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University of California  
Berkeley, California

Paul Bertolli  
Chef, Author, and Salumi Maker

Interviews conducted by  
Paul Redman  
in 2004

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Interview 1: October 11, 2004

Audiofile 1

01-00:00:00

Redman: So we are here with Paul Bertolli for the first interview. Today is October 11, 2004. Basically we want to start with your background growing up. It is kind of our theory for this project that as a chef many of your influences may have started when you were a child. So if you could just talk about your childhood and how you grew up and some of your early food memories and the role that food played in your family.

00:01:15

Bertolli: Well, I am one of seven siblings in an Italian family. Both of my parents were Italian, so that might explain why there was so much good food in the house.

00:01:34

Redman: Did your parents come over from Italy?

00:01:37

Bertolli: My parents were born here in this country but were sent back for school, which I suppose was one of the traditions among Italian immigrants, when they wanted to get a really good education - a traditional education- for their son or daughter, they would send them back to Italy.

00:01:52

Redman: Was that for University or just for regular school?

00:01:56

Bertolli: It was for Ginnasio, which is the first and second year of Liceo (secondary school specializing in classics) which would be like junior high or high school. It is a big commitment. My mother- just in Genovese upper school. But both my grandparents were, at least, I think in significant points in my life living very close to us.

00:02:24

Redman: Yes. Where was that, exactly?

00:02:25

Bertolli: San Rafael, California.

00:02:26

Redman: Was that where you grew up?

00:02:27

Bertolli: That was where I grew up, yeah. So my father's mother lived in Richmond and that side of the family was Piemontese- Milanese. The other side was from the Arsiero in the province of Vicenza- my mother's side. And her mother came to live with us when I was about fourteen or so. So there was lots of cooking going on, on both sides. In fact, we used to go to my father's mother's house for celebrations- Christmas and Thanksgiving and what not,

and she would do pretty much a traditional tacchino (turkey) Milanese with-turkey, with the most amazing stuffing.

00:03:20

Redman: Wow.

00:03:20

Bertolli: My mother's mother was a fantastic cook and she cooked for us on a nightly basis. We also did the tradition of the Veneto on Sunday. She would always make polenta. So there would just be this enormous round of polenta in the middle of the table and we would have stew meats and beans and anchovies, and things like that. That happened every Sunday, while she was living with our family.

00:03:43

Redman: Wow. And when you said turkey, was that on Thanksgiving, or was that on Christmas?

00:03:47

Bertolli: Thanksgiving.

00:03:48

Redman: Is that something that she picked up here in the states?

00:03:51

Bertolli: Yeah, she picked it up.

00:03:53

Redman: Did she kind of combine the two?

00:03:53

Bertolli: Yeah. She knew how to make forced meat. She made a great stuffing out of necks and she would take pancetta and usually onion. There would be sausage in it. Lots of sage, bread soaked in broth. That kind of thing. She would fashion this really soft, moist stuffing, and then she would make the turkey. Anyway- a very Italian taste in the turkey.

00:04:24

Redman: [Does] that technique of stuffing the turkey- does that come from Italy, or is that something that she also got that is sort of American, but she used her Italian knowledge of cooking to doctor it up?

00:04:38

Bertolli: I think probably she made a similar kind of stuffing in Italy for other kinds of birds - whatever it was. Like, the liver of the bird - the giblet, use the neck meat, bread. It is the same combination always - usually some sort of fat meat, like pancetta or prosciutto. Sage always figures into it. But it was extraordinary. I can still taste it. It was fantastic. Other than that, I grew up on a plot of land behind the Dominican convent in San Rafael. It was part of the estate called Lichtenburg Estate, where our property [was]—my father

purchased a sub-division of that Lichtenburg Estate. There were orchards surrounding this estate. There were old pear trees, and pineapple-guavas, bitter oranges, apples of all kinds, plums- Santa Rosa plums.

00:05:36

Redman: Were these part of your parents property, or these were surrounding your home?

00:05:40

Bertolli: They were surrounding, and when this Lichtenburg Estate dissolved and they cut up the surrounding areas, a lot of the orchard trees were in different people's yards or just along the creek side, or whatever. So, my first memory of food really, of eating fruit and things, [was] just of roaming around that neighborhood and eating all of these different things. There were quinces; there were figs, grapes growing on things. The pineapple-guavas were fantastic in the fall.

00:06:14

Redman: In what decade were you growing up? I am not sure the year you were born, but when was this?

00:06:18

Bertolli: I was born in 1954.

00:06:20

Redman: Okay. So you are talking about the sixties, would that be right? Early sixties?

00:06:23

Bertolli: Yes. That is right. I can remember the day that John F. Kennedy died.

00:06:27

Redman: Wow.

00:06:27

Bertolli: Yeah. I was eating a rangpur lime.

00:06:31

Redman: [laughs]

Bertolli: I remember. I used to love them.

00:06:33

Redman: Really. How old were you? What grade were you in?

00:06:33

Bertolli: [talking over each other some] I remember exactly where I was. I was sitting under a magnolia tree on my parents' property, and he had died in March, and I just remember how awful I felt. Anyway...

00:06:48  
Redman: That is interesting. Do you have any idea how long your parents or your family has been in the Bay Area? When they settled here?

00:06:59  
Bertolli: 1939, I believe that it was.

00:07:06  
Redman: What business was your dad in, if you don't mind me asking?

00:07:09  
Bertolli: My father was a patent attorney for the Standard Oil Corporation.

00:07:13  
Redman: Wow. So did they flee Europe because of World War II coming, or was it just--

00:07:19  
Bertolli: No, my father was there during the war. He did calisthenics in the morning, under some fascist school teacher, and told me all about what it was like to be in Italy under Mussolini.

00:07:44  
Redman: Wow. The one other thing that I want to ask you about this, or about your family and cooking and stuff like that: would you consider your parents beyond just the holidays, were they big home cooks? Was it the kind of thing where every night was a wonderful meal, or was it--?

00:08:05  
Bertolli: I can tell you that my mother cooked everyday. Everyday. She cooked everyday. The stove was going from as early as 1:00 in the afternoon for dinner.

00:08:16  
Redman: Do you think that food is something that you kind of took for granted when you were a kid because you had all of these fruit orchards around your house?

00:08:24  
Bertolli: Took for granted? Well, I mean, yeah. I suppose that it was what I was born into, so there was some element of it. In retrospect I realize what was happening. I was getting education about what it meant to taste things. Because I wanted all the fruit-I learned to watch fruit ripen, for instance. I knew when to pick from which tree and from which part of the tree. I learned that walking around those neighborhoods. Up in the hills we had oak trees, and there were all kind of mushrooms up there. We would kick them over—I wrote about this in my book, just about how, in retrospect, I didn't know it at the time, I experienced a lot of my world through food--[sees someone] Hi Peter!- through my senses. That it is through my sense of smell. I had a very powerful sense of smell, and I still do, and my son does as well. He knows—

he is much more sophisticated in his ability to smell than I am, at this point. I ride my bike home and he knows where I have been.

00:09:31

Redman: Wow.

00:09:31

Bertolli: “Oh Dad, you went through the eucalyptus orchard off of Nimitz Trail, right?”

00:09:35

Redman: Would you say that that sense of smell translates to a really powerful or a really good smell memory? They say for--

00:09:47

Bertolli: Yes. It is like having perfect pitch in music. I think of it that way because I studied music. Some people are gifted with the ability to hear notes in their head and be able to identify them as absolute pitches. I can do that with scent. I can remember, I can bring to my mind the smell of something. And that is, was something that I just grew up with. Some people hear very well, some people see extraordinarily well. Some people are good at math.

00:10:21

Redman: Okay. When I was researching articles about you and your restaurant, in one article you described the food of your childhood as soul food.

00:10:32

Bertolli: No I didn't. I would never have said that. It was probably the journalist.

00:10:36

Redman: Oh, okay. So that wasn't something that you said then.

00:10:40

Bertolli: I can't ever remember saying that. And I don't think that I would [laughs].

00:10:44

Redman: Alright. That is fine. That is probably something that they put in there. So then maybe could you go on to talk about your teenage years? I understand you worked in a butcher shop or something. Can you talk about how that came about and what your experiences were while you were there?

