomato out of this farmer who was nearby, out of his tomato patch, and you said 'This is a really a good tomato'. I thought you were crazy". He said this because he didn't have any real particular interest in it, but he realized much later that there was always something that moved me that I was aware of even as a young kid. I think all that fresh food, being around the game and the fish—I'm trying to close this circle here—made it something that I enjoyed, and thought about, and kind of pursued.

01:00:34:18

Jackson:

Would you say there was one specific food mentor in your childhood, would you say there was one person, or maybe all the people you've been talking about?

01:00:34:26

Lee:

A person I came into contact with?

01:00:34:30

Jackson:

Yeah, if there was one person especially who influenced your love of food. Or was it all these separate things that you mentioned?

01:00:34:30

Lee:

I think probably my mother. She always liked food, good food, and always had good food around for us. Even through my high school years there was breakfast on the table, and dinner on the table at night.

01:00:34:56

Jackson:

Did you always eat together as a family?

01:00:34:53

Lee:

No, no, my dad usually wasn't there. He didn't come home until late, and he kind of, he was kind of, distant, really, from the family. He and my mother weren't super close as a married couple. He was a pretty heavy drinker, and so he'd go to the tavern after work, plus he'd kind of hang out with his pals down there. He didn't get home till nine or ten at night. We usually had dinner—well then it was my sister and I, my brother was grown and off doing his things. He would have been twenty-two when I was twelve, so he was kind of gone, school and what not. The three of us would have dinner, my mom, me and my younger sister. She was just a child at the time. We always had good food on the table.

01:00:36:10

Jackson:

Do you think that she adventured a little bit, trying to cook other nationalities' food? You said before that she didn't have much access.

01:00:36:22

Lee:

No, she didn't really. Italian was what people cooked, which meant spaghetti and meatballs. A big deal was lasagna, we would have that now and again. I mean, she never made noodles, we always bought the noodles. But she would make the sauce, the meatballs, and so that part of it was good. And moms in those days really, that was sort of like, that was out of the fifties, you know. There was a big trend toward convenience. The refrigerator had appeared, what, in the forties? And freezers and all that kind of stuff, and so people were going in that direction. I remember clothes—there were no-iron clothes. There was all this interest in lessening the work on the housewife.

01:00:37:13

Jackson:

So she was pretty unusual.

01:00:37:13

Lee:

So, yeah, that's what I'm trying to stress. She still cooked real food as we called it.

01:00:37:30

Jackson:

Did you go to restaurants when you were a child?

01:00:37:51

Lee:

We did. Not very fancy ones, but I always liked to eat, I guess. Again, my grandfather and my father worked in the same business. They had done some framing for this family, Italian family. I think they were Italian, they could have been Jewish, I didn't really know them. They were sort of acquaintances of the family, but I think maybe they were Italian. It was a seafood restaurant there in Chicago, called Ireland's, I believe. That had nothing to do with their name, though. But they had wonderful seafood, fish and stuff. They had a couple of lobster tanks, so you would go up and say 'I'll have that one there', And I loved shellfish, always as a kid. Even that was kind of unusual, since kids didn't even eat that kind of stuff, oysters, clams, lobsters.

Jackson:

It flops around too much. [laughter]

Lee:

Yes. And I can recall, too, that we would go there, and that was like a big treat, because it was a fairly expensive place. It wasn't super expensive, but you know, to take the whole family out. So often my grandfather would take us. He was the patriarch, and he was fairly well off, especially at that time, quite successful. I have to tell you another thing, too, I remember about Michigan, I'll tell you that in a second, a food influence. I can remember going there, and I would love to have raw clams on the half-shell. I would order either clams or oysters on the half shell, depending on what the season was. Or I would order what they call steamers, which are an East Coast clam. It's a different variety of clam that has a long neck

01:00:39:56

Jackson:

I've heard of longneck clams.

01:00:39:53

Lee:

Well that's the same thing. Those are steamers, the neck sticks out of the side of the shell. And I could eat two dozen of those. They were fabulous. And whenever the waiter—they were always men back then—the waiter would come and I'd say, "I'll have two dozen of those." And he say "You know they're raw?", and I'd say, "I know." "You're sure?" And everyone would have to say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, he knows what he's doing, it's ok, he really wants that." They couldn't believe it, that this kid wanted it, but I always loved shellfish. And I remember there was this other room, which was like a bar, I don't know what it was, it was this room along the side of the building that was sort of a bar, a shellfish bar, but also the bar where they served—they served cocktails, beer and cocktails. It was really funky, it was sort of part of the kitchen. You could sit in there, and that was really cool.

01:00:40:56

Jackson:

Did you say this was an Italian restaurant?

01:00:40:56

Lee:

No, seafood restaurant. The family, I think, was Italian who owned it. As I say, they may have been Jewish, but I don't think they were, I think they were Italian. But this really really funky room. The stoves were all there, and the cooks were back there, and they had these broilers you know, and grills and fryers. The cool thing was you chose this lobster out of the tank, and you brought it back there, and you'd watch all this activity back there. A couple of times, I would go with my father on Saturday for his half-day and hang out in his shop, and then we would go over to this place to have something to eat. We sat back in this funky room, and I remember thinking that was the coolest thing, and I was little at this time.

01:00:41:52

Jackson:

So it was an open kitchen?

01:00:41:51

Lee:

Well it wasn't open to the restaurant, but this room was. So if you didn't want to do the whole fancy restaurant thing, you went into this little bar area part of the kitchen to have your shellfish there. That was really cool, I had forgotten about that. So I always loved to eat, and I always loved that kind of stuff. Kids didn't eat that kind of stuff, they were horrified, kids. That was something I always enjoyed. What I wanted to mention to you about Michigan was, in the sixties my grandfather had a summerhouse there. It was just a little—god this is really funny—what was once a farmhouse, on the lake, Lake Michigan, but it was just in Michigan state from Illinois, you pass through Indiana into Michigan, it was a couple hours drive from us. He expanded this house, built onto this house, so it was large enough for our whole family to stay there, cousins and everything to stay there at one time. So there were all these bedrooms and stuff. It was on this plot of land, and it was fenced, and the house was there and had been expanded, and there was this big kitchen where everybody could eat. And there was a playhouse sort

of thing, that was screened in because of the mosquitoes. It had a ping pong table, a trampoline at one time. But we would fish up there, my dad and I. My dad would go out early in the morning and often I would go with him. We would go to one of the little rivers and we would catch catfish. My friend and I developed this system for catching catfish and it was really effective, so we would catch all these catfish, a couple of pounds—they were good sized, and we would bring them back. If it was a lucky weekend all the aunties would be there, and they would all cook, so we would fry this catfish, and they would have biscuits that one of them had made, and eggs and all kinds of stuff. I remember sitting around this big table. I had five cousins, so there would be five of them, three from one family, two from another family, and usually just two of us because my brother was kind of old at that time and living his own life, older, at that time, a lot older than us. We were all kind of the same few years range. I can remember sitting at the table with all the cousins and all the aunties and the uncles, and we brought this fish in. That was really fabulous too, fabulous to eat. My dad was very nonchalant about it, but they couldn't believe that we went out and caught these fish and brought them back and cooked them. That was a good memory. That would have been—I think my grandfather sold that house in the late sixties. So he had that house for about twelve years. This is a little off the track. He sold it to Jesse Owens, a very famous sprinter. A black man. Jesse Owens won four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics

01:00:46:23

Jackson:

Did you always root for him?

01:00:46:24

Lee:

In Germany. It was at the time of Hitler, and Hitler tried to prevent him from running, because he was black. So he was a very famous guy, and he won four sprint medals. It wasn't until Carl Lewis came along in the eighties, and he won four, and there was all this bridge people were trying to build between the two. Anyway, Jesse Owens bought that house. And I ran into a chef from Chicago, this woman whose name was Jody Allen I think, who owns a popular restaurant there on the West side that's really popular. And she came to—when I worked at Chez Panisse we did a book signing for her. We got to talking and she said something about this house she owned in Michigan, and I said, "Oh, where is it?" And it turns out, it was in the same neighborhood as this house where my grandfather's house was. And we sort tried to pinpoint where it was. And she said, "I know that house. I remember that house. It's just a few blocks from where mine is." So I asked her if it was still standing, and she said, "Oh yes, it's still there." And she sent me some from photographs of it. And that was forty years later. That was pretty cool.

01:00:47:53

Jackson:

Was it still the same?

01:00:47:50

Lee:

Pretty much. My memory isn't so clear, it had been forty years. But yeah, it was just a little white sort of shingle house. The reason I was telling this story was the fish around the table thing, again.

01:00:48:11

Jackson:

Did your family travel when you were younger? Do you think you were exposed to food of other nationalities?

01:00:48:18

Lee:

No, not very much. We didn't travel more—I mean, traveling on vacation in the summer. It happened only in the summer, and it always had to involve fishing or lakes or something like that, because that was what would motivate my father to go along. We didn't travel far. We would go to Minnesota or Michigan, or some other part of northern Illinois. But usually we went to Minnesota. Many times we went to the same town, Bemidje, which was a little town. I imagine it's gentrified now, it's probably like Freeport, Maine or something. We would go up there. I didn't get on a plane until I was college age. I don't think my father was on a plane except in the military. My mother, I remember, first flew on a plane sometime in the eighties. We never had gone to Europe or anywhere like that. Canada, that was our foreign country. [laughter]

01:00:49:40

Jackson:

Would you say your family was involved in food and wine in other ways in the community? Did your mother perhaps cook for church festivals during the holidays?

01:00:49:54

Lee:

She would cook for church, but no, no, we didn't even really drink wine at home. My dad would occasionally bring bottles of wine, no he drank hard alcohol, he drank bourbon, my father. Again, a southern drink. And my mother didn't drink very much. She drank sherry, which was considered a lady's drink at that time, sweet sherry. My father brought—a lot of his clients, everybody would give each other alcohol for Christmas. He would bring home wine at that time of year. But we never sat down with a glass of wine at dinner or anything. It wasn't the culture that they belonged to. My mother did cook for church.

01:00:51:04

Jackson:

Anything special?

01:00:50:59

Lee:

Cookies, cakes.

01:00:51:18

Jackson:

So if you could sum it up in a couple of sentences, to what extent would you say your family's involvement in food played a role in your becoming a chef?



01:00:51:27

Lee:

I think, to summarize, having on our table that wild game and that freshly caught fish, made food for me something of great enjoyment. In the sense that it tasted great. The fish were great, the pheasants were great, the pigeons great, we used to shoot a lot of pigeons when I was older, tasted great. So there's the whole pleasure aspect of it. There's also the aspect which I didn't think about until many years later, is the completeness with which you see this continuum from field to table. On the gruesome side, pulling the guts out of these things, but really seeing it from beginning to end. We all know that people don't know about that anymore. Everything's packaged, everything's bought in grocery stores. We grew a lot of our own vegetables in the summertime. In the Midwest you can grow just about anything in the summertime. We grew a lot of tomatoes, a lot of cucumbers, which are the ones my father would pickle. Watermelons were great, corn of course. So we had a lot of that around us, where we lived, in our immediate area. You can't even really say neighborhood, in our area. So the presence of all of that on a daily basis made food important to me, enjoyable to me. I cooked it. Nobody cooked, kids didn't cook. So it was a cool thing.

01:00:53:47

Jackson:

It was probably inspiring to come back and see the aunts get excited about the catfish you brought home.

01:00:53:51

Lee:

Yeah, that kind of thing is great. And of course it's combined with family, and that sentimental part of it. That's what really set me in that kind of direction. I always cooked, nothing spectacular or fancy. I didn't try anything like that until I got older. But I was involved in it from a young age.

[Audio File 2]

Jackson:

It is November 5<sup>th</sup> and we are at Christopher Lee's house continuing the interview. This is the first tape of the second interview. Last time we went over how your family's involvement in food played a role in your becoming a chef. Today we're going to focus more on training and work experience. We're going to talk about how you trained yourself for this profession, and start at the beginning. So we know that you learned a lot about food when growing up. Do you think you learned a lot about cooking when you were growing up?

Lee:

I don't think, it's a hard question to answer. Yes, I think so. It was very basic, as a teenager, not having someone in the house with a lot of professional skills. But the basic thing I did was to use the grill, we had a grill outside, and used that a lot.

Jackson:

The Webber?

Lee: [laughter] The Webber. Everyone had a Webber. That was a good starting point, I think. I did do things in the kitchen itself, with the oven, even some baking I remember. I had this friend who liked to make brownies, so we made brownies a lot. That was a funny thing. That was a start. Also, all this wild game and fish, and we would cook that, using the oven or the grill. I think that was the couple of basic skills I started out with. Later on, when I did start to look at cooking differently and think that I might want to do that as a profession, I went out and got a couple of books that were technique oriented books. Julia Child's double volume "Mastering the Art of French Cooking", which so many people at that time—sixties, seventies—used. And she was on TV. and so there was a lot of visual aid as well as written instruction, that was really useful. You just kind of go through these books and make the really basic, important dishes that we had always heard about from French cooking. I made crazy things like croissants. I would stay up all night getting them to rise and baking them and having them ready for the morning. When you get really interested in something, really obsessed, you do these crazy things.

Jackson: Did you invite people over just so you had people to eat your croissants?

02:00:03:28

Lee: Yeah. When I was in school, I was living in a friend's house, and we were really interested in food and wine—we did a lot of cooking—once a week we would cook a dinner and invite people over to eat it.

02:00:03:51

Jackson: How old were you then?

02:00:03:48

Lee: About twenty years old. And that went on for a really long time. In fact, after I left and came out to California—he carried on and did that with some friends of his, and he taught a wine class for a while. [A friend of mine Shawn Cresny?] he taught a wine class for a while. He'd cook around that. He's an academic by profession, not a cook. That was a really good way to keep going through these recipes and these books, and learning, like Blanquette de veau, and all this traditional stuff like sauces and stuff. Later I wanted to learn the French repertoire, which is still the foundation most of the Western European cooking that we all know. There is a book by a very famous chef, a French chef from London named Escoffier. His book is the bible for cooking. The first two chapters are all the fundamental sauces and stocks. I went through that and memorized it and learned it and cooked it. It's a little bit like practicing music and doing scales and arpeggios on your instrument. You do it over and over and over until you get it in your head. As one musician friend says, you get it burned into your DNA, which is obviously a very modern phrase. It's like that, you do it over and over and over and over until you can do these things and understand these things how they work. I did that with Escoffier. I felt, in the naïve of my youth, I had a pretty good understanding of these things. Those were the two main sources, really, of technique and

knowledge. I even tell the young cooks now who are really intense and inspired that they should go read those first two chapters of Escoffier and memorize them. But I have a kind of academic approach to this whole thing. People don't really cook like that nowadays. There is some old-style French places that do, but what I want to stress is, that's really the basics you kind of need to know to cook.

02:00:06:42

Jackson:

It sounds like all the books that you're reading, like Escoffier, and practicing the *Blanquette de veau*, you were doing the exact same thing that I was doing for almost for free, that I paid thousands for, in culinary school.

02:00:06:54

Lee:

There you go. And you probably only made that dish once or you discussed once in class, right?

02:00:07:01

Jackson:

Right.

02:00:08:12

Lee:

That's the main difference between going out into the world and cooking, and going to cooking school. I think cooking schools are really good these days, headed in the right direction, but always seems like such a huge amount of money for experience you can get by working in restaurants. And when you do work in a restaurant you do get a chance to do something fifty times over. That's when you get something under your belt. We used to always joke when I was at *Chez Panisse*. There were two seatings, fifty people first seating and fifty people the second seating, and the menu there changes every day. And those cooks are so brilliant that they can do that and start from nothing and find the right dish. We would joke that you should never come to dinner for the first seating, because it took fifty tries to get it right.

02:00:08:10

Jackson:

Where did most of your culinary training occur? Restaurants? Cookbooks?

02:00:08:23

Lee:

It was restaurants, no question, for that same reason, you do something every day. And you see so many things in a restaurant. Your exposure and your practice is so much higher than you can get at home or I would argue in cooking school. I don't mean to denounce cooking schools, but they cover an immense amount of ground in a short period of time. You don't even come out of cooking school as a journeyman cook. You still really a beginner. By working in a restaurant you get experience. I'm old enough that I'm old school about it. I'm not strident about it, but I think to get out there and cook everyday is what really puts your feet on the ground as professional or aspiring professional cook.

02:00:09:28

Jackson:

I found that once I started working while I was in culinary school I looked back and realized that everything I learned was useless without being able to apply it.

02:00:09:38

Lee:

That's what it is. And I basically worked in two restaurants in my life. Three, really, but two. One was Narsai's, in Kensington, California, now gone, I'm sad to say. It was very much in the old French tradition. And then Chez Panisse. Which is in a new style.

02:00:10:09

Jackson:

Just those two restaurants?

02:00:10:06

Lee:

Really, I mean, I worked back in Illinois at a place when I was in school. It was a mom and pop place, it was very different. Even Chez Panisse, certainly in the early days, was built on French cooking and all that technique. But it had such an enlightened approach, such a fresh—eclectic is not the right word. It was a restaurant and Alice's vision that built upon French food with local ingredients. Things adapted and changed and modernized. Over time, people got less interested in butter sauces and cream sauces. Those are really traditional things. That was the foundation. Her brilliance was to say, hey, we're here in California and there's all this wonderful stuff here. Use it! Cook with it! That's what I say when I mean the modern way, French way. It wasn't arbitrary, it wasn't some group of people of threw things together. They started from the French foundation, and cooked in a way that people have been cooking for hundreds of years, that made sense. Fortunately, they never fell into the whole eclectic way of cooking, fusion cooking, the way of combining crazy ingredients that sounded fun, instead dishes that made sense and had history and came from a place. That's really how it I think about cooking now and interestingly, to go back to Chez Panisse, Alice was saying, we're here in this place now, and we're going to use these techniques, but we're going to forge a cuisine that's built upon this place, not upon Paris or Provence. The inspiration for a lot of the dishes, and the sentiment that motivated Alice and others there to want to recapture some of their experiences in those other countries. The sentimentality was what motivated them, I mean that in a positive way. I don't mean that in a effete way.

02:00:12:50

Jackson:

Did you hear about Alice Waters before? Did you know she had this type of mentality before you went and applied to work there?

02:00:12:50

Lee:

No. I didn't know. What I knew was what I read in a book that I came across. I mentioned this fellow to you earlier, Arthur Bloomfield, and this is back in the early seventies. He wrote a wonderful little paperback guide that was published by Chronicle books about San Francisco restaurants. It was really more than that, it was San Francisco and local Bay Area. He had a

couple from the East Bay, one was Narsai's, where I ended up working. I took that as a part time while I was waiting for something to come up at Chez Panisse, and I ended up staying there ten years. He had a wonderful description of Chez Panisse and what they were trying to do and of some meal he had had there. It just captured me in a way that made me and my friend who I was traveling with go there. That was 1974. We had a wonderful meal there. It was something that changed my view of the world a little bit. It was so simple and so delicious and so well done. Delicious food cooked wonderfully, but in a casual atmosphere. That was a change from the old days where you went to these temples of gastronomy and you had to get dressed up and the waiters were very formal. I don't even remember the meal I had, but it was transformative. What I knew was what I read, and then I ate there, and then I tried to cook those things we ate, and managed to do it reasonably well. My friend Sean said they were right on, but who knows how it was, it was a long time ago. Then her book started to come out [Alice Waters] and she was entering the national press. There was an article in Newsweek magazine about women in the kitchen and the new wave of cooking. Cooks I should say, that included women. In the old days there were not any women in these kitchens. The famous guys were guys, Bocuse and Verget and everybody, Michel Gerard, Robichon. Here was Alice coming along, and Julia Child was on the TV. There was a shift in constituency, women were coming into the kitchen. What I knew was what I read, and was fortunate to meet her a couple of times when we went there. We went there over a period of years. Then I came out here with the intention of trying to get a job working there.

