

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Narsai David: An Oral History

Interviews conducted by
Victor Geraci
in 2011-2012

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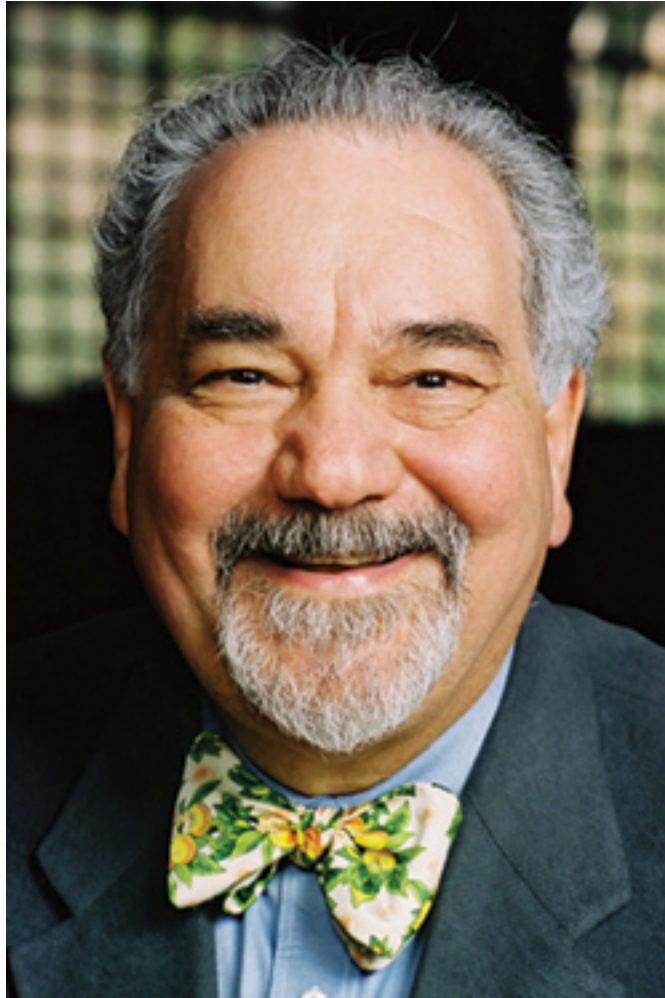
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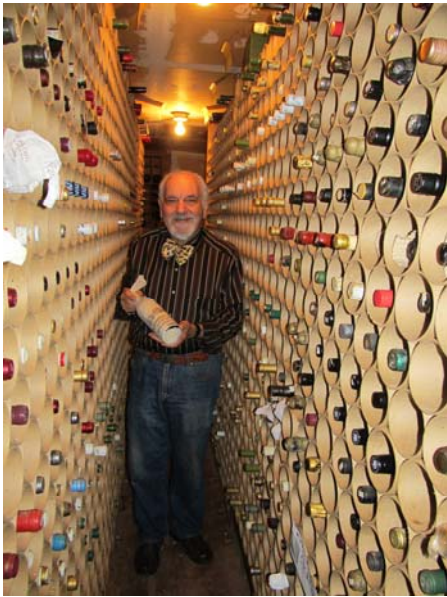
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Narsai David: restaurateur, caterer, specialty food purveyor, vintner, food and wine critic, author, radio and TV chef, early pioneer of California cuisine, and an advocate for the Berkeley Repertory Theater, the Assyrian Aid Society, and numerous other causes.



Narsai David cooking at home, in his wine cellar, and seated during the interview sessions. Photographs by Vic Geraci.

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[End of Interview]

Interview History

Between June 30, 2011 and August 14, 2012 I had the distinct opportunity to complete approximately twenty hours of videotaped interviews with Narsai David: food pioneer, restaurateur, caterer, specialty food purveyor, vintner, food and wine critic, author, radio and TV chef, early pioneer of California cuisine, and an advocate for the Berkeley Repertory Theater, the Assyrian Aid Society, and numerous other causes.