00:10:57

Bertolli: There were Italians in our neighborhood and one of them owned Maison Gourmet, which was in the Petrini's markets in San Francisco. They are no longer there. Fulton and Masonic. He was in turn related to his uncle, ran the meat department of Petrini's markets, which was, at the time, the best meat market in the city. They used to bring in whole carcasses. They would break them upstairs in a big cutting room and then downstairs there was a tremendous long, long meat market of really beautifully fabricated roasts and meats and things like that. So I worked with this man, in Petrini's markets, I worked upstairs in the meat section and I worked downstairs in the meat



section. I also worked in the delicatessen. That is where I learned a lot about international foods, particularly sausages. We had an enormous case. In those days there were a number of different pork sausage makers in the Bay Area. It was really in its heyday. So there was some Hungarian stuff, some Polish stuff. There was Saag's meat company- did all kinds of German style bratwurst, and the whole German section, the Italian section- all that.

00:12:20

Redman: How old were you when you started working there?

00:12:20

Bertolli: I worked there- I think that I started when I was like thirteen years old.

00:12:24

Redman: Was this something that was hard? I mean, what made you want to do it? Did your parents suggest it, or did they fight you when you said that you wanted to do it? What was sort of the chemistry of--

00:12:33

Bertolli: I wanted a job. I wanted to work and I knew this family. I was very fond of the family and he offered me a job and I said, "Well, let me see if I can do it." Then I went down, and it was in San Francisco, so I had to bus down there early in the morning and do it. But the reward was that I was in the butcher's union. I was guaranteed making \$14- \$15 an hour as a fourteen year old. I was a journeyman when I was sixteen years old. I think that I was making close to \$20 an hour. You know? The pay was very good and I liked the work. I learned lots of knife skills. I learned my way around an animal. I learned also all about cooking because the fellow who hired me was an extraordinary cook. His family was from Lucca, and they just really understood food. It was all gourmet, it was his delicatessen. So I did all of the salad making and the spit roasting of birds and all of that kind of stuff. Right. And then I got into catering through that company too.

00:13:50

Redman: Just catering in people's homes and stuff?

00:13:52

Bertolli: Well, they were events usually.

00:13:57

Redman: And so then, go on to talk about - you then went to Berkeley after that, or can you talk about what you wanted to study, why? Why not continue to be a butcher?

00:14:10

Bertolli: Well I had a very strong interest in music, and really the work was a means to doing the music. So I went to the prep department at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music while I was working at Petrini's markets and then made my application to Cal in music and decided to go to Cal. I continued to

work in the market and branched out from there. I worked in a place out in Walnut Creek called A la Carte, which is a very huge, sort of international delicatessen, designed after the Guggenheim. You go up from one level, there are 400 kinds of beer on the first floor, then there is a whole wine department and you wind up to the food. And you get everything up there. So I was hired to run that. I did that for a while. And meanwhile I was going to school.

00:15:10

Redman: Yeah. What age did you start playing music?

00:15:14

Bertolli: Oh, I think I was probably ten or eleven.

00:15:17

Redman: You played piano, or...?

00:15:18

Bertolli: I played guitar and lute. Then I moved over to piano, after.

00:15:27

Redman: Was one of those more important to you than the other? Did you know when you were working this butcher shop that this is something that you might go on to do--

00:15:35

Bertolli: No. I never thought that I would do it.

00:15:37

Redman: Really?

00:15:37

Bertolli: It just wasn't that I never thought about it- I never thought about it. I just did what I was doing and my focus was music, all throughout that whole - probably from sixth grade through college, it was music.

00:15:57

Redman: Were you successful when you were in college with music? Was that something that you thought that you could go on and do professionally?

00:16:06

Bertolli: I thought there might be something I could do and I moved to New York to try it out, and I realized reality [laughs].

00:16:14

Redman: How old were you when you moved to New York?

00:16:17

Bertolli: Ah - 1977, so twenty-one. I followed a teacher back there to the Manhattan Conservatory and decided to spend some time, and realized over the course of that year that I had to think seriously about where my buck was going to come from. So I moved to Europe on the last money that I had and kind of worked

around Italy, and that's where I started really developing an interest in Italian food in particular. I mean, I was raised on it, then I went there and it was a different thing because a lot of what we have here was immigrant versions of traditional Italian dishes. So to go there and to experience it for the first time, it was a real eye opener.

00:17:18

Redman: Sorry, before we go on I want to ask you, and I know that this might be hard because memory is sometimes strange, the way that you remember things. But, what was your impression of food, if you had any, say before you went to New York- like the Bay Area in the sixties. Obviously this was before what we have talked about- this sort of food revolution that a lot of people talk about starting with Chez Panisse and things like that, but did you--was there any concept of what restaurant food was supposed to be, or what it was like, say in the sixties for you, in the Bay Area?

00:17:54

Bertolli: Well I remember really distinctly that the seafood restaurants in San Francisco were a lot better than they are now. That was kind of one of the things that a family would do. We would always go to Sibella's- which was an Italian seafood place on Richardson Bay.

00:18:10

Redman: I was going to say, is it still there?

00:18:11

Bertolli: Probably not- or Dominic's, in San Rafael. These are places where you have got crab cocktails and Shrimp Louie and fillet of sole. And it was all from the bay, and cioppino. My father used to take me to Tadich's downtown in San Francisco. As far as the restaurant scene, in high school I had a lot of opportunity to eat in restaurants. I ate in probably every fine restaurant in San Francisco and in the Bay Area because I had this English professor who was wealthy by virtue of his aunt who fed his checkbook all the time. He would take out a group of guys, usually on Friday night. We would go to some restaurant.

00:18:58

Redman: With your teacher?

00:18:58

Bertolli: Yeah.

00:19:00

Redman: Were you guys out drinking and stuff on the side too?

00:19:02

Bertolli: Yeah, yes. That is right.

00:19:04

Redman: [laughs] Was this like a Dead Poet's Society sort of thing?

00:19:07

Bertolli: A kind of thing like that.

00:19:07

Redman: Like the real cool English teacher who takes you out?

00:19:09

Bertolli: Yeah! It was very cool. So we went everywhere. We went to Ernie's. We went to- let me try to think- there was this place called Le Camembert in Tiburon. There was another one in downtown Mill Valley, a good French one- El Paseo that we used to go to all that time. We used to go to--

00:19:37

Redman: Any ethnic food?

00:19:37

Bertolli: No.

00:19:37

Redman: Any impression of Chinese food when you were young?

00:19:42

Bertolli: No.

Redman:

Or any of the other ethnic cuisine that were huge in the Bay Area even a hundred years ago? Did you ever go to Chinatown?

00:19:45

Bertolli: Yeah. We did. Our family went there. I didn't spend a lot of time there. We used to buy firecrackers around the fourth of July and we would always eat Chow Mein somewhere. Something like that. But being near North Beach, we used to go into North Beach- the Cuneo bakery, and buy bread sticks. My mother used to like that. We used to go around to some of the delicatessens, and actually Gloria Sausage Company, which is no longer there- next to Rossi's Market on Vallejo Street. Right in there.

00:20:20

Redman: Okay. Well, if you want, jump back to the time you spent in Italy and if you can, try to tell us what you thought you were going to accomplish there, what turned out to be important to you there, and what you learned there, and things like that.

00:20:34

Bertolli: The first time I went with my eyes wide open and the second time I went it was in 1981. I went back to Italy and I went there with the expressed purpose of working.

00:20:49

Redman: To become a cook or a chef?

00:20:49

Bertolli:

Yeah, I had already worked in a significant restaurant in the Bay Area- Fourth Street Grill- I opened that with Mark Miller in 1979. I spent a year and a half with him- a really intense year and a half. I kind of knew that I wanted to go in this direction at this point because everything was really turning out well. I just felt like, this is something I can do, and I understand it. I am interested in it. It's not what I expected, but it is working. So I, through a friend who I met at Fourth Street Grill- an Italian- I was able to land a job in a restaurant south of Florence. So I flew to Italy and ended up in this restaurant in the countryside.

00:21:44

Redman:

What was it like? What kind of a restaurant was it?

00:21:46

Bertolli:

It had sort of all the trappings of what was then a fine dining restaurant, but kind of an extension of the family home. These people all lived right there and they all worked in it.

00:22:06

Redman:

Now, did you speak Italian from your family or did you learn any in Italy?

00:22:12

Bertolli:

I learned it, I mean there was certainly Italian spoken in my family- everybody spoke Italian. But you don't really learn it well. I took it in college, and did all the grammar. I did four years of it, and when I went to Italy I was pretty good. Yeah.

00:22:36

Redman:

Maybe you could talk about - I think that a critical thing to cover for this interview would be to talk about your experiences at Fourth Street Grill with Mark Miller. What it also before this that you went to get a job at Chez Panisse?