02:00:16:12

Jackson:

From Illinois?

02:00:16:12

Lee:

Yes. My choice was either New York or San Francisco. San Francisco seemed a lot friendlier than New York City. I also knew people out here, so it was a little more comfortable for me. So I went there two or three times and they kept saying we don't have anything, come back in a month. That's how I ended up taking that job at that other restaurant, which was second on my list. I had gone through this book and listed all the places I thought were possibilities for me, or that were hopefuls for me. Those two were in the East Bay. First was Chez Panisse, second was Narsai's. I kept working on that job at Chez Panisse, but Narsai's gave me something when I walked in there. And I ended up staying there a long time.

02:00:16:53

Jackson:

Was it ten years until a job opened up at Chez Panisse, or did you find yourself learning?

02:00:16:59

Lee:

I found myself learning in a tremendous way. He had a fabulous wine list, really one of the best in the country. I was able to do the same kind of thing that I had done with the Escoffier, which was learn about French wines, and

California wines. All the different rankings called growths. And the experience of being able to taste something every day. To educate the staff and for their own pleasure they would open a couple of bottles of wine a day.

02:00:17:43

Jackson: Even for the cooks?

02:00:17:43

Lee: Yes. You tasted this stuff, and read about it, and that was a tremendous learning experience, analogous to that cooking school thing, where you read about it on a book and you never see the application of it. Here it was the case that you could read about these wines and because it as such a fabulous list you'd get a taste of special things you could never afford to go out and buy. Wine was a lot cheaper in those days, however. Narsai's was kind of on the wine circuit, he was a collector, he was involved in the wine business.

02:00:18:19

Jackson: The chef was the chef-owner?

02:00:18:25

Lee: No. Narsai David was the owner of the restaurant. And the chef was named Robert Boyle. I lost my thought.

02:00:18:57

Jackson: If you want you could tell me if you had jobs cooking in Illinois, that you think may have helped teach you something about cooking particular, what jobs you worked there.

02:00:19:09

Lee: Nothing too specific. This one place I worked in school, this mom and pop that I mentioned, it was a man and wife, and the wife's mother had started this restaurant back when. She still worked there, I can't remember, I think it was twice a week, the grandma would come in. She baked pies and lasagna, it was terrific.

02:00:19:43

Jackson: Was it classic Italian?

02:00:19:43

Lee: Yes, it was classic lasagna. She would make these pies from fruit she had bought, it was not canned stuff. She would make the doughs. That was something that stuck with me. It was unusual. People cooked out of cans, or bought it pre-made. You could buy lasagna frozen and throw it in an oven. She made the sauce and the noodles. I had never seen noodles made before. That was an important thing.

02:00:20:21

Jackson: Was she Italian?

02:00:20:21

Lee: She was not Italian. Italian food was some of what they did, and this lasagna was very popular for a good reason. And her pies were really famous. I imagine she's gone now. This was thirty-five years ago.

02:00:20:44

Jackson: What was the name of the restaurant?

02:00:20:41

Lee: It was called the Hillside Restaurant.

02:00:21:00

Jackson: You can mention the other names if you want.

02:00:21:00

Lee: I won't tell you any others.

02:00:21:02

Jackson: That was a job that influenced you, then.

02:00:21:08

Lee: It gave me an eye opener. Again, it was like what my mother would do, cook fresh or good food as she would say, real food. To have that attitude toward cooking was really good for me. It was about cooking real fresh food, not convenience food, packaged stuff, which doesn't teach you anything. I'm not saying that's bad, I've certainly eaten my share of stuff. But having the attitude toward cooking which is to go and purchase food either from a farmer or a market. And to cook that rather than warm something up that someone else has made in a factory, it was formative for my attitude. We used to go make these bouillabaisse, which is a big Provencal fish stew. We'd search around for the right fish market.

02:00:22:20

Jackson: That must have been hard in Illinois.

02:00:22:17

Lee: It was tricky. We were also enough to Chicago that there was some stuff, but, there was this obsession that I had to cook these things that made me drive around to all these places looking for blue crab. Then out here, things were so different. You have a mild climate in comparison to the Midwest. You have produce year round, which in Illinois you don't—you have produce year-round, but god, what are tomatoes like in the winter time? Even greens and stuff like that, it was all frozen. Coming out here was like a revelation, because everything was so good and so available. There is one of the points where Chez Panisse enters. Alice to this day is talking about cooking from the garden, and has extended that in so many ways to Yale and to Berkeley school district.

02:00:23:47

Jackson: To Yale?

02:00:23:44

Lee: She's working on a project at Yale University to put in an organic garden there. To get away from cafeteria food. To eat stuff that's planted outside and cooked.

02:00:24:06

Jackson: We could use that at Berkeley.

02:00:24:06

Lee: Yeah, really. Where do you eat around here? There's a million restaurants. Is that Swallow Café still in the art museum?

02:00:24:20

Jackson: It's now called the Raw and the Cooked, which is a reference to Levi-Strauss. I know it has like raw food and cooked food, but they changed the names. Would you like to talk about Narsai's? The dates you worked there? Where it is, what position you had? And was there something particular there that helped to train you to become a chef?

02:00:24:46

Lee: Yeah. It's a little bit of an indirect answer. I worked there from June, 1976—I think that's when I started there—to essentially the end of 1985, it might have been January 1986 that I left there. It was a fabulous place. It had the restaurant, which was top notch, and had this wine list that I mentioned that was also top notch. It had a tremendous following, it was a successful place, busy, good food. He had also a catering side business. It was run out of that kitchen but it did all off-site catering. Narsai was involved in the wine world, the Napa world. A lot of the catering was up there, in addition to the usual things like weddings.

02:00:25:57

Jackson: It was in the East Bay?

02:00:25:57

Lee: It was in Kensington, which is a little town wedged in between El Cerrito and Berkeley, up in the hill area. He also, over time in this building which is on Colusa Circle, cool building, wraps around the corner, built a market. It was one of the first terrific markets in the area. It sold pates and wines and salads.

02:00:26:34

Jackson: What was it called?

02:00:26:34

Lee: Narsai's Market. He made a lot of charcuterie, which was good, very good.

02:00:26:42

Jackson: Did you do that with him?

02:00:26:39

Lee: I did very little of it. I tried to get into their kitchen. I was a waiter there for three years, which gave me the contact with the wine. Then I took over his



catering operation, in 1979. That's where it gave me a chance to cook. We were always trying to save money here and there and I was a reasonably good cook, so I would work in the kitchen with the chef, and then go on to the parties and cook these things. That was really when I started to figure out about cooking. He also had a bakery, which preceded Acme Bakery. In fact, a lot of the original bakers that baked for Acme had come from Narsai's Bakery. They had the best baguettes around. They had terrific croissants, all kinds of different breads and pastries. It was very, very good. We opened a little café in the [unintelligible] department store in San Francisco on Union Square and ran that for years. There was a lot of opportunity there, a lot of chance to learn for me. I was able to, crazy enough, to be involved in a lot of that stuff. It was a good restaurant, good market, good bakery, obsessive people. That's how you put out good food. There was a crazy pastry chef named Josef Strausser. He was archetypal German guy from Bavaria. He was this old school guy. He knew everything and could make everything.

02:00:28:42

Jackson: Did you cook for him?

02:00:28:42

Lee: Yeah, I baked for him. There was this other guy who was his assistant, Floyd Goldberg. He was this Jewish guy from New York. So here's this Bavarian Aryan dude running the kitchen. It was a big question, whether—Strausser was a pretty strident German, so we were afraid there was going to be this conflict. They were best of buddies. Floyd, the Jewish guy from New York, Josef the Bavarian field marshal guy. They were obsessive. They put really good stuff out.

02:00:29:28

Jackson: When did you start cooking in the kitchen for the restaurant?

02:00:29:36

Lee: I cooked in the restaurant also, and I continued to run this catering business. Narsai let me go with that. We made a big business out of it. A tremendous amount of catering. We used to do 400 parties a year, which sounds like one a day, not much, but there always concentrated on the weekends. In the summertime we would have three to five parties a day. But it was fun and a good chance to learn how to cook, and I moved back and forth between the kitchen and the catering. Eventually the catering took over because it got quite big. I did that for seven years of the years I was there, and got tired. The restaurant had closed, it had gone downhill, people had lost interest in it, in that French style of cooking. Chez Panisse was on the rise that style of cooking was on the rise. Narsai didn't change it, didn't want to change it. He modernized a little at the end there, but it was too late. So the restaurant shut down, then the market shut down, so we running the catering, which was still going strong. I had done it at that time for a long time, and was getting into my mid-thirties, and was tired of working seventy or eighty hours a week, week in and week out. And I also wanted to cook and there was an

opportunity coming up at Chez Panisse that I knew about. They had always had three cooks and a chef in the kitchen, and they were going to add a cook. I knew Chez Panisse from the old days. I didn't have to start work until 4 o'clock, so I would have lunch there everyday, I knew all the people. It was cheap in those days, it was just a little café that served the leftovers from downstairs. You could eat for six bucks. It was really good. It's a credit card deal now. There was a little group of regulars who came almost everyday, so I got to know them, it being a small restaurant community. So I said I would like to audition for the job, and they said fine. So it was this elaborate thing where you work in the kitchen for a few days with them and they kind of get to know you and you get to know them. You put on a luncheon for the big wigs, and they kind of evaluate you.

02:00:32:12

Jackson:

How frightening.

02:00:32:12

Lee:

Yeah, it's a pretty crazy thing. But I was lucky and I got that job. And that's really where I—that's really where anyone learns to cook is there. It's a path that you go up, from which there's no turning away. You can't go back and cook any other way once you have come to think in the way that you do at Chez Panisse, which is the best freshest ingredients that don't have too much done to them, that have good flavor and beauty in themselves. You can't go any other way after that. I ended up working there from 1987 to—oh, I had a little catering business of my own for a couple of years, too.

02:00:33:14

Jackson:

What was it called?

02:00:33:14

Lee:

Christopher and Clark. I had a partner named Diane Clark. We ran that for a couple years. It was fun, it was hard, but again, I realized through that that I was over catering and I really wanted to cook, so that's when I went to Chez Panisse. I stayed there until September, 2003.

02:00:33:42

Jackson:

Did you think at Narsai's you perfected any cooking techniques that changed when you got to Chez Panisse?

02:00:33:48

Lee:

No, more growing. We were always outside or in a situation where we had no kitchen. We used to do these huge parties, some of them with 400 or 500 people. We did the first five years of the Napa Valley Wine Auction, which was 1000 people, so they were really big, and so we transported a lot of equipment. Typically we would use grills. The return of the grill! So I did a lot of that, and knew how to do that pretty well, I think. But then Chez Panisse, it's a very different being on the line and cooking everyday and learning how to sauté and how to fry. I had reasonable enough talent that I learned pretty quickly. I was always very interested in eating and in food. I

think that's the fundamental qualification for becoming a cook is that you like to eat. I don't mean voraciously, that you enjoy it and you like it, and you're seeking a taste. There's a lot of grilling and spit roasting at Chez Panisse. In the downstairs kitchen there's a huge hearth.

02:00:35:15

Jackson: I've seen pictures of it.

02:00:35:12

Lee: Every night there's cooking in that hearth. Nearly every night, and spit roasting. That harkens back to my little Webber in back of my house. And I had a hole in the ground with a grate over it for a while, and cooked on that. Of course that's the beginning of cooking—the fire out in back. Chez Panisse, there was a lot of that. Again, I was keen enough myself to want to do this grill and spit roast every night. You do that 500, 1000 times and things make sense to you. Now, interestingly, when I see a new cook come into my kitchen who says night after night 'I wanna work on the grill', they do it and you can see that little spark of passion. They wanna get hold of that thing and master it, that's great. I always see myself when I see people that have that drive.

02:00:36:25

Jackson: Do you like to teach people that are so interested?

02:00:36:29

Lee: Yeah. That's really about the best thing about cooking. When you can teach somebody and they can find their own satisfaction and own talent and own success. That's pretty great.

02:00:36:54

Jackson: Inspiring. What cooking techniques did you really solidify at Chez Panisse?

02:00:37:05

Lee: The grill and the spit roaster.

02:00:37:11

Jackson: Sauté?

02:00:37:09

Lee: Yeah, sauté. Again, you do it over and over. We always had a little vegetable accompaniment to the entrée. We used to joke about it. It is a lot of pressure to put out a really top notch dish there, of course, being the restaurant that it is. There's a lot of effort involved in spit roasting and grilling, and it's a hot fire, there's smoke and heat, all kinds of stuff going on. It's a tremendously physical thing. Cooking is a tremendously physical thing. People don't realize that. A lot of young cooks don't realize how much physical energy it takes, how much stress, and you're on you're feet—

02:00:38:15

Jackson: The big pots—

02:00:38:15

Lee:

Yeah, the big pots and the bags of onions, and the lamb carcasses that weigh fifty or sixty pounds that you have to throw over your shoulder. It's hot and long, and you have to be on top of it every second. And there's the grunt work of it too, like chopping onions and shallots. You don't realize how important it is for you to do your own mise-en-place to make a dish, which is chopping the onions or tomatoes or making a little vinaigrette.

02:00:38:54

Jackson:

What is the translation of that?

02:00:38:54

Lee:

To put in place. To get everything lined up, put everything in order that you need for your dish. That's one of the things you do recognize. I remember the light went on for me one day, I knew how much control you have over your dish when you do all of it. You don't have someone else you has not quite done it right, or not made enough of whatever is. It's like building a house, in a way, maybe that's a weak analogy, because who builds houses? But it's like when you know that little joist in the corner, and you put that in place and that, and you squared it, and all that kind of thing. It's an analogous situation. Back to your question about the techniques. You learn everything there, that's another part of the brilliance of Chez Panisse. You make soups 1000 times, you sauté 1000 times, you do the spit roaster 1000 times. You really come to understand these things, and how they work and where you're going—you learn how to make mayonnaise 1000 times—it's funny. You hear all these anecdotal things, like 'always temper your eggs before you make mayonnaise—. Well, we never, ever tempered our eggs. In fact, I think I broke [ruined] a mayonnaise there twice, and it was when I tried to temper them.

02:00:40:20

Jackson:

Really?

02:00:40:20

Lee:

You can get around that if you understand how mayonnaise works. You get to the essence of cooking at a restaurant like Chez Panisse, the fundamentals of cooking, the real heart of it. You come to understand a lot of stuff there. I was saying about these vegetables, so the joke was, we always pick what part of the meal we were gonna do. Someone would be on the salad course, someone would be on the middle course, whether that was pasta or soup or fish. And two people would be on the main course. One would do the meat or protein or fish or poultry, and the other one would do the vegetables. We would say, 'I wanted to do the vegetables', and that would mean you were hiding in the vegetables, or you were hiding from the massive amount of work that were required by the other stations in the kitchen. That was never true, because cooking those vegetables just right is really, really hard. You can't go too far, you can't go too little. You have to have the right amount in the pan so that you're not throwing it away all the time. Because you go in these

groups of four or six or eight, depending how the orders get placed. I remember this day, when I was no longer on the line there, I was a chef at this point. Someone was sick, so I helped on the line, and I did the vegetables. I was helping this woman Jennifer Sherman, great cook, great person, who worked there for quite a long time. I said, "Well I'll do the vegetables because I can take care of whatever else needs to be done and it's not too much responsibility." I remember doing the vegetables, and I would do a six and use a certain pot, and then I would do five or whatever the number was, and I would never have any left. And she looked at me and said, "How long does it take until you get exactly the right amount in the pan?" I hadn't thought about it once, and I said "I don't know, a long time." That's what I mean, you have that there, and you do it over and over, you finesse it, after a while you get it just right. So, cooking vegetables, maybe that's my answer to your question. It's a brilliant restaurant.

02:00:42:50

Jackson:

Is there anything unusual about the logistics of the kitchen itself? Is it smaller?

02:00:43:07

Lee:

At CP?

02:00:43:07

Jackson:

Yeah.

02:00:43:04

Lee:

Yeah, small kitchen space wise. We're all thrown into a small space together. There's three tables, each of them is about six feet long. There are four or five people working in that place, plus an intern. So the immediate space that we're in is quite compact. You're elbow to elbow. There's a good part to that, too. That proximity keeps you working smoothly and in synch as a team. The other answer to that question is that I believe the kitchen at that restaurant takes up more floor space than the dining room, which is unusual. Going back to the old days, or going into a city like New York or Chicago or London, you have tiny kitchens, because real estate is at a premium. They are even squashed more so. In one sense we are all in a little compact group in one part of the kitchen. But the kitchen itself is quite expansive. There's a little pastry section at the ends, and a butcher space down below, and a dish room over there, and a waiter station over there.

02:00:44:33

Jackson:

IS there a butcher that works there full-time?

02:00:44:33

Lee:

No, no, no. That's another thing about Chez Panisse. We all do our own butchering. That's a powerful thing, because butchery is a dying art.

02:00:44:46

Jackson:

That's intense, too.

02:00:44:46

Lee:

Very intense. Again, you get a passion for that from butchering lambs 1000 times, and you know how they work. If you go in to a grocery store, there might be one butcher, and there might be five or six other people who are glorified clerks. This is test. Go in and ask them to cut up a chicken, and you'll see the most horrifying acts of butchery you've ever seen. It's amazing that these people are getting paid as butchers. It's a dying profession, like a lot of those crafts and guild professions. I think that's important, too. That's part of the whole picture of being a cook, is knowing how the fish is put together, knowing how it's filleted, how the lamb is taken apart, where this muscle comes from, and at which bones you sever the shoulder from the rib. Whenever young people come along and I teach them butchery—I do a lot of charcuterie, so it was important to me to know that too. Apart from needing to know that from cooking at Chez Panisse— When I teach people now butchery, I half-jokingly say to them I am going to teach you this, and it is absolutely something you need to know in order to become a good cook, but you'll never use it again outside of this restaurant. Well, there's a few restaurants that do it, Oliveto, Chez Panisse, us, everybody else—well I can't say that, but most places now buy portion cuts, or at best they buy the prime cuts of meat. There aren't going to be many butchers down the road. It's sad.

02:00:46:58

Jackson:

Is there a always a long line to work at Chez Panisse?

02:00:46:58

Lee:

A very long line.

02:00:47:00

Jackson:

How long?