After arriving at The Bancroft Library's Regional Oral History Office in 2003, I assumed leadership of ROHO's food and wine series. At the time, Chuck Williams, a ROHO interviewee and food series patron, along with Marvin Shanken, *Wine Spectator* publisher and editor, recommended that David would be a top candidate to interview about the food and wine history of the twentieth century Bay Area. In 2009, ROHO began a two year process to seek project sponsors, and numerous individuals from the food and wine community contributed to the costs of completing the interviews. During the first half of 2011 I met Narsai at lunches and on campus to discuss the interview process and better acquaint the two of us. During these pre-interview meetings it became very apparent that he had a cornucopia of knowledge to feast upon during our interview process. In preparation for the interview I read ROHO interviews with Chuck Williams, Marion Cunningham, Mary Risley, Christopher Lee, Cecilia Chiang, Doris Muscatine, and John DeLuca, all of whom mentioned Narsai's role in helping to develop the Bay Area's California Cuisine—often termed as a food revolution. The research also included reading articles in the *San Francisco Chronicle* by and about Narsai and reading his books. The underlying accomplishment of our first encounters created a sense of personal trust that quickly gravitated to conversations about our love of wine and Mediterranean foodways, ethnicity, family, vacations, politics, and life in general. I learned of Narsai's passion for quality-of-life issues for all people as we discussed his life in his always calm, clear, and confident voice softened by a smile and a quick sense of humor. A mutual trust quickly developed, creating an atmosphere whereby any and all questions or ideas could be placed on the table for discussion.

This is the story of a man of Assyrian heritage whose parents migrated to the United States from Iran and Turkey to avoid the persecution of Christians during the World War I years. Born in South Bend, Indiana, outside Chicago, the family migrated to an Assyrian community in Turlock, California. At an early age, Narsai worked at food establishments and in the fields and attended the University of California for a couple of years before launching his own culinary career. His formative years were spent at the Berkeley restaurant Pot Luck, which he left in the early 1970s to build his own catering and restaurant businesses. He then opened Narsai's Restaurant and quickly expanded his culinary presence with radio and television cooking segments, newspaper pieces and reviews, and even served as caterer for Bill Graham, the famous rock impresario. Throughout his interviews, Narsai speaks of personal friends such as Chuck Williams, Carol Field, Julia Child, Diana Kennedy, Joe Carcione, Alfred Peet, Jeremiah Tower, MFK Fisher, Frank Prial, Marion Nestle, and Alice Waters, to name a few. During these stories he lays out his opinions on buying local, organic, and sustainable foods, modern agricultural practices, American wine, restaurants, and the 1970s food revolution and development of a California Cuisine.

Victor W. Geraci, PhD
March 2013

Interview 1: June 30, 2011

[Begin Audiofile 1]

Geraci: I am Vic Geraci, food and wine historian from the University of California Berkeley Regional Oral History Office. Today's date is June 30, 2011, and seated with me is Narsai David, restaurateur, caterer, specialty food purveyor, vintner, food and wine critic, author, radio and TV chef, early pioneer of California cuisine, and an advocate for the Berkeley Repertory Theater, the Assyrian Aid Society, and the Alameda County Meals on Wheels programs, to name a few. This interview is being conducted in Narsai's home in Berkeley, California. Narsai, first, thank you for agreeing to go into this process. We'll be having a lot of these sessions, and as we mentioned earlier, this is where we kind of start at the beginning. Let's talk about your grandparents, parents, coming to America and growing up, and get those early experiences. I find that the early experiences are really what set the tone for our lives.

01-00:01:01

David: Oh, boy, is that the truth. Vic, thank you. I can't tell you how delighted and honored I am to be asked.

Geraci: Well, thank you.

01-00:01:07

David: My parents were both Assyrians. My father grew up in Southeast Turkey, up in the mountains, and my mother in the plains of Orumiyeh, in Northwest Iran. They came as refugees, during that First World War, when Christians were—well, massacred is a simple, easy word. We keep hearing about the Armenian genocide. When you hear Armenian genocide, you really should be thinking Armenian, Assyrian, and Greek. But there were a lot more Armenians than Assyrians or Greeks.

Geraci: The Ottoman genocide.

01-00:01:54

David: Exactly.

Geraci: We don't even know the parameters, how many millions died.

01-00:01:57

David: Exactly. Exactly. We do know that the impact on the Assyrians, as a percentage of the total, was far more profound than either Greek or Armenians. The Assyrians were a small minority. They didn't have a country, and they obviously still don't have a country. At the rate we're attempting to destroy the Middle East today Assyrians [are] concerned whether they'll ever have a safe place to live. But anyway, my father came in 1912. He was born in 1888, so he was twenty-four years old.

Geraci: What was his name?

01-00:02:36

David: Michael. Michael Khanno David. M-I-C-H-A-E-L, K-H-A-N-N-O, David. In fact, there's a little story there. His paternal uncle, who was really the head of the clan, had come earlier and he managed to bring him over on some kind of a student visa or entry form, and had lied about his age. He was listed as being much younger. We had always thought that my dad was born in 1900, because that's the date that is shown on his passport. My father was the only child. his uncle had come, they asked him his name and he said it was Rehanna, son of Hiv-Koo. They said, "Well, what's the family name?" He said, "What do you mean family name?"