00:22:52

Bertolli:

No. I didn't go. It was Fourth Street Grill, then I spent a year in Italy, working. And I worked in four different venues over there in and around Florence and Tuscany. Then I came back and that's when I started working in Chez Panisse. That was like in 1982. That's right.

00:23:20

Redman:

Who was running the kitchen there at that point?

00:23:22

Bertolli:

Good question.

00:23:25

Redman:

Was that still Jeremiah Towers?

00:23:25

Bertolli:

No. No.

00:23:27  
Redman: He was gone. Did you ever know him from back then, just out of curiosity?

00:23:29  
Bertolli: I knew him, sure. I did know him. I still do know him. Yeah. He had gone off to the Santa Fe Bar and Grill. That was later, no- he was in the city at the Balboa before he came back over to Santa Fe. He was at the Balboa for a little time. Anyway, no I didn't have much to do with them. Who was there? Jean Pierre Moulet, Patricia Curtam, Mark Miller- no, not Mark Miller... Todd Koons, Alice, once in a while, was there.

00:24:11  
Redman: Well, tell me about your experience at Fourth Street Grill. What was that restaurant like?

00:24:16  
Bertolli: It was--

00:24:17  
Redman: Tell me what stations you worked and stuff.

00:24:19  
Bertolli: I worked all of the stations, and Miller had left the kitchen to me to run after a certain point. It was a grill, and it was really heavy work. You worked the grill or you worked the pasta section, or you worked the cold station. Three stations, basically. The grill station was the most intense. Because we had three or four fish, meats - you had to keep it all going, and the room seated about seventy-two people. I could remember on Sunday night in particular, people lined up down the block.

00:24:58  
Redman: Wow. How many covers did you guys do for dinner?

00:24:59  
Bertolli: Oh, I think we often did 210, 220. Three turns, so it was really hot and heavy. That restaurant, I think, struck a chord with people because it kind of was like an American bistro in a way. Yeah, that is a good way to describe it. It was informal. You could get a hamburger but you could also get a nice lamb chop or sausage or pasta.

00:25:36  
Redman: Well see, didn't he then go on to do Southwestern style food?

00:25:44  
Bertolli: Yeah.

00:25:44  
Redman: So it wasn't that-- this restaurant was not that kind of food?

00:25:46

Bertolli: Oh, not at all. No. It was like marinated grilled meats. It was some sort of a spin off on a seafood restaurant with more meat. It had that kind of feeling about it.

00:26:02

Redman: Sounds good.

00:26:04

Bertolli: Yeah, it was good. It was very good at the time. It really was very successful and popular.

00:26:10

Redman: Why did you go to Chez Panisse. Was that something that you had thought about for a while?

00:26:17

Bertolli: I had kind of auditioned at Chez Panisse before I went to Fourth Street Grill. It was the restaurant that I wanted to work in because I kind of grew up with that restaurant. I went to Cal. I came to Cal the same year that Chez Panisse was opened- 1972. I ate there frequently. I remember when the menu was four dollars. I went to the midnight steak and red wine feeds.

00:26:42

Redman: Wow.

00:26:42

Bertolli: I just kind of followed it from the very beginning. My nose led me there. I could smell really good stock being made. I could smell that there was something good going on- really good, and a different smell. It was the smell of the place that attracted me, mostly. And I said, "That is the place where I am going to work."

00:27:03

Redman: You still get that when you walk in the front door.

00:27:09

Bertolli: Yeah. Sometimes. It is not the same now.

00:27:09

Redman: The first time I went in there was several years ago, I just walked right in the front door on a Friday night and I was going there to trail the next morning or whatever, for the day. And I just went in there to check it out the night before, and the smell was really strong. Like lamb or something.

00:27:25

Bertolli: Yeah.

00:27:26

Redman: Which I had never really smelled that in a restaurant. I don't know how it would come through, or just because it is small, but it does have a smell.

00:27:32  
Bertolli: It is small and--

00:27:34  
Redman: Why is that, do you think? Is it the ovens?

00:27:36  
Bertolli: It used to be stronger before they remodeled.

00:27:39  
Redman: It used to be a closed kitchen?

00:27:41  
Bertolli: A closed kitchen?

00:27:43  
Redman: As opposed to an open kitchen? I just read something today, there was a fire--

00:27:47  
Bertolli: Yes.

00:27:47  
Redman: And then they opened it up.

00:27:49  
Bertolli: Yes. There was a fire, yes. That's right. The fire happened in what? 1980, something like that? I can't remember exactly. But I knew that something was going on there and I wanted in. So I auditioned. I came back that first time from Europe and invited Alice to lunch with the chefs that were there at the time. Jean Pierre Moullé, Mark Miller and Patricia Curtan- those were the ones in the kitchen. They all came to lunch. And I didn't get the job.

00:28:25  
Redman: Where did you have lunch?

00:28:26  
Bertolli: I was staying in Berkeley at a friend's house and I basically just spent my last \$400.

00:28:32  
Redman: Oh you just invited them over to your home?

00:28:34  
Bertolli: I invited them over. That is what I did.

00:28:36  
Redman: Really?

00:28:36  
Bertolli: Yeah.

00:28:36  
Redman: Did you even know them before that?



00:28:39

Bertolli: No.

00:28:39

Redman: You just kind of went in, and were like, "I want to work here. Can you come have lunch with me?"

00:28:42

Bertolli: Yeah, I would like to cook for you guys. Come over for lunch.

00:28:45

Redman: Wow. What did you make them? Do you remember?

00:28:48

Bertolli: Oh I made them poached salmon and asparagus soup in the wrong pan, so it turned brown. I did an antipasti thing like my mother used to do- beans and fresh tuna and olive salad, or something like that.

00:29:04

Redman: Did they seem snotty to you, or do you think that you just didn't cook that well or something?

00:29:09

Bertolli: They didn't seem snotty- no. No, they didn't seem snotty. Not at all. They were very nice about it. So I didn't get the job, but when I came back from Italy the second time I remember doing this lunch for Susan Nelson who was Mark Miller's partner at Fourth Street Grill. She asked me to cook a lunch for some wine distributors. So I did that and Alice attended that lunch and she ate the food and then she called me, the second time around, and said, "I'm looking for somebody, would you like to work for us?" I guess it took a year in Europe to convince her that I could cook.

00:29:51

Redman: What did you do when you started there, then at Chez Panisse?

00:29:55

Bertolli: Cook, cook, cook, cook, cook. You get in there at one in the afternoon, or two in the afternoon and you are responsible for a course. You meet with whoever is in charge to discuss the pre fix menu for the night. You get assigned a dish. You talk about how you are going to do it, and you do it.

00:30:18

Redman: Wow.

00:30:20

Bertolli: So that is what I did. And then, it was pretty much, I guess by the end of the year there were some big changes. Jean Pierre left and Patty was thinking about leaving as well that year. So we needed to kind of reorganize then. I was really jazzed to be there. I loved it. Alice liked me- I could translate Alice, which was what- Alice has these ideas. She has visions for how things should be and she relies upon people to help her get there. So I was somebody who

could understand what she wanted. She would say, “Make this taste good.” Yeah. I remember. Sweetbreads with green beans with pasta. “Make this taste good.” So I did it. She relied on me for that kind of thing. I kind of assumed that leading role in the kitchen- you know, as others left. I was all that was left and it was by the end of 1982 that I was writing the menus, working on the menus. I would give them to her and she would criticize them, send them back to me. We would work it out in a meeting every week.

00:31:27

Redman: Yes. How would you describe what it is that she wanted?

00:31:30

Bertolli: [pause, laughs] I couldn't even tell you because she couldn't even tell you.

00:31:42

Redman: It was in a certain level of seasoning, or--

00:31:45

Bertolli: You want me to make a generalization about it but I really can't because the whole point of the cuisine there was that it was spontaneous. You could argue with her mercurial attitude, let's say, but most of the time she really had something in mind and she didn't know quite how to get there, but it usually had to do with making something taste more like what it was, or harmonizing the menu as a whole- I guess I could say that.

00:32:20

Redman: Well it sounds like it has something to do with balance, then.

00:32:23

Bertolli: She had a very keen sense of balance. If it didn't taste just right and she had a reference for how it could taste better, that would be the dissonance, you see, and so the cook would kind of have to bridge that gap- how do we get to that?

00:32:39

Redman: Would you say that she has a similar sense of smell and memory of food?

00:32:48

Bertolli: Yeah. I would. I don't know if she would describe it that way, but I think that she does. I think that she has a very, very good taste memory. Very cultivated.

00:33:04

Redman: Okay. How long did you work there for?