02:00:47:00

Lee:

Pretty long. It's long. It's maybe shorter these days then it was years ago, but let me give you an example. In the early nineties the average tenure of a cook was around five or six years, which in the restaurant business was a long time. There were a couple of us who had stayed there for many, many years, but downstairs it was about five, six years. People stay around five, seven years there. It's a good place to work, no better place to learn. It's a good environment, good food, busy. It's shorter now. People have gotten older, some have families, dropped out of cooking. The demand for private chefs that kind of rose up eight or ten years ago took a lot of people from that kitchen. Because when you're working as a cook 45 hours a week-

02:00:48:19

Jackson:

That's not many hours.

02:00:48:16

Lee:

Actually, that's pretty good, that's five days a week, eight and a half hours a day.

02:00:48:24

Jackson:

Most people who cook work sixty hours a week, I guess that's when you're coming up.

02:00:48:30

Lee:

Maybe when you're coming up. So you work 45 hours a week, and you make, if you're beginning, about \$32,000 a year. Working 45 hours a week. Maybe if you older you're making forty. But you become a personal chef, and you work three or four hours a day, five days a week, and you make twice that. People got out of it for different reasons. Maybe they didn't want to be on the line. Again, it's a physically stressful job. Maybe you're in your late thirties, you're forty and you're tired, maybe you've got two kids. Maybe you're a woman and you want to have a baby, and you can't cook on the line anymore. We lost a bunch of people to the private chef world over the years. What I'm getting at is that the group is a shorter tenured group than it was years ago. It's still by restaurant standards a good place. People stay. People stay at a good place.

02:00:49:39

Jackson:

So if you want to trail there or {stauch?} there is there a line for that, too?

02:00:49:43

Lee:

There's a line for that, too.

02:00:49:47

Jackson:

A line for free work.

02:00:49:44

Lee:

Yeah. They use a lot of interns at Chez Panisse. There's usually two or three interns at a time, from cooking schools mostly. You have to be a certain level cook to get in there. At one point we started requiring restaurant experience. So not only did you have to come from a cooking school but you had to have worked in a restaurant, so you kind of knew how the place worked. Because sometimes we would get inexperienced, fresh out of school, they had left computer programming and decided they wanted to cook and couldn't dice an onion, so suddenly the free labor becomes something you have to sweep up after and pay a lot of attention to. Mind you, most of the interns that came there were pretty good. Some of them would get jobs there after they finished school. There is one woman who is helping to run the café who was one of my interns years ago. Two interns work for me now at Eccolo restaurant, who I had helped along, and are fabulous.

02:00:51:17

Jackson:

How long did it take for you to become the chef de cuisine at Chez Panisse?

02:00:51:17

Lee:

They call it chef. For many years they have had two people share that job, because it's a big job. It's open six days a week.

02:00:51:34

Jackson: How many tables?

02:00:51:34

Lee: There are fifty seats, give or take. They do two seatings every night, so it's about 100 people. It's a big job, there's a lot of stress and pressure. Getting it right is hard, ordering food, organizing the staff, overseeing things, it's a lot. So we had two people, have still two people to keep up with. There's also a lot of off-site stuff. Alice is involved in with many benefits.

02:00:52:10

Jackson: Who were you working with at the time, the other chef?

02:00:52:08

Lee: I worked with a couple of chefs. Jean-Pierre Moulle, David Tanis, Kelsey Kerr.

02:00:52:40

Jackson: How long were you the chef there?

02:00:52:40

Lee: Nine years.

02:00:52:46

Jackson: How many years were you cooking there before you became the chef?

02:00:52:48

Lee: Seven.

02:00:53:07

Jackson: You were talking about the benefits and things. When you were cooking professionally, and you can talk about before you were cooking professionally, when you're teaching yourself these things, becoming a part of the food community. Did you participate in extra-curricular events, food events, did you donate your time to these things?

02:00:53:22

Lee: Oh yeah. I didn't belong to many clubs. I was an anti-club person in many ways. Clubs seem to become about themselves and not about their purpose. I'm talking too much smack about things, especially cooking schools, so don't get me wrong about that. You know the James Beard flap that came up.

02:00:53:57

Jackson: What's that?

02:00:53:57

Lee: The James Beard House in New York, which is a non-profit which was put together for a number a reasons, to preserve the memory of James Beard, preserve his house as a food museum. Also to raise money for the food community, specifically to offer scholarships to talented young chefs around the country. Over the last couple of months there was a scandal about money



vanishing. Hundreds of thousands of dollars, this that and the other, leadership. There was a huge consulting board, most of whom scrambled after this came out. It turns out, I don't know if I've got my figures exactly right, that they were raising \$4 million a year, and they were only giving \$29,000 in scholarships out of this money. So there were huge parties and a well-paid staff. On the one hand, you go into something like that and that's what it becomes about, the club, and not about the scholarships. That's not true of all organizations. But I kind of stay away from most organizations because they become too clubby for me.

02:00:55:43

Jackson:

When James Beard has the dinner and they invite in chefs to cook and people pay money for the dinner, is that the money that was supposed to go to scholarships?

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Lee:

Right. They did a tremendous amount of dinners, many nights a week. But it wasn't going where it was supposed to. I would always, however, be involved in benefits. Just because we did that and like to help organizations and schools. We did a lot of events for the King school garden project. We always helped with AIDS benefits, that was one chosen area of, let's say philanthropy. Volunteerism that would we participate in.

02:00:57:00

Jackson:

Did you donate food too?

02:00:56:57

Lee:

Food, too. Meals on Wheels was one we always got involved in, to serve the infirm. At my restaurant Eccolo, we have done a few things. We donated food to many Kerry fundraisers. But we are such a young restaurant we don't have a lot of time and money to put into projects like Chez Panisse, but we will down the road when we get our feet on the ground. We have only been open six months, we're really new..

02:00:57:52

Jackson:

Have you received any higher education that might have affected the way that you became you a chef? You said you went to school earlier.

02:00:57:59

Lee:

That's hard. Part of the sea change that happened as a result of Chez Panisse, with regard to the food profession and the food world, really, was the entering into an otherwise middle class or working class world of cooks—being a cook wasn't something that was chosen by the middle class until Chez Panisse came along.

02:00:58:58

Jackson:

Becoming a cook, choosing that as a profession?

02:00:58:56

Lee: Because you became an academic or a doctor, or some profession. That's where college educated kids went.

02:00:59:12

Jackson: So cooking became a respected profession?

02:00:59:14

Lee: Cooking became respected. Here was a group of people who were from the great universities, traveled—two things, education and travel. I'm going to start to sound snooty on this, and I don't mean to, because not everybody gets an education and not everybody gets to travel. But that stratum of people suddenly started to go into this world. They brought their education and their travel and their world experiences to the cooking world. It really made it possible for a lot of people to come into cooking who otherwise wouldn't have chosen it. I remember when I said to my grandfather that that's what I wanted to do, he said "Oh, I don't know, are you sure? You can probably make an okay living"-

02:01:00:15

Jackson: What year was this?

02:01:00:15

Lee: That was 1972 or 1973. You didn't go to college and become a cook. But now people do. I don't mean cooking school. Well, of course, in Europe the system was very different. After you reach a certain point in high school, which was sort of 16, you either went into your craft or you went on to the advanced level in school. There was a version of that here. Let me get back on my track. I think that was part of the sixties cultural revolution. People became craftsmen, and chose professions that were maybe romanticized. Some people didn't want to be insurance salesmen, or whatever the standard profession was that people followed, that people thought were respectable for college people to go into. So suddenly you see an arts and crafts renaissance. People are entering—making—becoming carpenters. In fact there was a joke at Chez Panisse that even the dishwashers had Ph.D. It was kind of funny, because there were three bussers who were Ph.D. candidates. Back to Alice. So people could come to work in a kitchen. You should see the resumes we get now. Almost all of them are college educated. You see things like art history, English, philosophy. It's mostly arts and sciences. Fewer sciences than arts. That makes a really different kitchen. It makes a different conversation, an entirely different attitude toward cooking. Someone will say, "When I was in this place in Italy, I saw this." There is a much more worldly, enlightened person at Chez Panisse. Maybe it's an American phenomenon, who is coming into the world of cooking now.

02:01:03:09

Jackson: Do you think it's about money? Chez Panisse seems to pay people more.

02:01:03:13

Lee:

They do, although it's not as true anymore. A lot of other restaurants have come up. I remember years ago we were having trouble finding cooks and it was because people could make more money at other restaurants. And we thought we were paying people more. That was always one of Alice's mandates, she wanted to offer people a livable wage, as a lot of places didn't in the old days. It was tough. I am trying to force this little point across that you had people in the kitchen who came from a different education level, background, a different cultural background, different socio-economic than years before that. That changed a lot.

02:01:04:28

Jackson:

Where did you go to school and what did you study?

02:01:04:28

Lee:

I studied philosophy and I went to school in Illinois. And I would never encourage a person not to—you get your eyes opened. You get to see a little bit of the world, you get to meet people from other cultures. I think for a guy like me from the Midwest—you know, you had black people and you had white people and you didn't see—then you come to a place like Berkeley and you see there is a huge Indian community, there's a huge various Asian communities, there's black communities and Hispanic communities. It's just so diverse out here. My son plays soccer and has for years, and the Hispanic kids playing from all over South America and Central America and Mexico. It's just something that I didn't see as a boy back in Illinois, even in a big city like Chicago. Likewise you get food. And you get music and you get art and you get all of these things that come from other cultures. I don't know if you feel this way about Berkeley, it's where you go to school, but it's a different world from Minnesota.

Jackson:

There's even a major called sustainability. American Studies, you can focus it on that.

02:01:06:06

Lee:

It's pretty amazing.

02:01:06:08

Jackson:

It addresses a lot of current concerns.

02:01:06:09

Lee:

Right. I hope that wasn't too vague and rambling, that last thing.

[Audio File 3]

Jackson:

Can you say a few things?

03:00:00:11

Lee:

Hello, Wednesday morning, November 17<sup>th</sup>.

03:00:00:11

Jackson:

Alright. We can start now. It is Wednesday, November 17<sup>th</sup>. This is disc number three. So Last time we were talking a lot about Chez Panisse, and we are still going to be talking a lot about Chez Panisse today. But I want to start with your travel experiences. If you could, talk about your traveling experiences, and relate them especially to what you think they brought to your food identity and how it helped you become a chef.

Lee:

Okay, let's see. I first went to Europe in 1978 with a friend of mine, a very good friend of mine who teaches back in Illinois. It was kind of a funny experience, but it was a good one overall. He was teaching in London for a summer, and I went over to meet up with him there. We ate around London a little bit, and we ate a really cool little place in Oxford, where he was at that time. It has now become a famous place that's called the Manor on the Four Seasons. It was just a little place at that time, owned by a man named Raymond Blanc, who I subsequently met and found out that that was the first year that they were open when we went there. But the food was pretty delicious. He's a Frenchman and I'm not sure how he ended up in England, but he was cooking there and did some really traditional stuff that was quite delicious. It was a time when I was first getting seriously in cooking, or had just gotten—I was in California at the time, and was in the food business here, and was studying food and wine and what not.

03:00:02:14

Jackson:

Was this the first time you went abroad?

03:00:02:14

Lee:

Yes the first time, I was 26 years old. We ate around London at a couple of places there, famous places there—the Savoy Hotel, which was very stiff and stuffy, but we had some wonderful wine and some good food. I remember in particular this one place we went called the Carlton Hotel. It's in Sloan Square. They had a couple of restaurants, I think, but it was the one in particular called the Grill Room, which was mostly kind of French food but a little bit of British food. Of course this was way before the so-called Modern British cooking that's going on now. I remember I had this dish which was veal kidneys with mint sauce. We had a delicious bottle of Beaujolais that was under Paul Bocuse's name. I still cook that veal kidney with mint sauce to this day. That was really one of the first kind of eye-openers, I had never seen anything like that. I really indulged my pursuit or knowledge of food much later, when we began going to Spain and to Italy. That was in the mid 1980's and up till the present. My mother-in-law lived in Spain for many, many years, on the Costa Brava, which is a stretch of Mediterranean sea coast up near where it joins the French border there. It includes Catalonia, from Barcelona up. She was about two hours north of Barcelona, about forty-five minutes south of the French border. It's a little sea town, called L'escala. It's an interesting town. It is a fishing port. It's overrun a little bit in the summertime by tourists, mostly from France, who come to spend their August holiday. Historically it's kind of interesting. It's where the Greeks and

Romans first entered the Iberian Peninsula. There's some ruins there from that time, that were recently refurbished. In 1992, when the Olympics were in Barcelona the government spent a lot of money making it a very kind of tourist-accessible place with promenades and these walks through the pines along the sea. It was a pretty funky place when we went there before. I remember I was running one morning through this pine forest, and came across this mosaic floor that was in the middle of this wooded little section, mind you it was right on the sea. I stopped to look, said "What is this?" And it was the floor from a Roman structure.

03:00:05:43

Jackson:

Wow. Did the government fix it up or did you just happen to find it?

03:00:05:43

Lee:

Well, there was a little plaque next to it, saying the date. I don't remember the exact date—379 BC or something. It was spectacular. In fact this little promenade is just down from the Punta Romana, that's what it was named that—it was where people landed, Romans landed. So there's a Greek city—actually above and sort of upon it is this Roman city that was built about five-hundred years later by Roman explorers. So, that part is interesting, historically. But what I'm getting at is this fishing fleet, which fishes for anchovies. There are about six boats which are mostly families and some other workers, but you can see that there are these brothers and the dad and what not. They set off from this port that was only about fifty yards from Janet's mother's apartment, right on the pier there. They fish these anchovies from the Med, and I think they're the best anchovies in the world, they are spectacular anchovies. And they are brined rather than salted, so they have a moistness and a freshness that salted anchovies never seem to get. I used to go down to this pier every morning and watch them come in. And they haul large numbers of anchovies. I can't imagine, can't conceive of how they fish so many. They just do it with nets, so it's actually a sustainable fishery since it's not a factory operation. The boats are maybe fifty or sixty feet long. They would be stacked with these wooden flats and these fat, beautiful anchovies that come from the waters there. They are so fresh they look like they are painted.

03:00:07:55

Jackson:

I've only seen small ones.

03:00:07:55

Lee:

Incredible fish. They had some by-catch, which were mackerel. There were these larger mackerel, they were maybe ten inches long. They had this sort of herringbone color to their skin. I would buy some of these fish almost every day, and take them back and do something with them—either grill them or marinate them or preserve them in some way for salads later. In fact, I would do this so often that finally everyone said to me "do we have to eat anchovies again?" It was really cool. And the people who didn't know how the system worked—you could go up to the side of the boat and say, "May I have some

anchovies?” And some had better ones than others. You would go to the person that you trusted and liked. So people who didn’t know the system would come in and say “May I have a kilo of anchovies?” And the fellow would say “No, no. Here you don’t order by the kilo, you order by the handful. How many handfuls do you want?” And then he’d grab a handful and go like that. And then you’d pay a few hundred pesetas or whatever it was. This was before the Euro. That was cool. Then there was a restaurant there, called the Fisherman’s Bar, which is a totally funky place. All the language up there is in Catalan, it’s not Spanish.

03:00:09:31

Jackson:

What languages do you speak again?

03:00:09:31

Lee:

French and a little Spanish and Italian and English. I used to speak German but it’s been too long. So in this bar, there was an old guy who owned the bar. He had a big fireplace maybe eight feet tall. It had a huge open hearth that was about three by three, or four by four. It had a very heavy iron grate that went in it. He would—when the anchovies were running, which was in the summertime—would—there was a sea of tables that you would sit at, maybe twenty tables or something like that and they were all just long tables. So you would be sitting with other people whom you didn’t know, and you could order from the menu, which wasn’t very big. It had like squid on it, fried squid, and grilled squid. It had a couple of fish items, it had a lot of shellfish. Of course it was northern Spain, so you could get Paella and stuff like that. That was only on Friday and Saturday. But for the anchovies, he would build a huge fire out of coal and he would let that burn down so it was embers and not too hot, and he would sprinkle the fire with salt to kind of temper it a little bit, coarse salt. And then there was this big brace, it was two parts, and it was hinged. He would lay the anchovies nose to tail, all through this grate, you had them all bookended. I’m sorry, he sprinkled them with salt, then shut, and he would set that right down on the coals. Of course I got right back to Chez Panisse and said, “We are gonna do this.” I bought a bunch of little grates. They weren’t as medieval as his big cast iron one was. They were little steel ones, chrome steel ones. We did the same thing. I guess what I’m saying, you see these little things and you have these experiences and you taste this food and you want to recreate that and recapture that experience. That was pretty big. That’s just one example—there was another little restaurant that was just a five-minute walk around the corner that was in a really odd building. This old seaport had been, not modernized, but there were a couple of modern buildings built around the seaport. This one was a sort of, high rise is too strong a word. It was maybe a four or five story group of condominiums. It was way fancier than anything else around. They had a restaurant on one end that had wonderful ice cream and a couple little stores that went around the perimeter of the ground level floor. And on the portside, on the seaside, looking out onto the sea was this cute little place. It was run by these two guys, and it was called Bar Manolo. The guy who owned it was

called Manolo. He cooked, and his friend did the front. They had maybe six tables, it was really tiny, it was really cool, it was romantic except that it was set in this apartment building. But he forgot about that, and he had a big display case filled with ice, and all his fish, shellfish mostly, would be laid out on this thing. We would go there often, because it was five minutes away and it was great. Tom, our son, was little at the time, and he would eat fried squid and drink Coca Cola. It was very funny, because he learned how to order his squid and Coca Cola in Spanish, and that was pretty cool. But he did really great stuff, there was no one else back in the kitchen with him, no prep cook, no dishwasher.

03:00:13:42

Jackson: No dishwasher?

03:00:13:44

Lee: There was no one else in the kitchen. No dishwasher, no nothing.

03:00:13:45

Jackson: He did all his prep and everything?

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Lee: He did the whole deal. He would take his pot over to the sink and scrub it out and bring it back. He was a very good cook, so I copied some of the things that he did.

03:00:14:02

Jackson: Like what?

03:00:14:02

Lee: He made a delicious Paella, I hung out and talked to him about that. And he described in great detail how it should be. It's very hard to describe how to make something like that, something like risotto. How you determine how much liquid there should be, how the liquid should be seasoned, how much crisp should be on the bottom, how you get that crisp bottom without burning it. You like the little crispy part on the bottom; it can't be burned; the rice has to be cooked to the right doneness. It's a very tricky calculation. And then he made these wonderful platters of fried shellfish that were fabulous. He talked about that, how this one should be floured and this one should be battered, and what the combination should be. He was really thoughtful about this stuff. He was a grumpy old guy, but he was really thoughtful. And he had really nice fish, of course being a fishing port you could get really nice fish. But there wasn't a wide, wide selection. The Med, like everything else, is kind of overfished now. I don't know if it was then, it didn't seem like it. Some of the shops had a lot of choices. I don't know if they were flown in to Barcelona or what. Oh, there was another great fish there called Hake, which is in the cod family. That was a really fabulous fish. It was inexpensive at the time. A lot of things were inexpensive at that time. He was very helpful and knowledgeable and—well he had this air of grumpiness. He was grumpy to some people, but if you could talk to him a little bit, he softened up. There

was another place up near this point which I described, the Punta Romana, called the Octopus Bar. It too was one of these little places. It was just him and a woman, and I'm not sure if the woman was his young wife or his daughter. He was probably about forty or so. She was about twenty-five or so. She ran the front of the house and he did the back. It was a hidden place, around this little corner. There was a side street that came up to the main road. The side street was a one way, which nobody obeyed, and his little place was almost sort of on the corner there. He had a couple of tables out front. I went in there one day and decided to have something to eat. When I walked in I saw he had all these salamis and hams and things like that. I thought to myself, "Whoa, this guy has something special here." It turns out he made them all at this place. So I kind of went back there often and talked to him a lot.