Geraci: They didn't have a protocol for that.

01-00:03:50

David: They didn't have a protocol for that. So he went back in his memory, some seven generations, and was able to identify. The very first one, the oldest one, was David, so he said, "Well, then I guess David must be our family name." So that's how the name came about.

Geraci: Thus, it became David.

01-00:04:08

David: Thus, it became David.

Geraci: Now, they're Christian; they're Greek Orthodox?

01-00:04:13

David: No, no, no. They're Christians, but it's a separate church, the Church of the East. Its proper name now is Holy Apostolic and Catholic Church of the East and of the Assyrians. It holds that there are six churches that have apostolic succession: The Church of the East itself; the Roman Catholic; the Greek Orthodox; the Armenian Orthodox; the Assyrian Orthodox, which has frequently been called the Jacobite Church and is now known as Syriac; and finally, Coptic and Abyssinian. So those are the six that all have claim to apostolic succession. Since the Church of the East does the ritual in Aramaic and the sermon is delivered in Assyrian, which is the contemporary vernacular, you could say that Assyrian is to Aramaic like Italian is to Latin. Of the Semitic group, Assyrian is the closest to the Aramaic. That, of course, is the language spoken in Christ's time.

Geraci: Right, Aramaic being the language of Jesus himself.

01-00:05:27

David: Exactly. I've often said that a well-educated Assyrian priest, a Muslim mullah and a Jewish rabbi could probably communicate—because all three of them will have studied Aramaic—pretty effectively. So the Assyrians are among the earliest Christians.

Geraci: Can you talk about your grandparents?

01-00:06:05

David: Well, they lived a pretty primitive life up in the mountains.

Geraci: But it seems that your dad was educated.

01-00:06:12

David: Nominally. No, he hardly had a formal education. Well, my mother got here in '18, and she was thirteen years old. She was born in 1905. She did finish grade school and high school, so she had a high school degree.

Geraci: What was your mother's name?

01-00:06:39

David: Shulamith. S-H-U-L-A-M-I-T-H. Shulamith David. Going back to names, we all took—I have two younger brothers, no sisters. All of us have Michael for our middle name, because with that old country tradition, my father's name was Michael Khanno, Khanno being his father's name. So once he came here, it was Michael Khanno David. I am Narsai Michael David, my brother is Ken Michael David, and the other brother is James Michael David. So we've maintained [that tradition]. And my son has Narsai for his middle name, following that same tradition. Daniel Narsai David. So my father's uncle had an Oriental rug business in Chicago. My parents met and married in Chicago. I guess I'm jumping ahead there. I can go back.

Geraci: Yeah, jumping a little bit.

01-00:07:41

David: Go back to the old country. My mother's father had come to Chicago and was working as a janitor, trying to raise enough money to bring the family here. He had seven children. When the war got underway, my grandmother packed the seven children and an ox-drawn cart—that ox provided them with milk, as well as drew the cart—and they marched across to Northern Iraq, where there were civil encampments set up for the Christians escaping persecution. They lived there until such time as he had raised enough money to send for them.

Geraci: So they spent time in a refugee camp.

01-00:08:39

David: Several years, right. I don't have the exact dates. She told stories of selling milk or yogurt that she made from the milk. As they traveled across, she would trade milk with some of the British soldiers, for other foodstuffs. The really emotional story that chokes me up even as I think of it now is when they finally did leave to come here, she gave the ox and cart to a cousin who was staying behind, and this man fell to his knees and kissed her hand. She had provided him a livelihood. They made it by their wits. I was born in South Bend, Indiana.

Geraci: Now, how did your dad raise the money to get here?

01-00:09:53

David: That would've been his uncle.

Geraci: Through his uncle helping him.

01-00:09:55

David: Through his uncle, who was already selling the rugs. He brought him over here, and he worked for him, with him. They called the company David Brothers Oriental Rugs—although my father was a nephew, not a brother. Then subsequently, one of his uncle's brothers—two of his brothers, arrived in Chicago, one of whom was somewhat involved in the rug business. This Uncle Rehanna was a pretty fascinating individual. He was pledged to the church from the time of his conception. From the time he was conceived, his mother became an Old Testament vegetarian. That is to say, she could eat flesh fish, no shellfish, and no meat of any sort. He was ordained a deacon, and many had expected him to rise through the ranks to become one of the leaders of the church. He never married. But he also never accepted a role above deacon, because he saw how critical it was to make money and send it to help the family. One document that just really breaks my heart that I wasn't able to save, I was reading in his letters, had been sent to him, saying that he could buy Assyrian lives for a dollar apiece. This is at the time of the First World War. So he was very successful as a rug merchant. My father was a very handsome, outgoing, well-spoken, well-received person, and so he was the real salesperson. They would set up displays in department stores and furniture stores, within a hundred- or 150-mile radius of Chicago. Then periodically, my father, the expert, would be billed as coming to discuss your rug needs. South Bend, Indiana was one of those places, and a cousin of his was living in South Bend. In fact, when he and my mother married, they lived for a couple of years in South Bend. So I was born in South Bend, but then at the age of two, we moved to Chicago.