00:33:08

Bertolli: Ten years.

00:33:11

Redman: Yeah. Why did you decide to leave?

00:33:13

Bertolli: At that point I was feeling as though I was downwardly mobile [laughs].

00:33:20

Redman: How come?

00:33:20

Bertolli: It had to do with a management decision to democratize the cooking staff so that there would be several different chefs. With that came a democratization of the pay as well. But the real reason is that I felt like I had really contributed what I could and I was ready to leave and figure out the next step. I really felt like I had been there enough. I understood. I mastered what I needed to master and it was time to move on.

00:34:00

Redman: Yeah. And then what did you do after you left there?

00:34:03

Bertolli: I went to- I spent some time off studying in Toronto. I applied to the University of Toronto medieval studies department. I was interested in a particular period in history and I took a break from cooking for a while. I just went up there and read in the snow for about a year and worked on my Latin.

00:34:32

Redman: Wow. What was your period of history?

00:34:34

Bertolli: The fourth century. [Inaudible] The world as they knew it. Very interesting period.

00:34:42

Redman: Did you think that you might go into academics or something?

00:34:45

Bertolli: Yes. I did. I did. I thought—I'd always felt that- I guess that I didn't really choose to become a chef to answer the wrong question, until I was about thirty-seven, because I had these other plans. I really liked to write. I still thought music was some kind of more pure art. In some ways I still do. But, I just kept approaching this green light. Sometimes I would go through it. Sometimes I would wait in the crosswalk and just—cooking was like the green light. Whenever I did it, it was like the world opened up for me. But it wasn't enough sometimes either. So I struggled with who I was supposed to be because I had gifts doing different things, so it was kind of confusing for a while. The hard thing about being in the restaurant is when you are doing fine food like that, is it's so perishable. I got tired of the perishability of the art form. That you make it and it's in some sewer three hours later. So I wanted to do something that had more of a long arc to it- more of a beginning, middle and end that took place over time, and kind of ride that continuum rather than create it, destroy it, create and destroy it, every night. So that is where I started to get interested again in studying something else. The writing I was interested in doing had to do with my excitement over reading really interesting things that made me want to write, made me want to find something to write about. At the same time, the music kept calling. That kept calling me too. So I kept

going back to that. You can't do it all. At some point I had to decide, that is what I finally did. After I had spent, I don't know, four years kind of out and away from it, because I was still working- ah, I shouldn't say that. This change was happening irrespective of what was actually going on in my life, in me.

00:37:20

Redman: Which was that you were at school?

00:37:23

Bertolli: No, that I was working at Chez Panisse and then--

00:37:27

Redman: I see.

00:37:27

Bertolli: And then I was going to school afterwards, and all the stuff that was going on inside of me—but it didn't correspond to the dates in which I stopped. So I just had to let it play out, and I did. And what I have realized now is that everything that I have ever done is in relation to these other pursuits- like music or history or language study. It is all kind of about the same thing. And the cooking was just fun, because you can apply all of the things that you- well, I found out that I could apply all of the skills that I have to this, and this could be just fine. I was looking for something that would kind of just take me over, "This is what I am, this is what I do." And I finally figured out what it was. It was in front of me all the time. So, my career occurred to me and I tell young culinary students that under the best of circumstances your career chooses you, not the other way around. So that—I got chosen.

00:38:36

Redman: Well that is really fascinating.

00:38:38

Bertolli: I have been out of angst ever since that day [laughs], whenever that was. It wasn't a day, {it happened} over time. So anyway, you've got other questions.

00:38:45

Redman: So let's see here. Maybe you can just continue and talk about how you then came to this restaurant- how that came about.

00:39:01

Bertolli: Right. So I came back after being in Toronto and decided that I wanted to pursue, put my foot back in. So I did some consulting with O Chame for a while.

00:39:13

Redman: What is that?

00:39:13

Bertolli:

It is a Japanese restaurant next to Fourth Street Grill on Fourth Street. We had collaborated on a really interesting event at Chez Panisse and he needed some help, so I helped him out for a while and then I was looking for a restaurant space in the city for the better part of the year and I had gone through several different deals looking at sites and in the meantime Bob and Maggie called me to Oliveto and said- they knew that I was free- they said, “We’d like you to come in and eat and tell us what you think of the restaurant.” So, I did that. Well, at first I said, “Well, that’s really nice, but do you really want to know? Do you really want to know what I think?” They said, “Yes.” And I said, “Well, it will take a little more time than a night here.” So they said, “Well, why don’t you just come in for a month.” And I said, [laughs] “What do you want, what are you looking for?” So they told me that they wanted me to concentrate on the food and the service and what I thought of the experience in the place. So I did.

00:40:23

Redman:

Well what did you think of the experience before you started working there?

00:40:25

Bertolli:

What did I think of it?

00:40:28

Redman:

Yeah.

00:40:28

Bertolli:

I thought that they started off strong but that when I came through, it entirely lost focus. Some of the food was dismal and a lot of the service was horrible. I thought that the room needed help as well. Anyway, long story short, what came out of it was that they retained me to help them resurrect the revenues, first of all. So we did some major events here that brought people in, got them interested, re-interested in what was possible, and at the same time I produced a report that had to do with recommendations for how we might fix all of it. So they liked that, and they said, “Let’s do it”. So that led to a different chef- Mike Tusk came on at that time.

00:41:41

Redman:

Was he from Chez Panisse before that?

00:41:43

Bertolli:

Yeah. He had worked at Chez Panisse. We had worked together. He was upstairs in the café. It led to firing most of the service staff and coming up with a plan to renovate. By 1997 we had done all that. The restaurant was doing really well. It had just started to pick up again, revenues came back. So I was really happy and they- that actually happened in around 1995, when the revenue started coming back. And they offered me a partnership in the business. I said, “Well, hmm... let me think about that.” It just occurred to me that there were so many restaurants in the Bay Area, it just felt like we didn’t need more of them, we just needed better ones. And here I was installed. The

alternative was that I could have spent a million dollars opening my own place or I could get free equity here and see this thing come back. And I like my partners. So I decided to stay.

00:42:48

Redman:

Cool. All right, well, I want to ask you a question. How would you define the term cuisine? Not in the French sense of kitchen or whatever, but in a kind of food.

00:42:56

Bertolli:

I know what you mean. Well there is some sort of a deep meaning to it and then there is a surface meaning to it. And the deep meaning, which is the one that I am more interested in has to do with the relationship of a group of people to a food source that is usually local, that evolves over time in such a way that it produces recognizable repetitions of dishes that become almost iconic, you know. Become- they become a measure of place and the season and particular skills associated with it- the limitations of a place. I learned what Tuscan cuisine was all about in a year. I stayed only there and so you see olive trees outside. You see that they raise pigs, they don't raise cows. So they don't have butter, they have olive oil. They have pig fat. They can grow grain. So they make bread, and they salt meat because they've got all these pigs, which gives them the meat. Which gives them the salted meat, which means that the bread is not salted. They can raise sheep there as well because there is a fair amount of pasture and so you get this particular kind of ricotta and you have a cuisine that if you go back you can see that it's based on bread. It was pretty much a poor region. Agriculturally, it doesn't support what the area around the Po river does, for instance. So you get an entirely different flora. So the cuisine is the whole repertoire of dishes and the relationship of the people to those dishes that is celebrated in a kind of ritualistic way when they repeat what their grandfather taught them, or their grandmother taught them. That is what cuisine is and that's why I have a problem with the idea of a California cuisine because I don't think that that's ever happened. And the other thing is that cuisines are the- the true cuisines are born of some necessity also. You can talk about fusion cooking- I mean, that's kind of on the surface level. It doesn't represent a whole lot.

00:45:45

Redman:

I know some places that don't have salt in their bread. I don't know if I thought that it was Tuscany or someplace else. I had read that it was almost in honor of a period of time when they were out of salt. And they couldn't put salt in the bread, so then they continued to do it later on sort of to honor that period of suffering or something like that? It is something that I have sort of thought about. Have you noticed that in certain dishes in certain regions, that it is sometimes associated with some kind of suffering back in history- that they want to remember that aspect of the history?

00:46:21

Bertolli:

Well I can think of matzah brei and the Jews, or matzah- which is an unleavened bread. And in Italian it says something about leavening being a fourteen. You can't mix flour and water and hold them for more than fourteen days. It is considered leavening. Maybe it is less than that. Maybe it is so many hours, I can't remember exactly. As soon as something starts growing in it, potentially puffing it up. So there is the obvious correlation between "We don't want to be puffed up." There is a physiological implication in leavened bread- that puffed up people eat puffed up bread. Something like that.