Jackson: In the kitchen?

03:00:17:17

Lee: Yeah. I saw how he made his stuff; how he treated the legs, the pork legs, for the ham. It wasn't prosciutto, it was more the Spanish style, which is dryer, generally. It's a drier, saltier ham than prosciutto. I hung out with him a bit. It was a cool place, because all he served with it was these salamis and octopus. That was it. He had octopus done in a couple of different ways. He fried it, he grilled it on these skewers. But the best way, I thought, was that he had cooked them in a salty water. He said it should be the saltiness of the sea, which is what we all learn to do now, so that you keep the salt balance in the fish. He served little slices of that on a plate, covered with thin, quarter of an inch, octopus tentacles, drizzled with olive oil, salt, lemon juice, and sprinkled with paprika. You get a little bowl of wine, you don't get a glass of wine, you get a bowl of wine, which is customary in the old-style up there. That was another thing. The story is getting really, really long, but a lot of those same things wherever you go. So we went to that town a lot, we ate a lot around that area, because—

03:00:18:49

Jackson: Because it was good!

03:00:18:49

Lee: It was great. Janet's mother lived there, there was a seaside, so that's great for kids, you know. The seashore. She lived there for such a long time, it was great, we'd always be able to stay at someone's apartment, so it wasn't expensive to do. It was really pretty cool. Another time we actually rented a place in the town. It was on the property of this sort of mansion-like place that supposedly—reputedly—was owned by an absentee drug dealer who had fled. I don't know, it's a very grand story. But the woman who ran it, Sue, was his wife. She was very quiet about what happened, anyway, he was somewhere else. She had a little house, a cabana, and it had a wood burning fireplace, it turned out. We said, we're going to rent this place. We cooked a lot. You could harvest snails from the little nearby forested area, and there



was lot of squid around, and of course these anchovies. There is fabulous lamb, and fabulous chickens in that area.

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Jackson: Really?

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Lee: Yeah, just delicious. So of course I went down and made friends with the butcher, who was a woman.

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Jackson: That must be pretty unusual there.

03:00:20:17

Lee: It's pretty unusual. She was the daughter of the guy who owned this shop, which obviously helped make it possible for her to do that. Women just don't do such a thing. Still to this day. She was really cool, and I kind of befriended her and would get these nice little cuts of lamb, and she'd talk about things. Of course, I was in the restaurant business and blah blah blah—That was very good. And then one year we went off on an excursion to this area called La Cerdanya, which is a valley—mountain valley—which divides Spain from France. So you drive up into the Pyrenees, and then you get over the top and you go into this valley. It stretches east west from the Med inland quite a long way. It's traditionally a sausage and salami making area. So, we kind of went on this salami tour.

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Jackson: You've had a lot of experience with that in your travels, charcuterie.

03:00:21:36

Lee: Yeah, well that's what I was interested in, that's kind of what I was pursuing. I mean it kind of fired it, and was actually the target of the hunt often, too. So that was a pretty dramatic. I visited a lot of places there. We ended up in this little town called Llivia, which is a very interesting place. It's a hamlet of Spain, set within France. So you leave Spain, you're in France, you come to this town, it says you're entering Spain. It was a town that Carlos [Pamero?] had stayed in and built homes in and whatnot, so the Spanish government wanted to maintain it. So here was this Spanish hamlet inside France. So we fell into this town, ended up staying there—it was an uncomfortable stay, because we stayed in this boarding house. There was nothing else, it turns out there was a music festival that weekend. We had no idea and there was hardly any place to stay so we had this funky place. But there was a wonderful restaurant called Plaza 35, it was owned by these two Algerian brothers, and they cooked fabulous food, too. It was Spanish food. We went there night after night after night. They were very nice to us, which was pleasant, because we had a little child. They took care of him and gave him stuff. But they too made salami, and they had a lot of delicious food. We talked to them about how they cooked snails, and kind of hung out a little bit.

03:00:23:31

Jackson:

In the kitchen, too?

03:00:23:31

Lee:

Yeah. And it turns out that the little hotel where we stayed was owned by this guy who was a chef, who knew San Francisco. And so I started hanging out with him, and seeing how he was cooking. You know, you do these things and you keep bringing them back, and you make it part of your repertoire. So then years later, I started getting interested in Italian food. And so I started traveling to Italy and doing the same thing. Most of my time was spent in Tuscany, in Florence, because I knew people there, and would go there, and became very close with a butcher there named Dario [Cichinni?], and spent quite a bit of time in his little mountain top town, in his kitchen, making this and that and the other. Then he sent me off to a salami maker named Andrea Marini, who was in a town about an hour away from him, in a town called Pistoia, which is on the edge of Florence, or out of Florence, and sort of the next town over. And so there's a lot of manufacturing, it's on the edge of farmland, and there's cheesemakers there and salami makers, and there is a lot of stuff like that, so it's kind of interesting. So I spent some time in Marini's place, and got pointers and helpful information from him. I traveled around the area, ate in restaurants, Benedetta Vitali, who owns Zibibbo restaurant, I spent some time with her. She is a very good cook and a kind woman. That's in Florence, on the outskirts of Florence. I think she's cooking the best food in Tuscany, myself. Really good. So you know, you go on these crawls, and try to find people and try to learn things, and all those things were of interest to me. I went there specifically to know about them, to learn how to cook them, and to bring them back. So, yeah, traveling, that's one of the questions I often ask new cooks who are going to come in, or are considering coming to work for me in some capacity, is how much they've traveled, because you have an experience outside of America, you have experience with the other culture, you see that food, you see the way people really cook that food, you taste those different flavors. You can't really replicate them here, not truly, there's so much involved. For example, at Zibibbo, there's a garden across the street, a big open spot. An old guy takes care of it, he grows about eight different things and brings them to the restaurant. Well, he picks them and he walks across the street and delivers them to the place.

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Jackson:

That's cheating.

03:00:26:59

Lee:

Yeah, and so you just—it's important to get a sense of how food really is supposed to be. And that's why people like Alice, not people like Alice, that's why Alice has talked for so long about cooking from the garden, and local produce and all of that. You know, it's an evolution of a time when you did have a garden across the street, or are still lucky enough to have a garden across the street to bring you things.

03:00:27:44

Jackson:

Okay, you say that you ask people who are interested in working in the kitchen if they have traveled. Would it matter to you where they traveled? What if they said they traveled to China?

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Lee:

No, it's all that. In fact, that would be really fascinating to have had that different experience. I mean Europe is different enough than the US, but to go into a completely different world than China or Southeast Asia or Middle East

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Jackson:

You deal with fish sauce.

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Lee:

Yeah, interestingly enough, there was a woman who was an intern with us for four months, just this past summer who had lived in Africa, East Africa, for a couple of years. She didn't really bring any recipes or anything like that, because they were in an impoverished place in Africa and had nothing to eat anyway. They kind of ate lizards and rice. She had a very different perspective on things and brings that energy and that change of world view that I think happens to you from an experience such as that, to our kitchen. She spoke four African languages, and not Swahili.

03:00:29:07

Jackson:

Not Swahili? Why?

03:00:29:07

Lee:

No. Little local languages. It's remarkable.

03:00:29:17

Jackson:

I ate with someone from Kenya once, and he made this dish. It was greens and they were braised, and he made this white corn dish. It was almost exactly like polenta, but it was made with white corn. It was really, really good.

03:00:29:31

Lee:

Yeah. So people who have that experience—and hers was dramatic, obviously—just bring a different tone, a different view, a different take on all of these things. She had also lived in Paris for nine months after getting out of Africa, so had that to bring, so it's—traveling changes you. You realize that there's more than Wal-Mart, and big cars.

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Jackson:

So would you think twice about hiring someone if they hadn't traveled?

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Lee:

I'd prefer it if they traveled. You need to see a little something else, in order to have a richness to your thinking and to your cooking. By richness, I mean a little bit of openness, a little bit of experience. Obviously not everyone can do

that. I have some young people who work for me who really haven't had much opportunity-

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Jackson: Financial opportunity?

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Lee: Yeah. Or just in terms of time or life. However, one guy who is twenty years old is Iranian, so he comes from a different cultural background, and you know, that kind of changes him, it makes him different from a twenty year old American kid. And that's good.

03:00:31:11

Jackson: I read in a review of your once that you're considering opening a restaurant in Italy. Why didn't you? How did that go?

03:00:31:16

Lee: Oh gosh. Yeah, I worked on that for about a year. I had wanted to move to Italy, and was looking for a place there, and kind of had the feelers out with people I know there. And something finally did come along after about seven or eight months. It was a restaurant, a small restaurant, in a small hilltop town in Chianti, the valley, called Costello di Volpaia. It's a curious place. It's a mountaintop village that was almost defunct. The village was bought by a Milanese industrialist. He bought it for his daughter's wedding present. It is this small place, and there is no commercial district to it. It's got one little piazza. This castle was on one side of the piazza, and the church, and apartments and houses and stuff. And they rent some of these apartments to tourists. And they make wine and honey and olive oil. They have a very, very sophisticated press. In most of Italy you can't change the facades of any historically significant buildings. You can do nothing to the outside except maintain it. And then you open the doors of the church is this sort of state of the art winery. It's very curious. It looks beautiful from the outside. It looks beautiful from the inside as well. Also the castle has in it the olive press, which is also a very, very sophisticated press inside of this 16th Century castle. So there is the castle with the little wine tasting room and the restaurant which we were going to take over, thirty-five seats or something.

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Jackson: Wow, you were going to be housed in a castle.

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Lee: Yeah. It was pretty romantic. The church has the winery in it, as I said. And there is a little osteria, a little tiny restaurant across the street that's owned by a woman and her daughter. It has honestly about three tables downstairs, four upstairs. Upstairs is this grand expansion. The place to eat is downstairs at this big table, and mama is there. They have delicious food. They have I think the best ravioli I've ever had, which are just ricotta and butter and sage. Very traditional. Most of the dishes are braised, so it's not sophisticated cooking, but it's just kind of the real thing. And then there's a cafe across the

street, it's about fifteen minutes' drive from this butcher [Cichini?]. You can either go across the back mountain way, or you can come through the valley. Interestingly, it gets pretty cold in the winter time, there was snow up there a few years back when we were last—two Januaries ago when we were there. We were going to take this place over, and spent a long time working with them—emails, telephone—and then finally we went there to shake on the deal and sign papers. The long and the short of it is that my family decided they didn't want to pick up and leave. So we were literally signing the papers, and we were looking them over, and I could see there was trouble. I said, "Listen, we just need to think about it overnight. That was a Saturday night, I think. Maybe it was a Sunday night. It was a weekend night.

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Jackson:

You were in Italy thinking about it?

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Lee:

We were there. We were in the home of the people who owned the castle and the village. They were very sweet. [Stianti Mascaroni?] is their name, very nice people. Again Milanese money is all over Chianti, and it's interesting because the locals kind of resent the outsiders coming in, in a way. They are often very wealthy people who can afford to grand things, and nobody wants to live a grand life in Tuscany. Tuscans are very—they don't like change.

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Jackson:

Traditional?

03:00:37:05

Lee:

They are traditional people. They don't like outsiders coming in. We had gone through the place and gone through all of the details. We basically had our agreement ready and we're going to start buying the licenses the next day. It was what they call a seasonal restaurant, which is a seven month license. It's a place that's open in the better weather, the better time of year. We were going to rent it from March through October. They had had a guy in there the year before and they had trouble—he had kind of freaked out and tried to kill himself and all this wild stuff.

03:00:38:16

Jackson:

Wow.

03:00:38:16

Lee:

He was a pretty well known chef-restaurateur from Florence, so I don't know what exactly happened. It is a quiet little town, but in the summer there's a lot of tourism and activity.

03:00:38:32

Jackson:

Sounds like "The Shining" story.

03:00:38:34

Lee:

Yeah. In the winter-time there's a lot of hunters and the place is shut down. Although there's this little place across the plaza that mama keeps open, but

there aren't very many people up there in the winter-time. So we had to back out, which was hard, and bewildering to the Moscoronis, because here we had gone so far down that road, but—and we considered many options that I would start it and they would come in the summer-time, or I would stay through the year and come back in the fall. We went through all the possible solutions to the problem, but, didn't agree. They finally said, "We don't want to move and we don't want you to go." So, I had to say no. And then we came back here, and gosh, didn't know quite what to do, because I had after all that time at Chez Panisse we made it clear that we were probably going to go do this. They were changing gears from my leaving, and I was changing gear to leave. And then we came back and I said "The deal's off, now what do we do?" I figured, I should still try to do this and just look for a place here. So we started looking here, and from a friend of a friend of a friend we came across the Eccolo property where we are now, which was the former Ginger Island. That's how we ended up here.

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Jackson:

Wow. That's a big twist. It worked out very well, though.

03:00:40:07

Lee:

It was a big twist. It was really disappointing, because I was quite ready to go, and have friends in that area, and it was going to be a crazy thing. Maybe it was fortuitous. It was in the aftermath of 9/11 and there wasn't a lot of tourism, certainly not from Americans, in that area. And that's a lot of what happens in the summer in Chianti—American tourism, German tourism, Asian tourism. And I know a lot of people had a lot of trouble for a long time following that. But, you know, life takes funny twists.

03:00:41:02

Jackson:

That's a good one.

03:00:41:02

Lee:

What's that saying, when you reach a fork in the road, take it. I forget who said that, it was Yogi Berra or someone.

03:00:41:13

Jackson:

Okay, we are going to focus on Chez Panisse. How do think that working for the Chez Panisse clientele helped you as a chef? Were they particularly demanding?

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Lee:

Oh, no. I mean yeas and no. The demand—it's not really a demand—it's an expectation. Chez Panisse has been around for 33 years, and it's certainly the best known, most talked about, restaurant in the country—justifiably. It's a great restaurant. But people read about it, hear about it, and then come there and expect a brilliant dinner. So there's an extreme amount of pressure, apart from what you put on yourself. It's a funny kind of person who works there, the cooks, particularly in the downstairs, are obsessive and driven and perfectionist and energetic and extremely talented. Those are really some of

the best cooks in the world—I've always said that. So there is an immense amount of pressure, everyday, to be at 100%. It's hard to be at 100% every day. Very, very hard. So you have to have a kind of focus and resource as a cook and as a chef to work there successfully, day-in, day-out. It's always full. It's hard. There aren't a lot of people who can do that.

03:00:43:23

Jackson:

Is there sometimes—since there's such a strictness and pressure, do you think that sometimes there is—I don't want to say yelling, but is there kind of tension?

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Lee:

No, no. Well there's always a tension, but it's a good tension. It's not a negative tension, it's not a punishing tension, not a critical tension. It's a tension to perform well, and to get to where we want to go with the given dish and menu. No, there's no yelling—we never did that—we didn't swear, we didn't yell. Obviously there were interpersonal things that went on between this person and that person, but there was any stuff like that. We just didn't work that way, and didn't allow it, fortunately, so it didn't happen. And when it did it was squelched immediately.

03:00:44:21

Jackson:

Who squelched it?

03:00:44:21

Lee:

Myself.

Jackson:

No fits allowed.

Lee:

No fits allowed. Gotta leave your fits at home. On the other hand, any group of immensely talented, bright, dare I say artists, perhaps that's too strong a word. Craftspeople. There's competition, somebody wants something to go this way, and it doesn't. There's that kind of thing, but, no, we didn't yell, we didn't curse.

03:00:45:04

Jackson:

That's kind of unusual, too.

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Lee:

It's very unusual, and it's the only way a kitchen can successfully run. In my kitchen now I don't allow that. I don't want people cursing and swearing; they have to be respectful of one another. Among themselves in the kitchen, and between themselves and the dining room. In fact there was a really crazy thing, I never experienced anything like this, last week. One of the cooks got into a fistfight. I've never been in, never seen, a fistfight—

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Jackson:

Inside the kitchen?

03:00:45:48

Lee:

No, it was outside the kitchen. They dragged it. There was some disagreement over where to put some plates, and, they went outside to settle it. I was in the dining room and I came back in, and Nick, my chef, said, “You gotta go outside, because those guys are fighting out there.” So I said, “Who?”, and he told me. I went out and there was like this rumble going on. There was a couple guys, and then this other guy pulling them apart. Anyway, to make a long story short, somebody got fired over it. Anyway, a fistfight, hello? I’ve never been in a fistfight in my life, nor do I know anyone who had been. So, that was really extreme, and very unusual in 30 years in the restaurant business. But, immediately, you go, “You’re done.” But those things happen. But Chez Panisse changed that, I think, for a lot of restaurants, and, there are a number of places around now who don’t have to go through the screaming and throwing of stuff kinds of gyrations to get done what they need to get done. I mean, I came from a kitchen—Narsai’s—there was a lot of screaming and yelling in that place. That was the nature of the chef and the atmosphere, but it’s not good.

03:00:47:22

Jackson:

I noticed when I was working on the West Coast that there was a lot less screaming and yelling than when I was in New York, it was really okay.

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Lee:

Right. That’s the thing, if it’s okay, then everyone does it. If it’s not okay, then no one does it.

03:00:47:38

Jackson:

Okay, so were are going to take a little change, but we are coming back to Chez Panisse, but on the gender side. What chefs do you look up to, who influences you? Is there a certain book? You know, if you see a Paul Bertolli book, would you buy it?

03:00:47:56

Lee:

Well, Paul, you know, I worked under Paul for five years at Chez Panisse, from 1987-1992. He’s a brilliant chef. He’s a brilliant cook. He’s a very smart guy, and he has an immense amount of talent in a number of areas. He’s a musician, and a good writer, and he’s a good cook. So, yeah, sure, especially his first Chez Panisse book, *Chez Panisse Cooking*. It was so full of information, so detailed, and so well done.

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Jackson:

He’s a very intense writer.

03:00:48:35

Lee:

Well, he’s an intense guy. That book was very valuable. I don’t use it so much anymore, perhaps because I know it, because I worked with him so much. You know, page 336, the sauerkraut. That kind of stuff, that influenced me a lot. His thoroughness, his carefulness. Alice, of course, and her sort of more general approach to cooking. Before I was at Chez Panisse I



used to read those books over and over and over, and cook from them a lot. They are not as precise as Paul's. He's a precise guy. Alice's are a little more generalized. There were always a lot more people involved in the Chez Panisse books, so they are bound to be less tightly woven. But their attitude is very powerful, and the philosophy of how to cook is very strong, and right. There is a Richard Olney book called Simple French Food, which has influenced all of us an immense amount. That's from the 1970's. That's a very good book. Again, it's a way to cook rather than a recipe book.

03:00:50:07

Jackson:

Do you really look at the recipes?