Geraci: Now, was there a large Assyrian community in South Bend and Chicago?

01-00:12:48

David: Very small in South Bend, but Chicago, a very large Assyrian community. The reason was, pretty obviously, for jobs. If you look at an old-time railroad map of America, Chicago is the hub and there are these spokes that go in every direction. So Gary, Indiana were the steel mills; Flint and Detroit was the automobile industry; Chicago was the stockyards and the slaughterhouse of the nation, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So there were jobs there. This uncle who was the vegetarian from his conception actually worked in the stockyards for some years when he came, because that was the job he could get. My father worked as a busboy and a waiter in hotels, until he could get settled in to the rug business. The move from Chicago to Turlock is fascinating. I had always wondered what on earth brought them west.

Geraci: Now, about what years is this?

01-00:14:07

David: The first Assyrians came to Turlock in the late twenties, or somewhere in the twenties. And I now have a theory that I think must be perfect. Okay? On my own part I went and found my mother's village, Ada, in Northwest Iran, in 1974. It was a tiny, little place with mud homes. This is not a clever euphemism for baked adobe block or anything.

Geraci: Just soil.

01-00:14:45

David: The soil has a high clay content; they stack up the mud. Wood, a timber is a sapling that's about five or six inches in diameter. They put a row of those across the walls and pack more mud on top of it. After a really serious rainstorm, you better get up with a bucket of mud and fill in all of the missing spots. The oven, which is similar to an Indian tandoor—we call it ta-nay-ra in Assyrian—except [it] was not a big clay vessel; it's a hole in the ground. They dug this urn-shaped hole in the ground and after burning enough fires in it, the dirt gets glazed or smoothed out and baked, sort of like coarsely baked clay. It's easy to see why the Assyrian bread is flatbread; because that's the only way they could bake it. They roll out this thing. My mother described how their arms would be wrapped up with rags and such to protect them from the heat, and they reach in and slap this flat disk of dough against the walls.

Geraci: Which is heated.

01-00:16:09

David: Which is sizzling hot.

Geraci: Like an oven.

01-00:16:12

David: It is an oven. Within a minute or two, it starts blistering and turning brown and you snatch it out. The fuel was cow dung. They take the cow patties and lay them out to dry and that's what they burn. It was a mighty primitive existence. The roofs of their little houses were used as drying sheds during the summer to dry fruit and vegetable for the winter. I don't know how long a trek it was to the closest market, but it was some distance away. People were pretty much self-contained. They had to go buy flour and rice. Rice was very, very important to the Assyrian food style. I remember Ma saying that if some rice fell on the floor, you were down on your knees picking it up a grain at a time. There was no waste.

Geraci: Can we just go back to the trip for a second?

01-00:17:30

David: Yeah, sure.

Geraci: That had to be an emotional trip for you.

01-00:17:35

David: Oh, wow. Oh, wow.

Geraci: I've done that type of trip, to where my grandma and grandpa came from in Sicily.

01-00:17:42

David: Well, this was my mother, and I found a couple of people who were distant relatives and knew the family and remembered them. Mind you, this is 1974. My mother had left the village along about 1915. She had one sister that stayed behind in Iran, married a man and stayed in Tehran; and a brother died during the fighting in the war. He was off on a ship that was sunk.

Geraci: Do you speak the language?

01-00:18:18

David: Assyrian, yeah. Yeah, I speak it fairly well. I can't read or write it anymore. I used to, as a kid. Since we started the Assyrian Aid Society, my Assyrian conversation has improved substantially; but only because it's had to.

Geraci: To survive.

01-00:18:42

David: To communicate.

Geraci: Right.