00:47:02

Redman:

[laughs]

Bertolli:

But more to the point- it's about the memory of the time when the Jews- the Exodus, when the Jews had to leave very quickly and they had to take their dough with them, right away. It was when they reunited as a people. So breaking this bread, which is, you eat that, you take that into your body to remember the event. But, in Tuscany, I don't believe that is the case. I think that--

00:47:30

Redman:

You were saying that it has something to do with the meat- the preserved meat and the sausages and such, that the salt in the meat that--

00:47:36

Bertolli:

Well, the bread was what they called *companatico*. *Companatico* is a term that means the things that go with bread. Okay, so bread- the Tuscan bread is sort of like the Chinese rice. It's white. It's not necessarily white- it can be whole grain too, or some measure of whole grain in it. It probably was whole grain originally. And they used to salt their meats and their vegetables and things quite highly- and the prosciutto from Tuscany is very salty relative to Parma ham. And that is because it is a *companatico*- that which goes with bread.

00:48:17

Redman:

So everything is seen in reference to eating bread?

00:48:21

Bertolli:

Yeah. And then you have bread soups there. The whole tradition of bread soups- the *Ribolita*, *Pappa al pomodoro*. There are all kinds of bread based things. The use of leftovers- *panzanella*. So anyway, I- the problem with that whole thing is that traditions need to be renovated and our cuisines need to be renovated and if in a place like Florence where there is so many tourists there- all of the time- and they are giving them these dishes that have been there in the culinary heritage. Like you go there to eat the great *pappa pomodoro* and you are so tired of making it because they always do it the same. Everybody is bored, and it is horrible usually. There is no spirit. What I am trying to do with this cooking is to do traditional food but cleaned up. I call this chapter "Cleaning the Fresco" in my book because it is like there is this patrimony of history and tradition that has to do with this cuisine and although I don't live

in Italy, we are the same latitude and we can grow a lot of the same things. You can still cook in that spirit. What I try to do with those dishes is that when I see something that I don't think is alive anymore, I just change it [laughs]. I renovate it or I clean it. I clean out the--

00:49:51

Redman: That is interesting.

00:49:51

Bertolli: Yeah.

00:49:52

Redman: Well, let me ask you this then, what do you think about American food, or American cuisine, if there is such a thing? What I am trying to get at is, is it possible that America will ever have its own cuisine in your opinion, or even here in California, would it be a regional cuisine [talking over each other]?

00:50:09

Bertolli: Not in that sense.

00:50:14

Redman: Do you think that it is not quite there yet?

00:50:17

Bertolli: I don't see it happening- I don't see any one thing happening. I see old things being repeated- New England boiled dinner, Chesapeake Bay Crab, Texas Barbecue, New Orleans Cajun, Pennsylvania Dutch--

00:50:31

Redman: Yeah. And California what?

00:50:32

Bertolli: Hadderite cuisine. I mean, "California what?" is a good question. Exactly. I think it's still an open question. I think anything goes. I think pretty much anything goes. Go to a restaurant. If you were able to go to a restaurant and order the same dish that you had down the street- it would be different. Whereas you go to a place like France where they have been making sauce {*Nanucia*}, and there is a way to do that- in the city of Nance. It's just a very different thing. I don't see that we have a cuisine here.

00:51:19

Redman: So, well then maybe we can move on to this concept of--

00:51:25

Bertolli: [inaudible]

00:51:25

Redman: What's that?



00:51:25

Bertolli: Not one anyway. We have a myriad, myriad, myriad. And there are versions of those things.

00:51:30

Redman: Well, maybe we can move on to this subject of a revolution in American cooking that journalists and a lot of people often attribute to things here in California, Chez Panisse, and you have often been included in that in the time where you worked in that restaurant. One thing that I read, something that Alice Waters had said, or I think that she said countless times, that "It wasn't so much a revolution as a trying to return to something that was here before"- something that was already here, whether in a tangible sense the ingredients, or the use of them. So can you comment on that?

00:52:11

Bertolli: Yeah. Something that was here before- or something that was laying latent maybe waiting to happen, I would put it that way. Because I'm not sure that it was here before. I know that before the supermarkets sprung up that there were truck farmers obviously, and there were farmer's markets, and people used to eat off of farms where they would go back to the source to get their food. But I think that the industrialization of the food supply and the ways in which transportation affected what we eat, I think it is hard to go back to anything anymore. Was it a revolution? No, I don't think that it was a revolution. I think that it was a discovery that we- we also could stand for that. We could stand for it. We could say, "We want pure food, we want fresh." First it was just getting things fresh. I remember she used to go through six boxes of green beans to get one box that was--

00:53:13

Redman: Was the quality different than today or was she really just extraordinarily picky?

00:53:16

Bertolli: Hugely different. Most of that stuff was coming from- I used to go to the Farmer's Market in Oakland every morning at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning. So I saw all that stuff coming in and I used to load my Volkswagen up with boxes of romaine and beets and carrots and all of that kind of stuff. It was all pretty much the same- sort of mediocre quality. There were no Farmer's Markets. It was yeah- very, very, different, and what changed I think was the relationship between restaurants and the source of the food. We got rid of the middle man and we started to approach farmers directly. Things started to be grown that were taken off the shelf because they were maybe of limited utility to agribusiness. It was a huge thing that happened, and also an awareness that people could actually enjoy themselves at dinner and it was going to be an experience to dine out where you could kind of take charge of your meal.

00:54:29

Redman: Because of the ingredients, or?

00:54:32  
Bertolli: It was just the whole spirit of eating. Chez Panisse was really important in that respect. There were people that would come just to be in that room because there was so much- there was something alive going on and food was the magnet for that all to happen. But they also found out in the course of it I think, that there was a renewed interest in the social event.

00:54:55  
Redman: Right. That's interesting. I haven't really heard that before. So are you saying that food was the medium of expression or something for a sort of social spontaneity that or some sort of social behavior that people wanted to engage in- that food was a good thing to center it around?

00:55:17  
Bertolli: Oh yeah, oh absolutely. Yeah. We had all kinds of people carrying on in that restaurant, for many, many years- regulars who would come and touch base and it was a real institution. It still is.

00:55:36  
Redman: Yeah. And so--

00:55:37  
Bertolli: What time is it?

00:55:41  
Redman: I don't know, I think that it has been about an hour though.

00:55:48  
Bertolli: Anybody got a watch on?

00:55:51  
other voice: It is five to four.

00:55:51  
Bertolli: Five to four? Okay.

00:55:56  
Redman: What do you want to do? I mean, I think we are about half done.

00:56:03  
Bertolli: Half done? Of the whole interview? I would like to do it in two.

00:56:06  
Redman: Yeah, I think that that is better.

00:56:07  
Bertolli: Yeah. And I should spend like five more minutes with you.

00:56:11  
Redman: Okay. And then we will come back and do it another time [audio file ends]. Well, do you see this restaurant as- what's the difference between this (Oliveto) and Chez Panisse?

00:56:14  
Bertolli: Difference between this and Chez Panisse?

3-00:56:25  
Redman: Is this better to you than Chez Panisse?

3-00:56:35  
Bertolli: Better? No, I mean we're different. We're different in what we do, I mean we cook (inaudible) than Chez Panisse does. Let's go down that road if you want, or-

3-00:56:49  
Redman: Yeah, do you do things here that you couldn't do there?

3-00:56:56  
Bertolli: No, not so much that. It's more a method of doing things. I grew up in, pretty far along the Italian root. You know, Alice really loves that- the food of Italy, and Provence in particular. So while I was there I was able to influence the restaurant in that direction. And when I came here I think, we realized it in a more- kind of in a deeper way. We kind of tried to question everything, like if we're going to make pasta maybe we should think about the grain and where the grain comes from and what water we're going to use and who's going to mill it or are we going to mill it ourselves. One of the things that we did was we made that fireplace the focus of the restaurant in the '96 Oliveto renovation, so that all of our meat roasting goes on there. I'd say 96 percent of it or so. And grilling goes on in a spit roast over wood.

3-00:58:01  
Redman: So is it all wood or is there gas too?

3-00:58:03  
Bertolli: All wood.

3-00:58:05  
Redman: Wow.

3-00:58:06  
Bertolli: All wood, no gas. The overhead heat lamps, we don't do that. I think we work in a more basic way than Chez Panisse does.

3-00:58:25  
Redman: How so?