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Lee:

Oh sure. Yeah, you look at them and you kind of assess them and you kind of look at the ingredients. You don't follow them so diligently—I don't follow them so diligently anymore—I always look at them for technique. After a while, you know where somebody is going to go with something, but maybe they have a little twist on it. You say, "Oh wait, what's that ingredient?" You see how that's incorporated in. I find photographs in books awfully inspiring. Especially ones—some photographs in books are extremely evocative, and they are inspirational. If something looks good, and looks right and makes you want to eat it, then you get a little push from that. So Alice's books, Paul's books—

03:00:51:13

Jackson:

They don't have to be just books, either.

03:00:51:13

Lee:

Okay. I always like to read books that are about food but that also describe, culturally, a place, that try to paint a picture of how food is part of the life of that given place. For example, there's another book that's not really a cookbook, and it's not really a—but that has great recipes. It's really descriptive and really charming. It's called Honey from a Weed. She, Patience Gray, is her name, she describes her life living around the Mediterranean with her sculptor husband. They're in Italy and Spain and Greece and Crete, places like that. He's searching for marble, and she's searching for culture and food. That's a very inspirational kind of thing, enchanting, really the stories that she tells. Stories are nice. They paint a little scene that you can imagine, or maybe that relates to something you have experienced traveling. That's inspiring. She has a description of a fisherman's dinner that is basically shellfish presented in three different ways: the fish, the broth and the paella at the end. That's pretty cool. I don't remember how many pages it is, a couple or three pages. But she talks about this dinner, a traditional Spanish dinner. She describes these guys catching the fish, and then cleaning it, then cooking it. And then these three different presentations for this festival in the particular town where she was living in. That's a pretty moving sort of thing.

03:00:53:17

Jackson: Food in action?

03:00:53:17

Lee: Yeah, so I spent years trying to figure out how I was going to do that at Chez Panisse. We never did. We did a two-part version of it, never the three part version of it. I couldn't figure out how I could do the three-part version without someone saying, "Hey, what is this? We've had this already!" Those things are good. Then there are movies. Everyone loved Babettes' Feast, but I didn't.

03:00:53:42

Jackson: You didn't?

03:00:53:42

Lee: Well, I liked it, but it didn't capture me the way it did so many people. I don't know why, maybe it was too quiet for me. The Big Night, everyone loves that movie. Now that's kind of funny and sad at the same time. There's a brilliant scene at the end, when they're cooking the omelet, and there's no music and no talking. All you hear is the sound of the kitchen and the pot and the wooden spoon. The making up that the brothers did. And [Mark Anthony], who played the busboy, who I thought was brilliant, there is nothing, just the sounds of that little kitchen, and then they sit down and eat their eggs and he puts his arm around his brother.

03:00:54:47

Jackson: That's all one scene, too.

03:00:54:47

Lee: It's a long scene, it's a long scene. It's after they had that fight out at the sea in New Jersey, wherever they were. You know, those scenes kind of stick with you. There's a peace in that scene that they all get from—not only—the dissipation, the dissolution of the energy of that fight, but it also it comes from the food, and the act of the cooking. I think for in some ways for a lot of us that is something that we get. A little peace from cooking. I think people get focus and peace from their work, too. Anyway, something about cooking. There's a satisfaction about eating it afterward, too. That has a lot to do with the act of cooking. The inspiration comes from traveling, books—it comes from everything that we see and do.

03:00:56:03

Jackson: Were you inspired a lot from Julia Child?

03:00:56:09

Lee: Well, she really set us all in motion in the 1960's from her television show and her books. My first real cookbook that I went out and bought was the French Chef Cookbook from her show. It had a lot of basic stuff in it. But then of course you realize she has this grander book—Mastering the Art of French Cooking—which covers a lot of ground. Very clearly written, very precise, illustrated. It tells you which steps to do in what order, it shows you

the equipment you will need. Very, very influential. And where I first started to make these crazy things from the French repertoire. From croissants to Bouillabaisse to charlottes for dessert to petit vielle {?}. These crazy puff pastry, spiral, decorated concoctions that take hours to make.

03:00:57:15

Jackson: You made that from the book?

03:00:57:15

Lee: Yeah, she has all of that stuff in there. This is the basic repertoire, go learn this stuff. That's cool. Of course, there's Escoffier, which we all read. I still tell people to read the first two chapters of it, which covers the basics of French cooking, which is really the foundation of everything we all do, technique-wise. Those are the books that mainly influenced me. That's probably because of my age. Those are from the 1970's and 1960's. But not a lot that is new has come out in a couple-hundred years in cooking.

03:00:58:14

Jackson: A lot of stories.

03:00:58:14

Lee: A lot of stories. The stories are great. I have to go back to Benedetta, I love her cookbook Sofrito that came out a couple of years ago. I think it should have won the James Beard thing, despite the controversy over the James Beard Foundation now. I thought it was a great book. It was interesting conceptually, and it was interesting in its recipes, and in its layout. It was well written; it was made up of stories that led into recipes, often with beautiful photographs of them. It's called Sofrito: Innovation and Tradition in Tuscan Cooking. And you read that title and you don't pay attention to it at first, but what that says is, These are traditional dishes that have a history, and have a place that they come from, and I'm putting them into modern terms. She doesn't put them into very modern terms, like fusion cuisine. It's not that, it's sort an updating of these things people have been cooking for hundreds of years that have evolved and that she finds appealing. It's great. Plus the first picture in the book is of a dog, and the last picture in the book is of a dog. Now what better cookbook is there than that?

03:00:59:50

Jackson: Why is that?

03:00:59:50

Lee: Oh, one of the olive oil makers she knows—it's from his property—this is the dog. So he's sitting inside this huge, ancient urn that's laying on its side. Obviously it's not used for olives anymore, and the dog is looking out. He's with his pal dog. But there's a personal-ness to the book, and a lack of slickness to the book that I think is really Benedetta to a tee. There's a lot of awfully slick books out there that don't have any personality. I think that book does. Of course when that book came out we did a book signing for her at Chez Panisse, so I have a closeness I have with it that I don't have with all

cookbooks, but it's nicely done. It's good, it's personal, historical, clearly explained and looks nice. I mention that one because the other books I discussed are twenty or thirty years old, and hers is just a few years old. There aren't a lot of modern books. The pictures of some of the River Café books are inspiring. The recipes are not always accurate. But then again, you know, you don't follow them to a tee except for the pastry ones—

03:01:01:44

Jackson: Except if you're a home cook.

03:01:01:44

Lee: Except if you're a home cook, exactly, that's the problem. No other recent books really come to mind. Penelope Casas has a number of Spanish books that are good, inspirational, have some stories. Anyways, that's that.

03:01:02:10

Jackson: Okay. We are going to move on to gender and family. I'm going to ask another question about Alice Waters. How do you think Alice Waters, being a female chef in a male-dominated industry, learned to navigate the gender differences—food and food ways—and managed to be successful?

03:01:02:34

Lee: Oh gosh. The short answer is I don't know. But that won't stop me from taking a stab at it. It's an interesting phenomenon: women coming into the kitchen. Now I was entering the kitchen at the time that women were entering the kitchen, so I don't really—I'm not a person who, for lack of a better way of putting it, had the experience of being invaded by women entering the world of cooking. But I do know that it was a very male-dominated thing. I remember there was a big furor in the international press. This must have been about 1972, about women entering the kitchen, and about women in the kitchen. I can't remember, I think Alice was mentioned in that. But Julia Child was talked about a lot. There was a quote from Paul Bocuse in the international press. He had the nerve to say this, and the courage and the boldness to say it. He said something like, "Women have no place in the professional kitchen. The only place for a woman is in bed. Any man who doesn't change his woman once a week lacks imagination."

03:01:04:16

Jackson: Wow!

03:01:04:17

Lee: This was in Newsweek magazine.

03:01:04:18

Jackson: It didn't even say she belonged in a home kitchen.

03:01:04:22

Lee: Well, he meant in a professional kitchen. That took some courage to say something like that in the international press. Holy smoke! I couldn't believe it. Oh my God! So that's the kind of attitude that he had. I don't imagine

that he's speaking for everybody. That's the world that that kind of came from. Alice made it possible for women to come into the kitchen professionally in the U.S., and she made it possible for middle class kids to go into the kitchen. That changed things a lot here. She made it a respectable job, and therefore a possible job for someone who would otherwise live in a different world from that. She certainly made it possible for women. I think one of the reasons why there are kitchens now where there is not screaming and yelling is because there are women in the kitchen. Now that's not always true, because I know women chefs who scream and yell, and have all that kind of machismo in the kitchen. The kind that Anthony Bourdain describes in Kitchen Confidential. Now he inflates it a little bit, I'm sure, for the drama of his book, but it's pretty accurate description of a lot of kitchens, particularly as you say on the East Coast. Any of those old kitchens that are run by guys and they're busy and their small and they're tight and they're hot, and there is immense competition for jobs and for position. All of that, you know, it happens a lot of places. There are chefs now who scream and yell and throw stuff, who have good restaurants. I just don't think it's a good way to work. And I do think Alice changed that. And I don't mean to say that there isn't that occasionally at Chez Panisse, it happens. But it's not a way of life, it's not a way of working. Women, too, they often—I am making a blanket statement, talking about half the population—I'll narrow it a little bit by saying cooks—are more helpful in the kitchen, more sympathetic, more focused on making the whole work as a unit.

03:01:07:30

Jackson: Cooperation?

03:01:07:30

Lee: Cooperation, understanding, than guys who often have other stuff going on. I remember my chef, Nick, one guy came in and he looked pretty macho and he was pretty macho, and we interviewed him. In fact, he was sitting at the bar. And I said Nick, "Why don't you go have a talk with that guy for ten minutes." Nick said, "Do I have to?" I said, "Yeah." Nick came back and he said way too macho. Nick said, "I want to be the macho guy in the kitchen, I don't want anybody bigger or more macho than me." Nick's not that macho. He looks it, but he's not. You don't want to have to deal with all that stuff all the time. You want to cook. This fistfight outside that I described to you—we are here to cook food, we are not here to vie for position, and compete. There is a level of competition—overt level, among guys—that often you don't have with women. Now, I worked with some really competitive women who have that, and I've worked with some really soft guys who don't have that. I like to think the guys I have at my place are generally pretty soft, as far as that goes. And I like that.

03:01:08:56

Jackson: Do you think that her being a woman has played any role in your becoming a chef? Any attributes that you picked up from her that you might not have, maybe the quiet kitchen?

03:01:09:08

Lee: Yeah, trying to keep a good quiet kitchen, definitely. Trying to see—and I learn something about this almost everyday from Nick, who looks tough but he's not, how you have to take into consideration the factors of someone in life, like what's going on with them personally, psychologically, emotionally, in the kitchen. Maybe something has happened, causing someone to be less than 100% today. Or maybe that has happened due to some factor external to their job. Alice was very good at that, at understanding that, and operating in that way.

03:01:09:53

Jackson: That's pretty special.

03:01:09:53

Lee: It's pretty special. It's hard to do, because you're standing there trying to put out 150 meals. It's really pretty necessary, because things happen with people. Their mothers get sick and go in the hospital.

03:01:10:14

Jackson: Do you think she experienced food any differently?

03:01:10:22

Lee: I don't know what you mean.

03:01:10:22

Jackson: Some people will say that when a woman is cooking they experience it more like a sharing thing, like their feeding a family.

03:01:10:27

Lee: Oh, absolutely true. That is the basic and fundamental concept of her restaurant is that she is feeding people as if they were a family.

03:01:10:39

Jackson: Nourishment?

Lee: Nourishment and taking care. And I remember, too, for example, when the Gulf War started, everyone was just very upset and emotionally distraught, and many people wanted to just close and go home. She said, "No, no, we need to have a place that people can come to and congregate and share their sorrow." So, you know, that attitude is really the foundation of her restaurant, and why she wanted a restaurant. She wanted to feed her friends, and the community. Of course now it's gotten much bigger. But that's still what made her want a restaurant to begin with. And, I kind of wanted that, too. You want a place where people come, where your friends can come and talk and meet and eat and have a little community exchange. So that's why she cooks. That's why she has a restaurant.

03:01:11:53

Jackson: We are totally moving from Chez Panisse, now. But I'm still staying with gender things and family things. Do you believe some dishes are masculine

and some feminine? Are there some foods some people associate more with male gender and some with feminine?

03:01:11:53

Lee:

Oh, God. I'll probably have to give an obvious answer on this one. People probably think of meat as masculine and vegetables as feminine, that's the simplest division. I don't know. I was thinking about this the other day, actually.

03:01:12:32

Jackson:

You were?

03:01:12:33

Lee:

Yeah, there was something—I'm not going to be able to remember what it was—but it was something that was definitely a female food. It will come back to me: I can't remember. I think the biggest and most common division is meat and vegetables. I don't know. That's an awfully general question, and awfully general concept, and awfully general statement. I know there are people—there are women I know who eat more meat than vegetables and just thrive on making—Laurie, my other chef de cuisine here who runs lunches, she makes salamis and sausages and pork belly and all this kind of crazy stuff. She's unusual, she's a tough character. She has a strong personality, she comes from a Polish family where there is a tradition of that stuff. And so you see her making those things. Let me think about that one for a little bit.

03:01:13:53

Jackson:

Okay. If you think of something you can bring it up.

03:01:13:57

Lee:

I guess I'm resistant, in a way, to answer it, because—

03:01:14:06

Jackson:

It's a very general question.

03:01:14:06

Lee:

It's a leading question.

03:01:14:09

Jackson:

Yeah it is. Okay. How has becoming a father changed your role as a chef?

03:01:14:18

Lee:

[Laughs] I could give a couple answers to that.

03:01:14:27

Jackson:

How many kids do you have?

03:01:14:27

Lee:

Just one—a little boy, Tom, who is fourteen. It's allowed me to learn a little bit how sometimes you have to deal with people, which is, sometimes you have to say, "This is the deal, this is how I want it done, I don't want anything else. You can't behave that way, if you behave that way, you're gone."

Things like that. So that's a kind of hard disciplinary side to it. But, you know, sometimes you have to say those things, and be clear with people. "I want this, I don't want that. You do this, you don't do that." In the same way that I do with my son. I don't have to do that too much, fortunately.

03:01:15:22

Jackson: That's good.

03:01:15:22

Lee: But, you know. I think it's gotten me a little more compassionate towards the people I work with. Again on that idea of understanding what a person's emotional situation is. When to pursue an issue, when not to pursue an issue, is important. And how to take care of them a little bit, which is something people need in a workplace, especially in a smaller place like our restaurant. We have 305:40 people working there. You know everybody, you have contact with everybody.

03:01:16:25

Jackson: You've got a very close kitchen, too.

03:01:16:25

Lee: It's a close kitchen, yeah. And a lot of us have known each other for a while now, so it's brought out a little bit of that compassion.

03:01:16:40

Jackson: Do you cook with him?

03:01:16:40

Lee: I do. Every once in a while he'll say really funny things about it. He has a very good palate. He knows good food from bad. There was a very funny experience one night. He was talking about—we were sitting at the dinner table one night—and he was talking about the foods that he likes. It was a very casual conversation, and he started describing the foods he liked and it was very detailed, and very humorous, because he kind of went through the savory foods—what we call real foods—that he liked—highly specific. At some point I had to stop and say, "I've got to write this down because it's really something." I've got it somewhere on this computer and I can't find it. It doesn't matter, I'll just tell you. So he went through and he said, 'I like quail, a lot, but it's really the legs that are best when they're really crisp and chewy. And duck, same thing on the duck, when the legs are crisp and chewy. Chicken, I'd have to say the same thing there again, the legs are really the most delicious and the breast is okay. Roast beef-', and I said, "Where did you have roast beef, I don't make roast beef." He said, "I had it over at John my friend's house one time." And he went through this elaborate list, and talked about these little details like the crispiness of the legs and the saltiness, and how this had to be right. And I'm sitting there at the table thinking this was just an idle question and he had this whole thing and went through it.



03:01:19:05

Jackson: He had thought about it before.

03:01:19:05

Lee: He had thought about it before, and carefully. I wrote that all down and I said, “well, great.” And he said, “Those were the real foods, now I should tell you about the junk foods,” and he went through the junk foods.

03:01:19:19

Jackson: The junk foods are important. [laughter]

03:01:19:22

Lee: And he would make subtle little distinctions where he would say, “Now, I’m going to name these three altogether, and they’re really on the same level, but these three that follow, they’re in a specific order.” There were funny parts in the junk foods, where he said, “I like this, and I like this, and I like nachos supreme.” And I said, “What is nachos supreme?” and he said, “Oh, it’s just tortilla chips with everything on it: salsa, cream and cheese and guacamole.” I said, “Where did you have that?” and he said, “I had that in a pub in England with my cousin Joe.” I was like, Oh my God.

03:01:20:03

Jackson: How old was he?

03:01:20:03

Lee: He was probably about ten or something. So he’s out in pubs with his cousin Joe. Of course, kids can go into bars there. Out in the pub with cousin Joe, eating Mexican food in England. He kept going, and he said, “And then hot tamales.” And I said, “Where did you have tamales?” He said, “No, Dad. Hot Tamales are the candy.” I wrote it down because it was just so hysterical. There were all these, of course, Doritos, ranch flavored, and all this kind of stuff. I forgot what your question was— Oh, do I cook with him, yes. So, he thinks about food, obviously, to some degree. He likes good food. Oh, there was another thing that happened the other day. I knew it was going to happen, I saw it coming and I walked right into it. He wanted me to bring him home some food from the restaurant because he was here alone. And we have these little to-go boxes, and I asked one of the cooks to make this thing, “Could you make this thing and I’m going to bring it to Tommy.”

03:01:21:08

Jackson: Does your son ever work at the restaurant?

03:01:21:08

Lee: Not yet. He’s still young, he’s fourteen. So the cook put it in the box, and I looked at the box. And I thought, “I should have put it on a plate. But I’m tired, I want to go home, I’m going to take the food to him while it’s still warm, blah blah blah.” So I bring it home and I put it on the table, and he said, “I thought you were going to bring some food home?” And I said, “It’s there.” And he said, “Food in a box?” I said, “Tom, it’s a to-go box.” And

he said, “Oh, gee.” So I said, “Look, let’s just put it on some plates.” We put it on the plates and everything—

03:01:21:41

Jackson:

That’s pretty funny.

03:01:21:41

Lee:

Yeah it’s pretty funny. And the box was sitting there, and I said, “Put your box in the trash.” He said, “Not a box as good as that, that doesn’t belong in the trash.” Because he was making fun of me for saying it was this nice to-go box. Anyway, he says things like—he likes steak—and he says things like, “Dad, can you teach me how to make a steak, how to do it just right?” Things like that come up, now and again. He makes pancakes.

03:01:22:11

Jackson:

You mean like Bisquick?

03:01:22:11

Lee:

No, no, no. From flour and butter and the good things. And I try to teach him that, so that he’ll have that skill, which he’s going to need at some point in his life. What else? He doesn’t drink it, he doesn’t have any interest in it, but if he wants to taste wine, we drink wine with dinner. Whenever we’re in Europe he always had a little wine with water. I think he knows how good things taste.

Interview #2: December 8, 2004

[Audio File 4]

Jackson: We are recording.

04:00:00:01

Lee: Good.

Jackson: Today is December 8<sup>th</sup>, in the morning, and we are at Christopher Lee's house and last time when we got together we were talking about family and gender and food ways.

04:00:00:21

Lee: Oh yeah.

04:00:00:21

Jackson: And today we are going to talk about your food, your restaurant, and its influences. The first question that I am going to ask you is, how would you describe the cuisine at Eccolo?

04:00:00:31

Lee: Well, it is Italian inspired—I say inspired because it is impossible to cook food that comes from a specific place, region or culture or any of that, really, outside of that environment. Because the ingredients are slightly different and all of that. But it is Italian inspired and we do a lot of pastas that are really kind of authentic dishes that—and I say authentic meaning that they are dishes that have a history in a place there, and they are not these sort of made up things that a lot of people do and call it Italian or French or whatever. So that is really the thing that we are doing, is coming from that Italian perspective.

04:00:01:43

Jackson: Do you do any French, or is it just Italian?

04:00:01:46

Lee: A little bit. Things sneak in every once in a while, mostly at lunch. Lunch is a very different scene from the dinner. Lunch is what I call opportunistic eaters—people who are in the neighborhood who work there or they are shopping, or they are nearby and they want to have lunch, and they happen to like our food, but it doesn't have—the lunch crowd is not a destination oriented crowd the way dinner is. Dinner is—people say, “Well, where should we eat?” “Well, let's go down to Eccolo and have such and so.” At lunch it is, “We are here and oh, gosh, here is a restaurant,” or, “I work on the next block and lets go down there.” So, Italian inspired.

04:00:02:36

Jackson: Okay. You were talking about how it is a little difficult to do authentic Italian in, say California, how do you attempt to do it? How do you pull it together?

04:00:02:47

Lee: Well we use as many Italian ingredients that are the same in Italy as they are here—the same here as they are in Italy, I should say. All of our oils are Italian—well, that is not true, one is not. We do have one California oil, but the flavor range—

04:00:03:07

Jackson: Is it Bertoli?

04:00:03:07

Lee: No, it is called {La Frontoro?}, and it is pressed by a fellow over in Mill Valley who has a restaurant with an oil press in it, and he has groves of his own, and I buy that oil. I had never bought California oil before because I didn't really like it. It was so often pressed from inferior mission olives and it had a nasty quality to it, but this one I think is extraordinary and it is our basic oil, and by that I meant that we use it for the most general cooking and we use our more expensive Italian oils for finishing or tasting or drizzling or something like that—where you want a really, really specific refined taste. And as I say this I am thinking too of the previous question, which is, all of these oils come from different areas and have different styles because of their climate and the way that the trees are grown and the way that things are handled in general, and the taste that that particular region is after, and so the oils really kind of have specific uses. We have some, I think, extraordinary Sicilian oil that goes really well with fish. So that is what we tend to use that with. And we have a {Lagurian?} oil that is a little bit lighter. In general, in comparison to say, Tuscan oils, which are the kind of standard when people say Italian extra virgin olive oil. The Tuscan oils tend to be pretty robust and peppery, and really full flavored, whereas these other oils are a little more delicate. So what I am getting at is that they have specific uses and those flavors are flavors that come from these different regions, so if you are aiming for [stops to say goodbye to his wife] a dish has a Lagurian aspect to it, or is Lagurian, than you might use that oil and stay in that kind of flavor palate.

04:00:05:25

Jackson: Let's see. Okay. I am going to switch over here to California cuisine. Do you think that there is such a thing as California cuisine?

04:00:05:39

Lee: Oh, sure. It is—of course, you ask that question because it is s hard one to answer.

04:00:05:46

Jackson: [laughs] It is a hard one to answer.

04:00:05:48

Lee: It is a hard one to answer. Certainly there is a style of cooking that has developed in California over the last thirty or thirty-five years, which is a, people say, market-oriented cooking, which means that you are cooking from the stuff that is in season at the moment. And the food is often lighter, simpler

than, let's say classic French cooking. In fact, a friend of mine just came back from a couple of weeks in Paris and he said how much he loved the food and described all of the wonderful things that he ate—and these are restaurants that are not three star Michelin restaurants. They are sort of neighborhood places that he found out that he found through friends of mine, friends of his, etc. He said, “Yeah, the food was fabulous and we had these fabulous dishes,” and he listed a bunch of them, and then he said, “But it really is rich and heavy.” And California cooking kind of left that behind in a way. I think, I don't know how many times that I mentioned Chez Panisse in this interview, but I think of how it began with Chez Panisse back in the early seventies. They were cooking really French food, and that was their model and their taste. In fact, in those days I recall that the menu was one side of the page in English and the other side of the page entirely in French. So, there was a lot more traditional French cooking, and over in time it evolved into a much lighter, often vegetable-oriented kind of style. And that really is what California is really about. I mean, it has evolved too, it has gone through patches of uncertainty where, for example, people were combining otherwise disparate ingredients—or ingredients that weren't typically put together—that whole fusion thing that happened in the eighties that was not a high point of California cuisine in the minds of many of us, where blueberry sauces were getting put on crazy dishes. Raspberries and fish and stuff like that. And, while interesting, it isn't a style that stuck and it isn't a style that is really enjoyable. It is a curiosity. People claim that that came out of nouvelle cuisine, but it wasn't what came. That did not come out of nouvelle cuisine. And nouvelle cuisine, I think, took a lot of bad hits—unfair hits because they, in fact, those chefs—

04:00:08:55

Jackson:

Nouvelle cuisine—what do you mean by that?

04:00:08:57

Lee:

Well that was a wave of cooking that appeared in France, again, in the seventies, with—

04:00:09:10

Jackson:

Very stacked things?

04:00:09:10

Lee:

Pardon me?

04:00:09:10

Jackson:

Very stacked things?

04:00:09:12

Lee:

Well, that, yes, but their fundamental goal was to separate themselves or move in a new direction away from the classical French stuff. So cream sauces were, I won't say disappeared, but, they were used less and chefs were trying to cook sauces without rouxs and that is where this whole style of reduction

saucers or reinforced stocks that become saucers came from. I am a little bit off the track, but—

04:00:09:49

Jackson: [laughs]

Lee: But that was really, I think, the positive thrust of nouvelle cuisine, and that made it here too, in the US. And that is the way that we all cook now, apart from the classical places. But yeah—market-oriented, lighter—a lot of vegetables. People have this misunderstanding that in France and Italy that there is this abundance of vegetables, and people just don't eat that many vegetables there—especially in Northern Italy. I remember sitting at a dinner one time with a friend of mine and I made a comment like that, and another American said, "Oh, no, there are vegetables all over Italy." And we had been in Northern Italy for about a month at that time, and I hadn't really seen very many vegetables, and I turned to this Italian and I said, "Tell me, do you have vegetables here?" And he said, "Of course we have vegetables." He said, "We have potatoes."

04:00:10:37

Jackson: [laughs]

Lee: And [laughs] that was about the end of it. That is an exaggeration, but yeah, vegetable oriented cooking here. Freshness was a big thing, and that is a good thing too.

04:00:10:52

Jackson: So you don't think that it has always been there, you think that the term—?

04:00:10:57

Lee: Yeah, yeah.

04:00:10:57

Jackson: Alright.

04:00:10:59

Lee: I know, that is a kind of a diffused answer, but I hope that that gave you something.

04:00:11:02

Jackson: Yeah. Do you think that California cuisine is—do you think that you have to be in California to create it? Do you think you can have it in the Midwest?

04:00:11:12

Lee: Well, you know, that is the same question as the first one, really. Can you do another cuisine in another location. Yeah, you can, I think, because certainly people do do that in Chicago and the big cities—in New York. I remember being in New York a few years ago in June, and it was before the growing

season began there. Of course it was two months in here—summer time, vegetables. We had corn at that time and I remember seeing the corn plants in Illinois and they were about four inches tall. But I walked into a market. It was Dean and DeLuca down on Broadway, and they had two or three big refrigerated cases full of the most beautiful vegetables. And I looked at them and they had little signs of each of them and they were all from California. They were all expensive of course. But yeah—you can do that elsewhere, and people do. I think that they call it market cuisine or market cooking, or market restaurants in the east. And some people use that as a pejorative term—which means that you are not really cooking within the art or technique, you are just sort of taking some radishes and slicing them.

04:00:12:33  
Jackson:

Whatever is fresh.

04:00:12:33  
Lee:

Yeah, but yeah—you can do that elsewhere, and it certainly has moved around the country.

04:00:12:41  
Jackson:

Okay. Do you think California cuisine differs from Mediterranean cooking? Do you think that the main thing would be the amount of vegetables? How do you think that California cuisine is different that what has been traditionally Mediterranean?

04:00:12:55  
Lee:

[laughs] Things are cooked less.

04:00:12:58  
Jackson:

Cooked less.

04:00:12:58  
Lee:

Yeah [laughs]. In general. And you can get, again, you have indigenous foods there that you don't have here, and vice versa, so there is no exact replication of that cuisine, but you know, we are kind of on the same latitude. We have a lot of the same climate characteristics. There is a lot of the same vegetable because of all of those things. There is some of that cooking, and that was a cooking that people were interested in because it was different from classic French, which really sprung from Paris and Burgundy, Leon, and a lot of those big, three star restaurants. I remember Roger Verget—a three star, French chef. His book was called *The Cuisine of the Sun*, and he was on the Mediterranean. So his cooking was a little bit different. And that is really the beauty of all of that—that people in specific places cook with the local ingredients and the style. That is appealing. You go to this location and you have this kind of food, and you go to this location and you have another kind of food. But Mediterranean food was looked to because of its difference and appeal away from classic French.

04:00:14:30

Jackson: Okay. I am going to try to get in one other question about California cuisine.

04:00:14:34

Lee: Okay. Okay.

04:00:14:34

Jackson: How do you think what we call California cuisine now is different from, let's say the fresh cooking that people used to do in the forties and the fifties and, like when you are describing the way that your family cooked.

04:00:14:48

Lee: Yeah. Oh, golly, let's see. I would say that the cooking now, the fresh cooking now, has been informed, or has had the benefit of being informed by basically the French approach that changed all of our cooking here in the sixties, seventies, eighties. Julia Child's big book, Mastering the Art of French Cooking. I mentioned that earlier, I think, in the interview, that she covered everything.

04:00:15:31

Jackson: You did.

04:00:15:31

Lee: And that changed cooking. Those are techniques that have evolved over hundreds of years and recipes that have evolved over a long time too. And they came out of classic French cooking. So you made a soup. You didn't just throw all of the ingredients together and cook it. You did this step and that step and brought this together and etc. People I think, are a lot more sophisticated in their cooking than they were in the forties and fifties. I would just—the only thing that I would add is parenthetically, the advent of the refrigerator really kind of had a funny effect in the fifties on cooking, and convenience food and freezers, and all of that kind of stuff, and I think that that is something I think a lot of us have moved away from now. I am sure that you can go back to the Midwest and I could visit all of the friends of my mother and find lots of freezers and refrigerators there. But you—I leave my answer kind of the way—I let it stand the way that I gave it because I think that you are really talking about a small portion of people who cook anyway. But yeah, I think that we have become much more sophisticated in our skills and techniques of cooking than we were in the forties and fifties and earlier.

04:00:17:04

Jackson: I just saw online today, there is an article in the New York Times, in Food and Wine, about the editor who first received Julia Child's first cookbook—she was talking about it—how it was so different

04:00:17:16

Lee: Yeah.

04:00:17:16

Jackson: Really inspiring, and how she was inspired in the sixties.



04:00:17:21

Lee: Yeah. We all learned from that. We all were changed by that. And Julia Child was interesting because she, and she said this herself, she wrote a recipe—she wrote very, very specific recipes that had carefully defined steps—one that moved to the next, and that were all necessary and all correct.

04:00:17:48

Jackson: That is what the editor was saying—very specific.

04:00:17:48

Lee: Very specific. That was helpful. That was helpful to someone who was learning. The style of cookbook now that you will see often is very descriptive. By that I mean, it is—it will describe a dish and say, “Well, you sort of do this and you add a little bit of that.” And there is a lot of leeway for the individual, for the cook, there is a lot of leeway and interpretation and judgment that is made and you hear that, on one side, people love that because it is not something that requires a tablespoon and a half of this ingredient that you have to travel seven miles to some special store to get, that you are never going to use again or that you won't use for years and years again. But I think on the other hand that that specific recipe is very helpful to someone that doesn't have years of experience cooking. So you know this step and that step and this technique is described, and maybe there is a picture of it. And her book was illustrated beautifully [cell phone rings—song]. Sorry. My son changes my ring tones all of the time [laughs].

04:00:19:21

Jackson: [laughs] That one is pretty swanky.

04:00:19:21

Lee: It is pretty funny, and I will be standing in the line at the bank and the Star Spangled Banger—

04:00:19:29

Jackson: [laughing]

04:00:19:29

Lee: My son—he has great fun doing it. So I never quite know what I am going to get.

04:00:19:35

Jackson: Sometimes my boyfriend does that to me, too.

04:00:19:37

Lee: Yeah, it is pretty funny.

04:00:19:40

Jackson: Okay.

04:00:19:40

Lee: Yeah, so.

04:00:19:41  
Jackson: That is a good answer. Could you give me the names of maybe two or three farmers or meat companies that you buy from?

04:00:19:51  
Lee: Yes. For what purpose?

04:00:19:57  
Jackson: Well, I was wondering if you could tell me maybe your relationship with them and maybe if you had visited the farm or the place.

04:00:20:03  
Lee: I will give you a two-part answer again.

04:00:20:06  
Jackson: Okay.

04:00:20:06  
Lee: When I was at Chez Panisse for many years I was, in addition to cooking, I was what was called the Forager.

04:00:20:16  
Jackson: [laughs]

Lee: [laughing] Cute name. That was a person—and it was part time and I kind of did it in addition to my other jobs and my cooking responsibilities and in between weekends and days off and what not. I was very interested in it, but yes, I visited everybody.

04:00:20:33  
Jackson: How fun.

04:00:20:33  
Lee: All of the meat suppliers, with a few exceptions. We at that time were still building the network of farmers and what not that they use now. So everyone had to be sort of evaluated and screened and contacted personally. I spent a lot of time driving around Northern California visiting, looking and meeting, and tasting.

04:00:21:02  
Jackson: So you have got relationships.

04:00:21:03  
Lee: Yeah. That is really important, and I have continued with a lot of those farmers in my restaurant, Eccolo, and yeah—you need that relationship. You need to be able to get on the phone and say, “Hey, what is coming along in the next couple of months,” or, “gosh, those lambs that we got last time—one had a bruise on the leg—what happened to that?”, or, “the chickens were smaller last week. What should I expect this week?” And with large distributors, which I stay away from, and which and which always stay away from at Chez

Panisse, you can't do that. You can't get on the phone to the guy who raised the cattle and say, "What is going on?" or, "That was really great," or anything like that. You have a salesperson and 99% of the time they won't have an answer for your question. We have farmers who themselves grow this stuff and bring it to the restaurant and say, "Hey, you know what, we are going to have fava beans in another couple of weeks—so a little heads up on that." That is great. And also, it is a question of community. Having contact with the farming community, and restaurant community, and bringing them all together in a way that makes them close, makes them a force, and makes them pursue their common goal, which is to sell food to the public, serve food to the public—I should say—that makes it a more organized flow a more positive flow, that makes it a unified force. It helps people to have jobs and futures—

04:00:23:04

Jackson:

So you would say that it is very important to support local.

04:00:23:07

Lee:

Fundamental. Fundamental.

04:00:23:09

Jackson:

Alright. Would you like to name a few companies?

04:00:23:11

Lee:

Yes I will, just a second. I just wanted to site another little example of the fish guys that we use. Now, they are not fishermen themselves. They deal with fisherman. That is the way that it works. These guys have little boats—you couldn't deal with them yourself. They couldn't deliver it to your door, etc. But, for example, I asked this morning on the phone about sand dabs. He said, "Oh well, the guys said that he couldn't get out these last few days because of the weather and blah, blah, blah." Just the way that he says that—this particular fisherman couldn't get out. And this is a little patchy too, but someone in the restaurant last week said, "Why don't you have sand dabs? We wanted sand dabs and we came down here for that—they are so good when you make them." I said, "Well, we haven't had them in a few weeks because of this and that and the other—weather mostly." And they said, "Oh, well, they had them up at the other restaurant." Well—sure you can get them from anywhere. You can get them frozen or you can get second rate ones, or any of that kind of stuff, but I think that you need to choose. You need to say, "This is what I want. This is the quality that I want. I don't have that today, so I am not going to serve it. I am going to serve something else that meets those requirements." When you deal with distributors and big companies like that, you don't have that option. You say, "Do you have sand dabs today?" They say, "Yup, sure, we will send you sand dabs." And you get whatever. But having these personal relationships allows you to have quality, and the choice that you need in a restaurant these days.

04:00:24:52

Jackson: Right. That seems like if I were a customer I would be happy getting that answer.

04:00:24:53

Lee: Yeah, well, some people don't like that answer [laughs]. At some point you have to say what you believe.

04:00:25:01

Jackson: Okay.

04:00:25:01

Lee: Oh, you wanted me to name a couple.

04:00:25:04

Jackson: Yeah.

04:00:25:04

Lee: Yes.

04:00:25:06

Jackson: Just a couple.

04:00:25:06

Lee: Yeah. Some of the produce suppliers that we use—some of the farmers that grow produce—We use Terra Firma. Terra Sonoma.

04:00:25:21

Jackson: [laughs]

Lee: [laughing] Full Belly. Peter Martinelli.

04:00:25:32

Jackson: That is also farming?

04:00:25:35

Lee: That is a farmer. He is out in Bolinas. Dirty Girl, which is about my favorite name [laughing].

04:00:25:45

Jackson: [laughs] You can see almost all of these companies if you go to the Farmer's Market here, too.

04:00:25:49

Lee: Exactly. Right. They are all there. Let's see, who else?

04:00:25:53

Jackson: Maybe a meat company?

04:00:25:56

Lee: Yeah. Let me give you River Dog as another produce company. I buy a lot of beef from Neiman—Bill Neiman. I buy pigs from Laughing Stock Farm in

Oregon. I buy lambs from Don Watson. I buy goats from Trish Elliot. I buy chicken from Ruth Hoffman and I buy quail and chickens from Brent Wolfe—and he has an e on the end of his second name.

04:00:26:44

Jackson: Alright.

04:00:26:47

Lee: Yeah, so, there.

04:00:26:48

Jackson: Do you always believe in using organic? Or, do you always use organic in your restaurant?

04:00:26:51

Lee: I do. But I am not absolutely, what should I say—categorical about it. If something is extraordinarily good and it is not organic, well, then I will consider it. So that is my honest, true answer, but in reality, virtually everything that we serve is organic—with exception of the beef. Because he doesn't use organic feed it is not considered organic.

04:00:27:26

Jackson: Neiman?

04:00:27:26

Lee: Neiman. But it is all natural and raised in, I think, very carefully and in a very good way. I don't think that there is really anyone who is raising beef that tastes quite as delicious—certainly not on the West Coast, I can't speak so much for the East because I don't know that. So—I should say ducks from Jim Reichardt [spells out].

04:00:28:13

Jackson: All right. What if something is incredibly expensive and it is organic? Would you just switch or would you think about getting something that is not organic?