3-00:58:26  
Bertolli: Our relationship to our ingredients. We make more things by hand than they do. That separates us I think. And our cooking tends to be more set up for, like consistent savor. People come for the sauces and the braises and things.

3-00:58:43  
Redman: Consistent what?

- 3-00:58:43  
Bertolli: Savor. It's like if we make pasta in a pan, each one is sauté processed, versus doing a long long cook braise where you balance all the flavors out and then your pick up is basically to cook noodles and adjust sauce. That's when you have consistency and you can assure that that person on that side of the room is eating the same thing as this person over here.
- 3-00:59:09  
Redman: And that's what they do at Chez Panisse?
- 3-00:59:10  
Bertolli: That's what we do here.
- 3-00:59:12  
Redman: That's what you do here.
- 3-00:59:12  
Bertolli: They don't do a lot of that because of the physical set up of the restaurant and the prep kitchen. They don't have time to do that. A lot of the pasta is not- it's not- yeah, so we [use] this bottom up technique. I think this cooking has more definition, to this restaurant. It's more finely-tuned. You can count on it. You can come back and say that's what they stand for.
- 3-00:59:44  
Redman: You're saying that you take a stand here with a certain kind of food whereas theirs is still really free form.
- 3-00:59:48  
Bertolli: Less free form.
- 3-00:59:50  
Redman: Less free form.
- 3-00:59:52  
Bertolli: Yeah, I think so. We make all the cured meats, I do all that kind of stuff here all the time and- they have wonderful, marvelous ingredients from so many years of doing business with all these small farmers. They probably outdo us in the ingredient area. You know, we don't have access to some things, some special things. Although, we really work hard on it. And I think we have a little more muscle behind the repertoire. There's just more depth in the repertoire here.
- 3-01:00:34  
Redman: Cool. Great! So stop there?
- 3-01:00:37  
Bertolli: Yeah, I think-
- 3-01:00:39  
Redman: Yeah, that's a good spot to stop.

[Interview #2: November 10, 2004  
[Begin 02 11-10-04.wav]

Redman: Let's see, so we're here for the second interview with Paul Bertolli at Oliveto restaurant. Today is November 10, 2004. I want to start today by talking about Oliveto restaurant. Just tell me anything that you want to say about the restaurant. Do you consider this your dream restaurant? Do you consider it your restaurant?

00:00:28

Bertolli: Yeah, absolutely. It wasn't the restaurant that I started. It was started by my partners, but I was brought in at a critical point back in 1993 and my job at that point was to help the ownership re-imagine the restaurant, rework the food, the décor, the service, into a shared vision. A lot of it was a vision that I proposed and was accepted by the ownership. Since that point we've been kind of elaborating that whole vision. It took us some years to kind of turn everything around. We ended up renewing the kitchen, the service, and then remodeling the restaurant between 1996 and 1997, and since then we have been growing from where we started and I feel really pleased with how it represents me and my style and the other players here.

00:01:36

Redman: First can you say what the vision was that you had for this restaurant? Give me the pitch that you gave to them about your philosophy of what you wanted it to be.

00:01:44

Bertolli: The idea was to integrate the food, the service, with the environment. And that food should be—obviously as a restaurant, your product is the food. Of course people come to restaurants for all kinds of reasons but, sometimes the least of which is food, but that wasn't our emphasis at all. We really wanted the themes of authenticity and genuineness to pervade the food, the service, and the way that the place looked. We wanted it to be an Oakland restaurant, a California restaurant. That's what we are, with no confusion about trying to be a so-called Italian restaurant, although most people would consider us that. We would consider ourselves at least in our homage to those old traditions, an Italian-based restaurant, at least in the food vision. That is where it comes from. But it is planted here and the whole ethics of local and seasonal and buying from people who we know infuses our food, and hiring locally and then trying to have a really fresh approach to how we describe our food—genuine. We try to engender a genuine understanding amongst our staff. We don't hire people who act in front of people— who play the part. We try to get people to absorb what this is all about, which is something really, really simple.

00:03:23

Redman: How would you say that the décor reflects your vision? You can talk about specifics or just in a general sense.

00:03:32

Bertolli: Natural material- natural olive wood, granite, wood surfaces. I think that is it. A simple austere palate onto which people are the garnish on the plate so you've got to keep it simple. It is not a three-ring circus. It is not meant to titillate the senses. It is meant to be really comfortable and sensual but not overarching in any way. It is not a—I am trying to think, what is that Hollywood restaurant? There is a restaurant that most people know; I can't remember the name of it right now, but Arnold Schwarzenegger--?

00:04:17

Redman: Oh, Planet Hollywood?

00:04:28

Bertolli: Planet Hollywood. You know, where you go there for a form of entertainment. The place itself is a form of entertainment and it is meant to kind of focus on the food. Can I—?

Redman:

Sure, that is fine.

00:04:28

Bertolli: [answers phone- phone conversation]

00:05:18

Redman: Okay. Can you talk a little bit about the menu and how the menu is designed?

00:05:21

Bertolli: There are several different strains of thought that go into the menu. First of all, is that it plays homage to the Italian tradition, where there is an appetizer or *antipasto* course, a *primo piatto* which is a pasta or a soup or some other form of what they call *minestra* in Italy. It would be usually a brothy or a bread-based middle course, and then *secondo*, which is the meat or the fish. The emphasis here has always been on- and then desert- this is basically a four-course format. When people come to the restaurant, we want them to be exposed to that way of eating. That is how our menu is set up. You will get the best chance of having an experience at the restaurant if you eat that way. When we designed the restaurant, my sense was that what we needed was some sort of focus and focus happens to be the Latin word for hearth. The hearth is really the focus of the dining room. You come off the train over there and you can see the fire going. As soon as people would come up the stairs they would see this hearth, and it was a great way for us to also expand the kitchen so that all of our roasting and grilling is done outside on the hearth in view of the customers, which kills a lot of birds with one stone. It makes it a very hospitable, warm, appealing, environment. It helps us that we roast in the best way that we can- over live wood. And that becomes a really important part of the menu. The other strain is that we purchase our ingredients strictly locally directly from farmers as much as possible, who deliver, or through Farmer's Markets where we meet them and pick up their goods. And the menu is entirely informed by what is available, and it is response-driven rather than idea-driven, so that whatever is really fantastic on the market that is what we

buy- seasonal. We buy to every extent possible organic produce, also. In the kitchen, it is all designed, and the staff is designed- the staff training is designed to get people to understand that principle and represent it. So all of our cooks, lead cooks, who are in the position of buying will be involved directly with farmers and tasting things and responding to what is going on. It is a really different way to do it. It is [a] sort of less ego driven kind of cuisine. I have always thought that you can eliminate a lot of the problems in a kitchen if you can move the staff in the direction of responding together as a team to what is actually just in front of you rather than working with their ideas. It is easy to imagine that if you have a bunch of strong personalities together, that that can get in the way of something that we are trying to do, which is really just simple food presented simply. It is not always simple, I mean, sometimes we have a lot of steps or there has been a lot of work that goes behind getting a very simple thing to happen. But simplicity is not simple, that is really the point.

2-00:08:40  
Redman:

(laughs) Well, I want to ask you a question that we have asked of each of the people that we have interviewed. And it is about an article that they had in the Chronicle last year about possibly trying to instigate this system of rating restaurants based upon sanitation and things like that. I was wondering how you felt about that. Do you think that that is a good idea? They were going to have some symbol. Apparently they do it in other parts of the country. They have a rating symbol or something for restaurants.

2-00:09:08  
Bertolli:

I think that it is really a public health issue and also a Department of Health issue. We have been asked by our health inspector to post a sign based on what she had come up with when she was walking around doing an inspection of the facility. That is fine. I think that we tend not to try and put labels on what we do- we do our best to be as clean and sanitary and everything. It is hugely important, obviously, when you are delivering a lot of food to the public. If somebody didn't have it, I guess is the question. Would that prevent me from going into their restaurant? I don't think so. Do I think that it is a good idea? I am not sure. Who is mandating that and who is actually doing the inspection and what does this inspection mean? If it is based upon a half an hour walk through a restaurant, you can tell a lot in a half hour, but I don't know. I am not sure if it is that valuable to tell you the truth.

2-00:10:23  
Redman:

Yeah. Alright. Well, let's talk a little bit about the staff. You already talked about the staff here at Oliveto. I just want to ask you, what is it like to work for Paul Bertolli? Or what do you think that it would be like to work for you?