04:00:28:20

Lee: Depends. If it is olive oil, I am probably going to pay for it. If it is something that I don't desperately need, then I will look at it and consider not using it. I won't consider—I don't typically consider non-organic because of price. We just don't do that.

04:00:28:44

Jackson: Okay. So a lot of restaurants claim that their food is fresh. What does fresh mean to you? Does that mean—would you—I am assuming, since most restaurants do this, that you would take something that you had the day before and serve it the next day, depending on what it is.

04:00:29:02

Lee: Fresh to me means cooked that day.

04:00:29:05

Jackson: Oh really?

04:00:29:05

Lee: Yeah. Fresh to me also means using produce that is recently picked. We don't have—well, it depends. You can keep and serve lettuces the next day, or event the day after sometimes and they are really fabulous.

04:00:29:25

Jackson: After they come in, or after they are washed?

04:00:29:26

Lee: Well, that is a good question. If you don't wash them, they are going to last longer than if you do. And it is impossible to get everyday deliveries of the same thing because the farmers don't come every day.

04:00:29:41

Jackson: That would be pretty demanding [laughs].

04:00:29:41

Lee: But what we do is we sort of fan out our suppliers over the week and so we kind of fill in the gaps or try not to have gaps with that approach. On the other hand, we know that on Tuesday we are going to get a delivery, a great delivery of beautiful little lettuces from Terra Sonoma. So we plan around that. It becomes oriented toward when things are going to come in. We are prepared to use them up, and we are prepared to receive them, and we know that we are not going to get another delivery of that until Friday, so we will have them Tuesday, we will have them Wednesday. On Thursday we will do something else. Friday the more will come in and we will use those over the weekend. So—fresh. It is tough. And as a foot note to that, there are some dishes that are better the next day.

04:00:30:33

Jackson: Right.

04:00:30:33

Lee: A lot of braised dishes and stewed dishes, and things like that—definitely soups, often better the next day. So, is that fresh, I don't know? But it sure is good.

04:00:30:46

Jackson: You are right!

04:00:30:47

Lee: Fresh—and my best example of fresh—of the difference that freshness provides is evident of freshness of a thing is parsley. When parsley is first cut, it is sweet. It is not a hard flavor. It is not a sharp flavor and when parsley goes a couple of days, it has lost its sweetness. So you have a very different thing that you are dealing with, and I always taste that parsley when it comes in and I happen to—I am lucky in that we get parsley from a really wonderful

grower called County Line up in Sonoma County—well, they are on the border of Marin and Sonoma, and their parsley is sweet. It is that kind of difference that really gets noticed.

04:00:31:44

Jackson: Okay. If you had blanched green beans at the end of the night, would you serve them to your staff as a family meal?

04:00:31:50

Lee: Yeah. Probably. We try to cook just what we need, which is hard to do sometimes, but yeah. That is a good example too, because that is something that really doesn't last a day.

04:00:32:06

Jackson: How do you address the question of food safety? I think we have already talked about the question of how you address the question of food quality, but not safety.

04:00:32:16

Lee: Safety meaning?

04:00:32:16

Jackson: Do you stick to very strict standards in your walk-ins—?

04:00:32:22

Lee: Yes. You are talking about bacterial stuff?

04:00:32:27

Jackson: Yeah. Basically.

04:00:32:26

Lee: Yeah, you have to. You have to be very careful. You have to be very careful about raw foods coming in contact with things that are potential contaminants. Temperatures are important to pay attention to. You don't want a warm soup to set out for any length of time. But that said, if you buy from the right people, you really don't have trouble. That is very important, and that is part of the answer to that question about having relationships with people. You know that something is fresh. The pigeons, when they come in from Phil Paine—I didn't mention his name—they were killed that day and they are put on ice. They are chilled and put on ice and delivered to us that night. Well, you buy from a distributor, and it has been sitting around for a while in plastic and stuff like that. I would be much more unsure of eating food that is held like that then from Phil Paine's pigeons that were killed that day, and I know what the pigeons are like—I mean, I know where they live and I know what their pens are like. I know how clean he keeps his operation, and how careful he is in all of his steps. That is the other side of that thing—do you worry? Not really. Do you pay attention to proper sanitary techniques? Yeah, sure.

04:00:34:11

Jackson: Okay. And, I think about a year ago, I think a little bit before, there was a story in the San Francisco chronicle about rating restaurants—a system of rating restaurants on their adherence to health code standards. Did you—?

04:00:34:25

Lee: Oh, god. No, I didn't know about that. Fortunately.

04:00:34:27

Jackson: Oh, okay. Okay.

04:00:34:29

Lee: What was the outcome of that?

04:00:34:31

Jackson: I don't know, actually.

04:00:34:35

Lee: Oh. Well I know, years ago I rented a kitchen in Oakland when I had a catering business, and I kept it very, very clean and the inspector would come through and he would say, "Well, you know, you need a little soap dish over here." He always remarked how clean it was. Then I would go into a restaurant downtown and I remember sitting—it was a Chinese restaurant—and I could see into the kitchen from where I was seated. It was so filthy. I could see roaches. I assumed there were mice—that is my assumption, I didn't know that for a fact—but it was incredibly dirty. Well—I am sitting there thinking, "How does this guy get away with it? How is he allowed to have a kitchen in that condition when I am getting hit for a little soap dish, and my place is spotless?"—I forget what your question was. Tell me again, so I can tell where I am going with this.

04:00:35:41

Jackson: [laughs] I guess it is just basically, how would you feel about if there was a system in San Francisco Chronicle evaluating restaurants—?

04:00:35:48

Lee: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. I don't know. So, I think there should be, I think that there should be inspections. I think that guy should have been inspected. I think that his kitchen should have been shut.

04:00:35:58

Jackson: You might have called San Francisco Chronicle?

04:00:36:01

Lee: From what I saw. You know, why? Why is there that difference? But on the other hand, I think people get a little hysterical about stuff. You read these things in the paper about contamination and illnesses and what not and—they get really fervent about it. It is not always a necessary thing. I think E.coli in beef plants—these huge factories, and chicken plants—those are concerns, sure. Me and my kitchen—I don't think that I am going to make anybody sick,



and I don't think—there aren't very many cases of people getting sick. What are the cases that you hear of when people get sick? Burger King, because they bought their beef from some giant somewhere that was contaminated. The chickens—there was that big flop at Tyson chickens years ago about the fecal matter in the cold baths that they put them in after they are killed. That is what people should be concerned about—not—if my pigeon is sitting out on the table for a little bit. I think people have the wrong focus and I think it can be influenced a lot by the stuff that appears in the media and I think that there is a lot of overreaction and over concern, and again, like my previous answer—I don't really worry about it, but I follow procedures. So, I don't know.

04:00:37:45

Jackson: That is a good answer.

04:00:37:47

Lee: No—that is somebody in the Chronicle trying to sell newspapers with something like that.

04:00:37:54

Jackson: Yeah. That would help.

04:00:37:55

Lee: If they are really concerned about that—publish the names. If you are really concerned about that—report it to the Health Department. A newspaper article about it is going to get everybody all riled up about all of the other restaurants in town. I don't know. I don't know if that is the right thing. But that was my rant-sorry [laughs].

04:00:38:13

Jackson: [laughs] That is all right.

04:00:38:15

Lee: Okay.

04:00:38:15

Jackson: Are you very concerned with the sustainability of fish—the presence of mercury in fish that is going with the meat production in America—mad cow disease, hormones?

04:00:38:28

Lee: Well, all of those are individual questions and have different answers.

04:00:38:33

Jackson: Okay.

04:00:38:34

Lee: And I know that you don't want me to answer each one and I don't want to answer each one.

04:00:38:38

Jackson: [laughs]

04:00:38:38

Lee: Mad cow—no. I will answer that specifically. Repeat the question again, please.

04:00:38:45

Jackson: Are you concerned with the sustainability of fish and mercury?

04:00:38:50

Lee: Yes—fish, yes. That is the one that I am thinking of.

04:00:38:53

Jackson: Okay. We can do [inaudible].

04:00:38:54

Lee: Yeah, fish is a big one. And it is a really, really, complicated one too, and it is t a very saddening one because—it goes back to this big, small dichotomy issue/difference—whatever you want to call it. This guy that I mentioned a few minutes ago who was fishing for the sand dabs is not going to put a fish population out of existence. He can't catch that many fish! He has got a little boat, he goes out with this crew, and there are three or four of them on the boat, and they take what they can, and he scrapes by with his living. He is not people who make any kind of money. They like the lifestyle, and they have a nice lifestyle, but it is hard work, and you don't get rich as a fisherman. Factory boats are going to knock out populations and have reduced populations all over the place. So—and so there are fewer fish available. There is a prohibition on in shore rock fish now in California, which were at one time—I have this book that I love which was a University of California publication, Marine Fishes of the Pacific Coast, and I read it and I read it and I read it and I just was so interested in it and wrote a little paper for the restaurant about fish and the fish that we use and what not and at that time, I think that it was 1972 publication—I may have that date wrong, but the rock fish was the most common fish there—there are many, I think, maybe fifty-eight varieties or something in the West Coast. And they were the most plentiful fish in the Pacific West. Now they can't be fished for because of over-fishing. Because of trolling and stuff like that. So, it is a real big concern. What do you eat? Do you go to the next variety of fish and fish that out? Salmon, in various waters, have been at the brink of—extinction is not the right word, but—their populations have been so suppressed by various things—dams, water pollution, cattle run off, stuff like that, diversion dams and what not. What do you do? Do you serve that fish or do you not serve that fish? Well, let's say you decided not to serve that fish, and your customers come in and say, "Why don't you have salmon on the menu?" You say, "Well, it is really a threatened species and blah, blah, blah." They say, "Well, this place down the street has it." Well, okay. So that is my same answer as a little bit earlier, but then, some people will turn to say aqua-culture fish, and then you are into a whole another set of problems. Pollution problems there,

and contamination problems there, and PCB's which is the biggest concern right now of aqua-culture salmon—so many times higher than in wild fish. Wild fish are within the acceptable level as defined by FDA, but it is tough because we all love fish and we all serve fish and we all want to continue to serve fish and we ought to buy correctly, and we don't want to harm any fisheries, and we want to keep fisherman in business, too. But, there are fewer fish in the sea now. And the available food fish have dropped considerably. Even in the time that I have been in California, which is almost thirty years. That is a big concern. That is a big concern, and there are many groups who are trying to protect fish and conserve fish, and prohibit fish consumption, fishing—stuff like that. Fish is a big, big, issue. So again, that is a pretty ranging answer, but that is a big concern.

04:00:43:29

Jackson:

You are very concerned with it.

04:00:43:28

Lee:

Yeah, you know, I serve swordfish in the restaurant, I serve Pacific water swordfish, either from Santa Barbara or Hawaii, and in the East Coast it is a big problem. Atlantic swordfish have been in trouble for a long time because they have been so heavily fished and there is a big group down there that is trying to stop consumption of swordfish. Well, that is particular to the Atlantic water fish. It is not true of the Pacific waters swordfish. But I put swordfish on the menu and the customer, A, says, "Well, why do you have swordfish on the menu?" And you have to explain all of this stuff. It is a complicated thing and it is a real mess and I don't know what we are going to do because fishing is going to continue, and the unregulated fisheries which are pretty much, once you are in the open seas you can fish for whatever you want, whenever you want and how much you can take, and I don't know what is going to happen with that. It is a big, big concern.

04:00:44:42

Jackson:

All right.

04:00:44:42

Lee:

Yeah. Another rant.

04:00:44:43

Jackson:

[laughs] So, you have already explained that you are pretty concerned with meat production, and mad cow disease doesn't concern you so much. What about the use of hormones?

04:00:44:57

Lee:

Yeah, I think that is not a good thing, and the meat that I buy is never treated with what they call systemic hormones or antibiotics. Some application of medication is necessary in the event of illness of a particular animal, but I think what you are referring to is people who feed routinely.

04:00:45:24

Jackson: Right.

04:00:45:25

Lee: And that is not a good thing. We don't buy from people who do that.

04:00:45:28

Jackson: Okay. About sustainable agriculture, do you think that by buying locally and—well, do you think that that is the way that chefs can contribute to that? Because it seems like you really do care about that.

04:00:45:43

Lee: Yes. I think that is also fundamental and I think that once that you have entered that, adopted that view or belief, or have come to believe in that view, there is no turning back. Plus, as I say, you get better quality stuff from people who care about it, who grow it, who are concerned about how it is, the condition in which it is delivered to me—the customer, and likewise, me and my customers. When the guy comes in the back door with a bag full of arugula that he has picked that afternoon, that is pretty good quality. And it is darn fresh, and it tastes awfully good and I will pay a few cents more for that—or likely, a few dollars more for that. But, yeah, that is an important thing. I know, for example, where I come from in the Midwest, when I was a kid I lived in Chicago. As a young child we moved out to an outlying suburb. It was on the edge of farmland at that time and of course, the irony of that is that our house was a new house at the time and it was on what had been somebody's farmland. But now what I am getting at is that all of that open farmland that went for miles and miles and miles—we could walk out of our little neighborhood and be in somebody's corn field—I mean, I could walk out of somebody's door and be in somebody's cornfield. My childhood friend Kip, his parents were German immigrants who had come there—or, not his parents, I am sorry—his great grandparents—had come there and homesteaded and they lived in the house that had been built in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century by his great grandfather. They were no longer farmers. All of that land is now built and it is offices and there is a big hospital out there now, and all of these little mini malls, and it is shocking. The last time that I went back—it was shocking how—I mean, it was unrecognizable and I was even a little disoriented at one point because I thought, “Didn't we used to fish back there? Did we used to—?”

04:00:48:10

Jackson: Yeah, you mentioned that earlier.

04:00:48:11

Lee: Yeah. And so that is one of the reasons that we have to support farmers and the small farmers—to preserve all of that and a way of life and that land. I sure liked better seeing those big oak trees out there than Jewel Osco—which is a Midwestern grocery, drug chain. Yeah. It is really important. It is staying away from the convenient food life and the convenient life and families not

eating together and people not eating together, and all of that kind of stuff is part of that sustainable world.

04:00:49:03

Jackson: All right. Now we are going to move toward your restaurant a little bit more.

04:00:49:09

Lee: Okay.

04:00:49:09

Jackson: A little bit more towards them—construction, things like that. So, was it hard to open and create Eccolo? Was it a long process?

04:00:49:20

Lee: It was remarkably fast. And it was very hard. We basically remade a restaurant in about three and a half months—three months. We started working in early January of this year and we were open by the first week of April. So—three months and a week. We essentially gutted this building, which is an interesting building—it was built back in the seventies—1979, by—earlier than that. It was first made into a restaurant in 1979. Excuse me. It was previously the Fourth Street Grill, which was a great restaurant—which was there for about ten years. It was built out of reclaimed wood parts.

04:00:50:18

Jackson: Fourth Street?

04:00:50:20

Lee: And all kinds of things like that. It in itself had a kind of sustainability. But it has a kind of beauty still, because this wood is decades old. It came from a military building over on Treasure Island and was made into something else. So it has an awful lot of character—much character beyond its actual lifetime as this restaurant. So we gutted it, we rebuilt the kitchen, we opened the kitchen up. It was a closed, dark, two door swinging door kind of place and we opened up the wall to the dining room so that people can see what was going on.

04:00:51:06

Jackson: Who designed the restaurant?

04:00:51:06

Lee: Abrams Milikan and Associates—Berkeley firm [spells out name]. And they are the people who built the original building too.

04:00:51:26

Jackson: Oh wow. That works well.

04:00:51:27

Lee: So that was pretty cool. They are a funny group. Funny group. Because they do crazy things like this. Well, they were starting out back in those days and built it with their own hands, and a lot of the crew that they still have are

people that were there at that time. One fellow says, “Yeah, I built this restaurant. This is the third restaurant that we built on this site—out of this building.” It is pretty cool. That was one of the reasons also that it went so quickly—because their crew is very, very organized and does this all of the time, and knew exactly where they were going, and they really do A + work. And all of the subcontractors that they work with are A + people, and so things happened in an organized manner. They happened rapidly and they were perfect.

04:00:52:21

Jackson: That’s lucky!

04:00:52:22

Lee: Yeah, we couldn’t have done it otherwise. It was pretty cool.

04:00:52:26

Jackson: Is the kitchen modeled after another kitchen?

04:00:52:28

Lee: No, not really. I mean, I guess you could say Chez Panisse, but it is not modeled after that. We have a central table where we serve from, where we do our prep and where we serve from. And we have cooking line down one side, with a rotisserie and a grill and a stove and deck oven, fryer. Then we have pastry down at the end in the corner and prep tables up this other side, and I have a beautiful antique Italian meat slicer at the end of this table that can be seen from the dining room, which is beautiful. It is as old as I am. It is in much better condition, I think.

04:00:53:00

Jackson: Laughs

04:00:53:00

Lee: Certainly more beautiful.

04:00:53:03

Jackson: It is very pretty.

04:00:53:06

Lee: It is really nice. But no, it is not really—you know, you kind of respond to the space that you have and we put it together for the way that it made sense for that space.

04:00:53:19

Jackson: Okay. And is your restaurant independently owned and operated?

04:00:53:23

Lee: Yes. Yes it is.

04:00:53:24

Jackson: Wow. Was that hard to arrange?

04:00:53:28

Lee:

No—well, there is an investor gentleman in New York who owns a number of other restaurants there, but each one is individual and different, and I met him through a friend of mine and he was the owner of the restaurant in its previous incarnation as Ginger Island, and he wanted to stay involved in it. That was fortuitous to me because I have one backer and that is really nice. So many restaurants now days have groups of people who invest and everyone comes in and feels like they own the joint and has comments to make and desires to satisfy and wants for the menu and all of this kind of stuff. So I am lucky in that respect, that I have one person to deal with.

04:00:54:27

Jackson:

That sounds very good.

04:00:54:27

Lee:

And he is a very hands off kind of guy. It is great.

04:00:54:33

Jackson:

That is very lucky.

04:00:54:36

Lee:

Yeah, really lucky.

04:00:54:36

Jackson:

Do you use specific brands of equipment?

04:00:54:41

Lee:

Well we try to find the best of each kind of piece of equipment that we need. A lot of our stoves are Montague—which is a local company, Hayward. I have got that Italian meat slicer. I have got a couple of other Italian pasta maker—machine, I should say.

04:00:55:01

Jackson:

What brand is that?

04:00:55:01

Lee:

It is Imperia. And I have a little pasta press thing that makes extruded pasta—like spaghetti and stuff like that. There are a lot of standard brands. The refrigeration and all of that is stuff that you can get anywhere. But you try to buy the best. We use All-Clad pots, which are pretty expensive to buy, but last forever pretty much. And they are really great to cook in, so—

04:00:55:34

Jackson:

You have got lucky cooks!

04:00:55:36

Lee:

Yeah, I know it! Yes. They don't always know it.

04:00:55:39

Jackson:

[laughs] Okay. So, I am assuming that you think this, but maybe you can tell me why. Why do you think that Eccolo will become a lasting institution?

04:00:55:48

Lee:

Well, because I think that we serve good quality food. I think that it is absolutely delicious stuff. In fact, I am often shocked at how good it tastes and how young of a restaurant it is, given how young of a restaurant it is. I think that people recognize quality. Our basic line—my basic concept is that I wanted to have good food in a casual atmosphere, served by friendly staff. That is kind of what I am after. And really, that is what we do, and people will return because of that.