2-00:10:34  
Bertolli:

Well, I think I am a really fair manager. I think that I am a really fair owner. I think I am a collaborator. I like to work with people in a team. I realize that this restaurant is open seven days a week and from morning until midnight

and there is no way that anyone could pin that entirely on me, obviously. So what I try to do is to create a team that can work together. And again, it is more about communicating the values of the restaurant and getting people to— seeing whether they understand and can contribute something to that. And again, the big contributors are the ones who end up in positions of responsibility because they get it more than others. But the ground shifts here quite a bit because in restaurants, people come and go. We have sixty-five on the staff. That is a big group. I think we probably— relative to most other restaurants have more people here who stayed longer than most restaurants. That is a good thing, but my job primarily here is to incite people and to provoke them to think about things in a way that I think represents the vision of the restaurant. So, for instance, I will just sit in the room. The other night, somebody shot three wild ducks and had them cooked up for— this was actually lunchtime. So I shared them with one of the staff and we did this sort of impromptu wine training session where we started associating wines with the taste of these ducks and we talked about the quality of the ducks and the quality of the wine that was before us and, you know, “Let’s try this.” And somebody else said, “Well, maybe we should do that because this is happening,” so we opened that one. Everybody learned a lot just from that exercise, which is how I like to teach wine training. We don’t lecture to people. We actually bring food out and we talk about where that food comes from and its traditions. So if you are having a bouillabaisse and salt cod stew or a *carpaccio* of beef, there are certain associations in a culture, where it is based on the premise that the food and the wine of a place are usually linked together and they work together for those reasons— because they come from the same soil and the same place and the same attitude about drinking and eating together, in cultures where there is developed traditions of cuisine. So we associate, but then the test, the proof, is always in the pudding. So we then bring the wines out. There may be five wines around a particular dish that all are good choices in the abstract, but what actually happens? That is when you get into the olfactory and all the sensory evaluation about how this food works with this wine and why. And that is how we teach it here.

00:13:37

Redman:

Well, on the flip side of that then, say you are bringing out a dish that is from a certain region of Italy. How do you feel about pairing that with a wine from Napa Valley?

00:13:52

Bertolli:

I don’t think that there are any rules about wine and food pairing at all. I think that you can—you will be surprised as many times as you will be not surprised [laughs] I guess. I think that wine and food together, unless you know the food really well, unless you know the wine really well- like if you go to Domaine Tempier in the south of France and you have bouillabaisse there, they are going to serve their young, cool, Mourvedre from the cellar, and it is going to go perfectly. And I can bet on that a hundred times because I know that combination, but if you are in a restaurant, the problem for a



restaurateur is staff and the public. The public comes in and they are looking at the wine list, they don't know what is on the wine list, what it tastes like. They can't imagine it. The server has a sense of the food, but they may not have gone through this exercise of choosing precisely what would work with the steak tonight that has red wine sauce on it, or something like that. Then the ingredients shift every day, so if you had it on the next day it may not be the same entirely in taste, or with a different vegetable next to it. The problem is that food and wine happen in a live moment, so you have to be responsive to that live moment. So our approach with people at the table is to try to get them into a dialogue about what it is they think they want to drink, what it is that the dish suggests in terms of what we have to offer on the menu, but not lay down the law and say, "This is going to work," because you don't know. Nobody knows until you do it. You know? And then you hope for it. So you always win because if it doesn't work, if it is not a match, you have learned something. You have learned why- could be the acid balance, could be too much wood, it could be the wine is too jammy for the concentration of the wine. It could be a hundred different things. But you learn and then you learn to discern that way.

00:15:47

Redman:

Would you say that there is a window of wines that will work with a certain dish, or how much of it is somebody's personal taste versus—I mean, can somebody say, "Hey I love this really sweet white wine with," something that it wouldn't go with. Do you know what I mean, some really odd combination. How much of that is personal taste and how much—are there things you need to learn about food and wine pairing and these sort of areas of wine that might go with certain types of food?

00:16:18

Bertolli:

I think that it is like with any kind of discipline, to arrive at a fairly sophisticated level of discernment, it requires intellect and understanding and emotion and all of those things, and experience. So while someone might say, "Yeah, I just like cold duck with this particular thing," or I just like very sweet Riesling with—" on an objective level, if you have got experienced people in the room, they probably wouldn't choose it because they are part of a brain college, let's say [laughs], about how food and wine work together. You can have lots of opinions about that and your own opinions are open and your response to that can be stretched and your own awareness of what kinds of things work together are really influenced I think by others, but no- I don't think that it is entirely subjective. We are talking about— this is what we do professionally— so there are standards. Like in anything.

00:17:23

Redman:

Getting back to your employees, do you need to be a trained cook to come and work here?

00:17:31

Bertolli:

No.

00:17:35

Redman: Trained as a--?

00:17:35

Bertolli: Well, you have to have a certain level of training for sure. We don't take anybody who is just raw and who can't do it. On the other hand, we don't necessarily just take people who claim to be trained or who are "trained." They come, they get interviewed, they go through a period of time where they are following in the kitchen, or they are working in particular stations so we can see what they can actually do. They are put in a station, let's say, to work with somebody, to see what their skills are. Then they are usually hired provisionally so that there is a burn-in period of three months or so when we can look at them and say, "yeah, this looks like a fit for us." Because we want them to understand— we don't want to start from step one, really.

00:18:25

Redman: Not even if they say—well, what if you had somebody who came in and they were sixteen, and maybe like you were when you were that age and said, "Hey, I just want to learn everything." Could they start as a prep cook, or is this not the kind of place that--

00:18:37

Bertolli: They could. It would depend on—at this point we don't hire that many. They just don't come to us. That is kind of their circumstance, but it is not off limits entirely either. It is something that we would certainly consider if there was a real motivation, and good references.

00:18:58

Redman: Does your kitchen staff or any of your employees receive any kinds of benefits?

00:19:01

Bertolli: They are offered— we pay half of the medical benefit. Basically, that is what we do. There is disability insurance for managers. We don't offer any dental plan at the moment, and we couldn't get enough subscription on a 401K, so no.

00:19:31

Redman: Another thing I wanted to ask you is: is this the kind of kitchen where somebody could make a name for themselves and then go on to become a well known chef? Do you know what I mean? Is this the kind of place where they could, sort of- a proving ground, where they might be able to work here for four years and then go out and solicit people and say, "Hey, listen, I have been the sous chef here."

00:19:57

Bertolli: Yeah. Absolutely, I mean, that is already happening. There is the Quince restaurant, Mike was an alumnus from this place. Chris Fernandez was an alumnus. Morgan Brown was- in Portland Oregon, he has got his own restaurant and he is doing really, really well. We have been a whole group of

people. The guys over at Dopo on Piedmont Avenue, they both worked here. We have already spawned quite a number of restaurants. The great thing about this kitchen is that it is a real learning kitchen. It is a training kitchen and people are not stuck in one place. They have to do their own craft. They have to learn how to construct a braise and how to roast on the fire, and how to do pretty much every station, how to make things from scratch from the very beginning. So if they stay long enough, they end up with some pretty rare skills. They know how to cut up whole animals- how to butcher. How to cut whole fish. We don't buy fillets unless it is something like it is cheaper for the fish monger to cut all the petrale out and get it off the plate because there are so many of them- if there are sand dabs or something like that.

00:21:10

Redman:

So, when I was researching I read that you guys brought in a special front of the house person, I think that his name was Craig Jones, when you came on. Is that true?

00:21:19

Bertolli:

Craig Jones- that was a long time ago.

00:21:24

Redman:

Okay. Well, anyway, what I am getting at is, can you talk a little bit about what the service style is? We have already talked about wine and stuff, but, say the table service style that goes along with your vision for the restaurant.

00:21:34

Bertolli:

I would say that we don't have a whole system of captains and waiters and back waiters and that sort of thing. It is pretty much one waiter on a table. It is more casual, elegant service, where the waiter is there to facilitate the meal. Are you looking for structure, or, what are you looking for?

00:22:00

Redman:

Oh, I was just curious. Yeah- if there was a front waiter, back waiter system, or if it was some classic system, or whatnot.

00:22:06

Bertolli:

No. We don't do that. We basically have waiters and bussers and then there are dining room managers every night and hosts who bring people to the table. But usually the table is managed by one server who is their captain, basically, for the night. He gets assistance from the busser.

00:22:28

Redman:

Okay, and so then I wanted to ask you about the clientele at Oliveto. Are you targeting a certain clientele here? If so, what is it? Do you talk about repeat customers and things like that?

00:22:39

Bertolli:

Yeah. We are proud that we have such a local clientele, which is kind of our bread and butter. We are geographically kind of in an enclave right here, but the major source of revenue comes from our dinner service. Lunch is

necessary and it is a worthwhile part of the business, but we are not a huge lunch house here primarily because of our position- relative to Oakland and the city and Contra Costa county and La Fayette. Most people have either gone by on the BART on lunch. So we do most of our business at dinner. What was the question again?

00:23:29

Redman:

Oh, yeah. Is there a specific clientele of Oliveto, and if so, what is it? What is your target audience?

00:23:40

Bertolli:

Well, we don't target people, so I don't know that we have a target audience. I can say that we get people from this whole greater Berkeley, Oakland area and San Francisco, and beyond, at this point. I think that we are pretty steady in terms of revenues and the reason for that is that we have a really wide draw. People come from all over the place. But as far as reaching out, we like people who like what we are and understand who we are. We try to set ourselves up for that. There was some concern a while ago about losing certain people in the café because we introduced a more sophisticated tea service. That was fine to us that we were going to lose some people who only wanted to pay a dollar for tea, because some customers can kind of bring you down. Basically, if they are demanding something that is beneath your standard, it becomes not a good thing to encourage that— if you need to grow, and not only financially, we want people to accept what we have to offer. So we don't put cheap balsamic vinegar on the table and cheap olive oil. We use really good ingredients, so we are looking for customers to appreciate that and those who are willing to pay for it also.

00:25:26

Redman:

Yeah. Are your expansion goals limited to here at the restaurant or do you see yourself opening another Oliveto or another different restaurant?

00:25:41

Bertolli:

This is really a one off kind of deal thing. I think that it is such a unique kind of microcosm. It has got its own little world and behavior and economy and scale. I think that we are more interested in polishing a jewel than opening up some clone of this in Las Vegas [laughs] or elsewhere. But, I am opening up this plant which is one of the natural outgrowths of this- I mean, I did sausage before I came here, but one of the outgrowths of Oliveto is that I am going to go over here and do this USDA plant and be able to market my stuff nationally.

00:26:21

Redman:

Where are you going to do that? Right here in Oakland?

00:26:22

Bertolli:

Well, I don't have it locked down yet. It looks like it is going to be Berkeley at this point, but it is not finally settled.

00:26:34  
Redman: And when you say you want to be able to market that nationally, what do you mean?

00:26:39  
Bertolli: Right now--

00:26:40  
Redman: What sort of scale?

00:26:40  
Bertolli: Yeah. As a restaurant I can only sell the salumi on site. I can't sell it beyond my doors. In order to be able to sell beyond my doors and across state lines I have to be a USDA, federally inspected plant. So in terms of scale, it is pretty big, which means that I will be doing eventually up to 100,000 pounds a month.

00:27:09  
Redman: Wow. So is this the kind of thing that might be in like a high-end grocery store?

00:27:15  
Bertolli: High-end gourmet retail is where it will go.

00:27:21  
Redman: Cool.

00:27:20  
Bertolli: I am not trying to compete with Gallo or even Molinari. I am using really good animals. They cost more. I am doing most of the work by hand. It is just a lot of work.

00:27:37  
Redman: Speaking of that, can you talk a little bit about what kind of pigs you use?

00:27:44  
Bertolli: Mm hmm. The breeds you mean?

00:27:45  
Redman: Yeah.

00:27:46  
Bertolli: The pigs all come from—the pigs that we use here come from one farmer in Iowa who is the lead farmer for the Niman Pork program, and that program consists of about 400 family farmers who are spread from Iowa to the Carolinas. All of whom raise their animals out of doors, not in confinement, according to fairly strict protocols. They are not organic. The price of organic meat is really high because there isn't that much organic corn grown. Which isn't to say that it can't be done. It can be done, you just have to have somebody to pay for it.

00:28:37

Redman: So they don't eat organic food, but at least they are--

00:28:40

Bertolli: Or certified organic food. Most of these guys don't spray their fields. They basically are living on farms where the animals provide the manure in the fallow season and then the corn comes up, they feed them the corn — it goes around and around like that. But most of these farmers who are —they are struggling to make ends meet are not going to go out there and take the risk or go to the expense of having their farms certified- being under inspection for compliance with the organic regulations. And then not necessarily being able to reap the rewards for that. If they can't sell the hog for four times as much as they would normally—a hog that was raised on grains that were not certified organic— it is not hard to do that math. Which way would you go? So this is all natural, meaning that they do not use any sub-therapeutic guises of antibiotics. They don't use any antibiotics. Those animals are culled if they are sick. Then they are just beautiful, fat, happy ones.

00:29:52

Redman: Nice. What do you think about this Berkshire pig?

00:29:57

Bertolli: I think that it is a breed of pork that is quite interesting and rare, and has a particular quality in the meat that makes it ideal for breeding. For curing too. It is really great.

00:30:10

Redman: Why don't you try to use specifically Berkshire animals?

00:30:17

Bertolli: Because there isn't enough of it raised. There is a company called Snake River Berkshire Pork and most of that goes to the Japanese market. They really want it there. I would use it if I could get more of it. But those animals are raised in confinement. So I won't buy that stuff. I know what that is about. I won't support that. There are a couple of- the pork that I get has a little of Berkshire in it in fact, but it is not a pure breed. It is something called Farmer's Hybrid, which is a blend of breeds including Duroc, Berkshire, Yorkshire, and White Chester.

00:31:07

Redman: Cool. So the last section has to do with community events. Can you talk about any events- like either charity, or other things you have participated in, sort of more open to the public outside of just the restaurant itself?

00:31:30

Bertolli: My partner handles all of the charitable donations that we give. I mean, restaurants get deluged with requests for charitable donations. We tend to favor local charities, schools for instance that are underserved. Girls Inc. is something that we do every year. What else? We have done some bigger events in the past. We tend to stay away from them though- the big, scatter

shot events for chefs and restaurants involved. We did the AIDs benefit in San Francisco, for instance, a couple of years ago. But most of our efforts go into either providing economic benefit through the restaurant to local charities, places in Oakland in particular, near us.

00:32:24

Redman:

Okay. And as far as your cookbooks, can you talk about what your goal is with your cookbooks? I know that the most recent one certainly has a different style. It is almost like a more old- fashioned cookbook. It is not a list of recipes or a list of ingredients with directions and things like that. Are you going for a more conversational tone?

00:32:51

Bertolli:

I just tried to write a book that meant something to me, and that I felt like writing. It wasn't [inaudible] other than that. I tried in both of those books to try to explain what I knew about what I do. And really, they are both based on the idea that a recipe is not possible [laughs]. Most recipes are really not true to what the process was that got the cook there. That is a rich process and I tried to convey some of the richness of the process, because I think that that is what cooking is. It is about following your senses down this path and hopefully meeting others, if you are writing a book about it, down the same path. So they can not so much copy that experience by doing the recipe, but actually absorb the process, absorb the method that I found was useful in getting there.

00:33:54

Redman:

How much do you try to tailor it to your reader or to the home cook, if at all?

00:33:59

Bertolli:

I was certainly sensitive to the fact at not everybody would be able to, would even consider, doing some of things that I was asking them to do [laughs], and others who would, and there are some very, very simple recipes in the recent book or processes in the recent book that I think would be open to anybody. Most of the response that I got was that the book is for a little more advanced cooks. I would beg to differ on that. If anybody just read the book, instead of like turn the page and saw that there was a formula for brine in there that had numbers that actually asked people to make the calculations. Or had a discursive section on balsamic vinegar or how you would create a curing salt. And how many people would do that, I didn't think that it would be a lot, but I think that part what I am trying to do is also bring back older ways of doing things that have not gotten better by adding technology or speed or formulization. They can't be formulized. You just have to understand how to train your senses to pick up on things, and that is what I am interested in, primarily—in what I do. I thought that the best—I probably wouldn't write another cook book, but I might do some sort of a blog that was a live camera thing that was raw, very raw, on what it takes to cook a dinner- why you would chose this over that, and where you would start, and all of the steps that

occur along the way- mistakes and everything. And you sort of talk while you are doing that- that would be it. That would be interesting.

00:36:04

Redman: Cool. So, in closing, is there anything else that you want to talk about that you haven't gotten the chance to say, or, anything that you want to have on the record?

00:36:16

Bertolli: No, I mean, I might once I read it. There may be something there, but I kind of have to see how it shapes up. Yeah.

00:36:25

Redman: Cool.

00:36:25

Bertolli: All right.

00:36:28

Redman: Great. Thanks a lot.

00:36:31

Bertolli: You are welcome, Paul.

[End of Interview]