04:00:56:29

Jackson:

Okay. Well this is kind of a branch off on that question. What do you think that it says about your customer's tastes that they come to you?

04:00:56:40

Lee:

That they know and like good food. I think that is a short answer.

04:00:56:47

Jackson:

Alright. How is your menu designed and how often does it change?

04:00:56:51

Lee:

It changes daily, which is hard. In fact, it changes twice daily, because we have a different menu for lunch than we do for dinner. Some of the things remain the same just because we can't make every single dish twice a day and we can't make I don't know how many dishes that would be—a lot! So we carry over some salads usually from lunch. Sometimes we will carry over a pasta from lunch to dinner, but the entrees are all different at lunch and at dinner. I think I mentioned before that the lunch crowd is not interested so much in a grand meal as they are in a quick lunch, so we have to design differently for those two crowds. And we do it a little bit as a collaboration between my lead cooks and myself. And I think that that is the best way to do it.

04:00:57:57

Jackson:

Based on seasonality.

04:00:57:57

Lee:

Yeah, right. And what we want to eat [laughs].

04:00:58:00

Jackson:

[laughs] What you want to eat?

04:00:58:02

Lee:

[laughs] Yeah. We have a couple of things that people really want. We have started doing a gorgonzola burger, which I said that I would never, ever do, but, again, the lunch—

04:00:58:16

Jackson:

You were just talking about that—



04:00:58:18

Lee: Yeah—the lunch crowd wants that. So you know, okay. I will do it. And it will be a great one, and I am happy with that. What else? We always have to have soup. We always have to have pasta. We sell a lot of sandwiches at lunch—a lot of fish at dinner, interestingly.

04:00:58:42

Jackson: Okay. Who designs the wine list and how do they do that?

04:00:58:51

Lee: I do that in conjunction with one of my floor managers, and it is an all Italian list, which makes it interesting.

04:00:59:02

Jackson: Could you give me the name of your floor manager?

04:00:59:04

Lee: Kathleen Ventura.

04:00:59:12

Jackson: Okay.

04:00:59:12

Lee: It is all-Italian, so that means that we have to search high and low for stuff. French wines abound. Good Italian wines are harder to find, although because of travel and interest nowadays—

04:00:59:33

Jackson: Because you were a forager.

04:00:59:33

Lee: Yeah. Because I mean of travel and interest these days—I mean among the public these days—there is more awareness of wines other than Chianti and stuff like that. So we are able to put together what I think is a pretty interesting list—red and white. We don't have anything but Italian wines. We have some American beers. Of course we have a full bar, so we have liquors and stuff that—

04:00:59:59

Jackson: It is a very nice bar.

04:01:00:00

Lee: Yeah—that come from elsewhere, but the wine list is all Italian. That is pretty fun—pretty fun.

04:01:00:07

Jackson: Okay. We have been kind of talking about this issue, but maybe perhaps when you make the menu or just in creating Eccolo, were you trying to make a statement politically either on the local or national level?

04:01:00:27

Lee: No. That is Alice's realm. But—that said—you always make a statement, and the fact that we use local suppliers, organic, sustainable, that we cook what we do the way that we do—it is all a political statement. I remember, in fact, when we first opened, there was a little thing in the Chronicle and it was in the gossip column and someone overheard—one person overheard another person outside the restaurant looking at the menu box saying “Oh, this is far to left wing for us!” And they walked away. Well, I am not even sure what that person meant. But what I think that person meant—

04:01:01:25

Jackson: [laughs]

Lee: Is that we did have the names of farms and things like that and at that time we didn't have a hamburger on it and we didn't—so it was really—

04:01:01:35

Jackson: That is pretty funny.

04:01:01:35

Lee: Yeah—I mean, we just were proud of that! We were really proud of that! Thank goodness! WE joked about it for a long time. But I think that you do—by whatever you do, especially with regard to food. Because each time that you buy it is a choice. So, do you buy from a huge multinational company? Do you buy from a national company? Do you buy from the guy in Bolinas who grows really great arugala? All of that is political and I remember for example, when Chipotle—that restaurant down on San Pablo opened—the Mexican place. Everybody said, “Oh this is great! This new restaurant it's down there, and blah, blah, blah!” Then they found out that it is a branch of McDonalds!

04:01:02:31

Jackson: [laughs] I know!

04:01:02:31

Lee: So nobody would go there. And it is all political. It is all political.

04:01:02:39

Jackson: Right. Do you normally put the names of the farms or the companies that you order from on your menu?

04:01:02:42

Lee: Not always. I did a lot at the beginning, but I think that my clientele finds that precious. I sometimes find that precious.

04:01:02:57

Jackson: Precious. Bad?

04:01:02:58

Lee:

Yeah. Like, what happens is that you in fact say to the customer who reads that and doesn't know who that person is, "Phil Paines' pigeons," who is Phil Paine? "I don't know Phil Paine, so I am obviously not in the know." And I think that you—I think that we were alienating some people with those names, expecting them to know who they were—condescendingly saying "Oh, well, you don't know who this person is?" It had that tone to it. So I use it less when I feel that it is really important I do. But most of the time now, I don't.

04:01:03:44

Jackson:

Okay.

04:01:03:37

Lee:

However, I do explain to the staff everyday who the people are, where they are—they know a lot about them now. So if the customer asks, they say, "This person is so and so."

04:01:03:54

Jackson:

Alright. So, when I was looking on the internet for things about the restaurant I found a review from Micheal Baeur.

04:01:04:07

Lee:

Oh uh.

04:01:04:07

Jackson:

So many chefs are completely frightened of him because his reviews can be really harsh and it seems like some readers have a lot of faith in him. Were you nervous when he came in?

04:01:04:17

Lee:

Yes. Very. Very.

04:01:04:17

Jackson:

Did you staff know who he was?

04:01:04:20

Lee:

Yeah, we know who Michael is just because we have been around the restaurant community for such a long time. And we were quite nervous because, you know, he does carry a lot of weight—right or wrong and—

04:01:04:38

Jackson:

Right [laughs]

04:01:04:38

Lee:

And you are a brand new restaurant, you have been there for a month. People don't understand—people have no idea, A, how difficult it is to pull it together.

04:01:04:54

Jackson:

Especially when you are so new!

04:01:04:54

Lee: You are brand new! You don't even remember where all of the brooms are. You don't know how much food to order day in and day out, and you have got waiters that have been working with you for three or four weeks. And maybe that person is great and maybe that person is not, and you haven't had a chance to weed out at that point. I was really lucky in that everybody tended to show up in those days for work! But we were really, really concerned and I wish that—I only wish that reviewers would give restaurants a little more time to get their feet on the ground. And they do. It is a two edged sword. On the one hand, if it is really positive it can give you a big boost in the beginning, which is great.

04:01:05:41

Jackson: Especially him—he is so tough!

04:01:05:47

Lee: Right, and if it is not, well, you know, it has put people out of business. He was pretty favorable to us.

04:01:05:48

Jackson: He liked your food a lot.

04:01:05:55

Lee: He liked our food an awful lot. He hit the service pretty hard. Probably fairly. But yeah, they are under pressure to publish something because there is a new restaurant that everybody hears about. We are under pressure to kind of keep the thing organized, and so it is hard. But I just wish the custom was that a little more time was allowed to new restaurants.

04:01:06:22

Jackson: Okay. I am going to stop for a second and put in a new one just so I am being safe here.

04:01:06:34

Lee: Okay.

[Audio File 5]

Lee: Working, working, working?

05:00:00:03

Jackson: It is working, working, working.

05:00:00:04

Lee: Okay.

05:00:00:04

Jackson: All right. This is December 8, this is the second disk. We are finishing up the interview on the next audio file. All right. We are going to talk now about your transfer—are you cheating?

05:00:00:20

Lee: No, I am just trying to see how much that we have left.

05:00:00:24

Jackson: Not that much.

05:00:00:26

Lee: Good. Because I have got about twenty minutes.

05:00:00:28

Jackson: Okay. We will jam through these then.

05:00:00:31

Lee: Okay

05:00:00:31

Jackson: We are going to talk about now how you transfer your identity—your food identity, your personal identity to the outside world, probably through your restaurant and a little bit beyond that.

05:00:00:41

Lee: Translate that for me.

05:00:00:41

Jackson: I'll ask you specific questions under that.

05:00:00:44

Lee: Okay. Good.

05:00:00:44

Jackson: Do you participate in any events that—well, I know that you did the wine dinner recently—and do you participate in any other community events?

05:00:00:54

Lee: No. We haven't yet because—well that is not true—we participated in one event that was on Fourth Street, right outside the restaurant. But we haven't really been able to participate in any outside events yet because we are new. As I was saying a few minutes ago, it is really, really hard at the beginning because you don't have anything—there are no system established. When you come from a place like Chez Panisse, you know—that it has been there for thirty—three years, and every little job and every little screw has somebody responsible for it in a way that it is maintained, changed, whatever. A new place you don't. So day by day you are trying to get things systematized and organized and in the proper place. I mean, we have changed the position of our printers I don't know how many times in the kitchen.

05:00:01:47

Jackson: [laughs]

05:00:01:48

Lee: It was like, “I can’t think about that printer again, I don’t want to deal with that printer again, blah, blah, blah.”

05:00:01:55

Jackson: That is a good example.

05:00:01:55

Lee: Yeah, so—yeah, that is funny. We have declined participating just because—we have given away a few gift certificates, but we haven’t really participated in anything. We will, however participate in community events.

05:00:02:14

Jackson: That is fair. Do you belong to any culinary organizations, institutions?

05:00:02:19

Lee: I belong to none.

05:00:02:22

Jackson: You are not a club man, you said that earlier.

05:00:02:23

**Lee:**  
I am not a club guy. I am not big on clubs.

05:00:02:28

Jackson: All right. Do you have a desire to, or are you working on a cookbook?

05:00:02:31

Lee: I can’t answer that. Yes. It is in the background. It is on the backburner.

05:00:02:40

Jackson: Okay. Alright. Do you work with any culinary schools or educate students in any other way? It seems like you really like teaching your craft to people.

05:00:02:51

Lee: Yes. Yes I do like teaching and yes we do work with culinary schools. We get from a couple of different schools. There are three or four big schools—national schools, schools that send people around the country—California Culinary Academy, Culinary Institute of America in New York. There is a Johnson and Whales University and—

05:00:03:26

Jackson: Tante Marie’s?

05:00:03:26

Lee: Tante Marie—we haven’t had anyone from Tante Marie. But we probably will. Mary Risely is a friend of mine. She owns Tante Marie. We haven’t had anybody from there yet, but yes, we always have interns.

05:00:03:44

Jackson: National interns.

05:00:03:44

Lee: Yeah. We have been lucky so far. We have had some really great ones. And some—I'm hoping that this one woman who was here for the summer time will come back and work after she is finished with school. So yeah, we do. That is really important because their programs tend to be—though aren't exclusively—training people for the hotel industry or the corporate restaurant.

05:00:04:18

Jackson: Banquets.

05:00:04:18

Lee: Yeah. I think that it is really important to have people see that there is other ways of cooking than that. So I am lucky in that I get people who are interested in that. Some of the schools have different parts to their program now that are run by people who are interested in sustainable and organics and all of that kind of thing, and that is good. That is progress. But we all like to have the opportunity to teach the young cooks our ways and have them see that there is another way of cooking besides hotel pans and hot boxes.

05:00:05:03

Jackson: [laughs] All right. Would you like to name someone specifically that you feel like you have mentored?

05:00:05:16

Lee: Um—

05:00:05:16

Jackson: You don't have to do that. Just if you feel like dropping a name.

05:00:05:20

Lee: No.

05:00:05:20

Jackson: Okay. Do you feel that chefs in San Francisco Bay Area communicate with each other well?

05:00:05:27

Lee: Yes.

05:00:05:28

Jackson: Yeah?

05:00:05:28

Lee: Yeah, I think all around chefs do and it is not a huge world. There are a million chefs but the ones that—how do I say this—we all know each other. I can say that. And yeah, there is a lot of communication and there is a lot of exchange. In fact, if somebody is looking for a key person they might phone up and say, "Hey, do you have anybody or do have you seen anybody recently?" And people get passed around. There is a woman in New York—April Bloomfield, who came to work with me last year for three or four months. She was from the River Café in London and Batali, Mario Batali in

New York is friends and a partner with a friend of mine in a restaurant there called The Spotted Pig. They were looking for somebody and they said, “Hey, do you know anybody.” And I said, “Oh, I know April.” And she is now getting famous.

05:00:06:45

Jackson: Oh wow.

05:00:06:45

Lee: Yeah. Great restaurant. Great cook. April is just a great cook and she is a crazy person.

05:00:06:50

Jackson: So someone can make a name for themselves in your restaurant.

05:00:06:53

Lee: Oh yeah. But I am citing that as a way of exchange. There is a lot of communication. There is like a dozen people around the country who—I even can name them and who they are—Mark {Peal?}, Nancy Silverton, Mario Batali, Alfred Portale in New York. These are the people who have big names. Tracy DeJardin here and you know—you know everybody. You only have to know about two dozen people and you know everybody [laughs].

05:00:07:32

Jackson: [laughs]

Lee: In the food business.

05:00:07:34

Jackson: Okay. Well I have one last question for you and then if you want to make a comment you could so.

05:00:07:40

Lee: Okay.

05:00:07:40

Jackson: What would you say to someone that said that cooking is a young man’s craft?

05:00:07:43

Lee: Absolutely true. Man—I don’t know. Maybe young person’s craft.

05:00:07:46

Jackson: Young person’s craft. Oh, wow.

05:00:07:48

Lee: Yeah, yeah. I would say that. Yeah, cooking is for young people. Restaurants are for young people. God, everything is for young people. And I only say that now at fifty-two, but, people don’t realize how much physical stamina and strength is required to be a cook. You stand all day, eight or nine hours you are on your feet. You might get twenty, thirty minutes break if you are lucky,



to have lunch. You have to lift big pots. You have to drag them off the stove onto the floor. You have to move crates of milk. You have to move fifty-pound boxes of onions. You have to carry the Italian {Paninno?} machine from one room the next that weighs a hundred and ten pounds. It is a lot. It is a lot of chopping. It is a lot of repetitive action. There is a lot of that. And I think, I don't know if I told a story earlier, and I think that I might have, about this woman who I knew that was my—she was a little bit younger than me—but she was probably forty-five, forty-two, something—early forties at the time. She wanted to become a baker.

05:00:09:07

Jackson: The flour bags? Is that the story, about the flour bags?

05:00:09:10

Lee: I am not sure.

05:00:09:10

Jackson: Probably not then.

05:00:09:06

Lee: Maybe not. But she was an editor and she edited Scientific Journals and she got paid I don't know, sixty or seventy dollars and hour—something like that.

05:00:09:24

Jackson: Wow!

05:00:09:24

Lee: A huge amount, really. And she said that she wanted to be a baker. She had always gotten compliments from her friend and she did all of this stuff for the bake sales at school. She is a mother of a classmate of my son's. Anyway, so she said, "What do you think?" and I said, "It is really hard work." Oh, and she was a little overweight. So, she wasn't fit. She was in her forties, she had never done this before professionally. She had this great idea about it and she was going to go and create and blah, blah, blah. So she wanted to go to cooking school and I said, "Well, you know that it is going to cost you \$30,000-\$40,000. Why don't you just take that money and put it in the bank and hang to on the that, and think about and keep baking cookies for the bake sale." No, no—she really wanted to pursue it. I said, "Look, you are going to spend two years in this program. You are going to get out of school, you are going to be two years older than you are, and you are going to get paid \$8.50 an hour. And you are going to work forty to forty-five hours a week on your feet, all day long. You are a baker, you are probably going to have to start at six in the morning, if you are lucky." And she said, "Oh, I really want to do it." Well, she lasted about four months. Spent all of that money on the school, took the two years, complained about now having any money because she was paying it to the school, and it lasted four months. She said, "I can't do it, it is too much physical effort." And that is an extreme example, but it is a lot and I am not Mr. Joe Fit either, anymore, but I just kind of chuckle when I hear the young people on the job saying, "Well, you know, I am really tired." It's like,

“I am fifty years old, you are too young to be tired. Keep chopping the onions.” [laughs] But—there is a lot of physical demand in that job and it is for young people. It is for young people. But, after a while you learn how to work. And you cut out a lot of the extra steps and things and you know how to be efficient. And I know just little things. I am working here on this side of the table, and I have got my bowl full of stuff and my stove is over there, and I can either pick it up and walk all the way around the end of the table in the back with it, or I can set it there [reaches to other side of the table] and walk around the end. And I have saved myself and there is a lot of little stuff like that. It seems insignificant—

05:00:11:49

Jackson: No, it is not.

05:00:11:50

Lee: But you do it a hundred and fifty times a day. You got to take as much mental and physical stress out of your day as you possibly can. You don’t know that when you are young. You don’t care, because you are young and virile and everything else. And strong and whatnot. But, yeah. It is for young people. But it takes a long time to learn how to cook. It takes a long time to know where you want to go with it. And that is the advantage of being older and being—I have been lucky, there’s a million cooks my age who have been cooking for just as long or longer—still chopping onions. I still chop onions, don’t get me wrong.

05:00:12:39

Jackson: [laughs] Do you cook on the line at night?

05:00:12:40

Lee: No, not usually. But I always help during the day and I always have other, outside projects at the restaurant that I am doing, like curing meats and what not. So I am always cooking. In a way, I miss being on the line, but only in the sort of intellectual way. It is hard, it is hard. It’s hot. It’s long. It’s heavy. There is a lot of pressure. A restaurant is busy putting out dishes fast, and we cook everything to order. We are not doing much scoop and serve. But I think that it is good, it is a good profession for the young person who wants to do it. I always say that it is really hard work. You don’t get paid a lot. If you are lucky you get a chef’s job down the way. And if you are lucky and you work really hard and you have talent, that will happen. You have to want to do this more than anything else because you really can’t do much else other than this. Because of all of those reasons, because of the physical demands and the focus it takes. And if you don’t feel that way about it, don’t do it. I know one person who is in that situation now, and I said that years ago. “You have to want to do this more than anything else.” And she went ahead and did it and is saying, “I don’t know what to do, I am stuck.” And I could never say, “I told you so,” but it is a little bit like, “you should have been more careful in your choice.” On the other hand, what do you do? You never really know until you try something. But it is a big jump. It is a big jump. So, yeah.

05:00:14:24

Jackson:

That is true. Okay. Would you like to add anything else? This is the end of the interview.

05:00:14:27

Lee:

Other than that I think it is a really great project and I am very happy that it is getting done, and I hope that—people have more purposeful answers than mine.

05:00:14:43

Jackson:

You have very good answers!

05:00:14:36

Lee:

And don't ramble as much. Don't ramble as much [laughs]. It is something that I do everyday and that I think about all of time. I have been doing this for a long time and I came here from another place as a young person to do this, and I have been able to and—I am glad that it is being written about.

05:00:15:08

Jackson:

That is great. Okay.

05:00:15:10

Lee:

Yeah, okay. Thanks.

05:00:15:10

Jackson:

Thank you.