01-00:18:45

David: But tying in the connection with Turlock, which still seems so out of touch with everything, a couple years after being in Iran, I was in Grenada, in Spain. For the entire trip, my mind kept flashing on Turlock and Ada. Here I am in Grenada, Spain; why Turlock or Ada? Well, I got home, and Veni can tell you, the first thing I wanted to see was an atlas. Turlock, Ada and Grenada are within seventeen miles of the same line of latitude. So now when people say, well, how did the Assyrians ever end up in Turlock, I know damn well how they got to Turlock. First of all, as soon as they had made enough money to be able to buy a piece of dirt, they wanted to plant their grapes and their peaches and their walnuts, and they needed warm weather, and California was the place. So I can see the family taking the train up through the center of the valley, and they get off at Turlock to just get a break at the station, have a cup of coffee, and the guy is walking around sort of going like this and saying, gee, it feels kind of nice. Let's just spend a couple days and look around. He looks around, he buys a piece of land, he wires his brother in Chicago and his cousin in Flint and his uncle in Gary and says, "I have found home," and the migration began.

Geraci: It's the ladder effect with immigrants.

01-00:20:26

David:

Absolutely. So Turlock, in short order, became an important center of Assyrians. After Chicago, it's the largest collection of Assyrians, in the Turlock-Modesto area, in the country. Now, there's a group of Assyrians that belong to the Roman Catholic Church, the Chaldean order of the Roman Catholic Church, and some speak of them as Chaldeans instead of Assyrians. In the Detroit area, there is a huge number of those. So that probably would be second largest, after Chicago, and Turlock would be the third largest. So that gets the Assyrians to Turlock. My mother, once she got married, did not have a job outside the house in Chicago. She was raising three sons.

Geraci:

So they got married in the 1920s then?

01-00:21:35

David:

No, no, in '34.

Geraci:

In '34. How did your mom and dad meet?

01-00:21:39

David:

Just in typical Assyrian social events.

Geraci:

The normal social life of the community.

01-00:21:43

David:

Right. You see, from very, very different areas. The people from the area where my father is from, Mar Bishu, up in the Turkish mountains, the Hakkari Mountains, were far more remote, more iconoclastic, if you will. In the plain near Lake Urmia, there was a lot of intermixing with Muslims. The same village, Ada, had many Muslims that were neighbors. After the war and things had settled down, many Assyrians did go back to these villages. Many Assyrians were hidden and protected from the pillaging, by their Muslim friends and neighbors. But in Turkey, when the Ottoman Empire came sweeping through these mountains, they would just eliminate a village. There was no village; there was no village to go back to. It was gone.

Geraci:

Well, that was their purpose. It was a scorched earth—

01-00:23:06

David:

Exactly. Exactly. So I've never been able to see his [village]. I just would so much like to visit that area, even if it's just to see the ruins of the village. But how to get there is really problematic. When the Turks opened the consulate in San Francisco—how many years ago?—I catered the opening and got to know the Turkish consul pretty well, and I asked him if he could give me any help in finding the ruins of those villages and give me some advice on how I could go visit them. He checked with the government and said that when the line was redrawn between Turkey and Iran after the First World War, those villages now lie on the Persian side of the border. Yet when I talk to Assyrians in Northern Iraq, who have been up to these areas, they get there from the Turkish side. Well, knowing about these kids that are still sitting in jail

because they crossed one foot into the Persian side, I don't think I'm ready to take that step.

Geraci: [laughs] That's our local story of travail.

01-00:24:45

David: Right. Back to my mother and growing up in Chicago. She would can 100 quarts of tomatoes a year. She would can peaches and apricots and pickled peppers and cucumbers and Jerusalem artichokes and jams and chutneys and chow-chows. We lived in an apartment. During the war, we had a victory garden in Lincoln Park. We had no car; we would go by streetcar. I'll never forget, during the fall canning season one year, I went with my mother to the wholesale produce market and she bought five bushels of tomatoes and peaches. In those days, it was a real bushel basket. The merchant loaded them onto the back platform of the streetcar, when they had that sort of open area. When they got to our stop, the conductor set them down on the sidewalk for her. I ran home and got my little wagon and I towed one bushel at a time to the house. Now, I've often said that if my mother had had a daughter, there's a good chance I would never have ended up in the food business, because the daughter would be in the kitchen helping Mom; that would be the way of the world. But she had three sons. And by golly, Tom Sawyer had nothing on my mom. She had all three of us in there helping. We were racing to see who could peel the tomatoes the fastest or who could pick the peaches the fastest. It was a family thing. All of us grew up enjoying working with food. When we moved to Turlock, we lived in a house on the outskirts of the town. We came to Turlock in '47. I left in 1953, to come to Berkeley, as a student at Cal. When I left, the population of Turlock was 7,000 and it had seventy-one different churches. It had the highest per capita number of churches of any city in the country. So it's safe to say that it was a very conservative small-town community, and very, very religious.

Geraci: Do you happen to know how many Assyrians were there in comparison to the total population?

01-00:27:27

David: Well, now there are probably 150,000 in the surrounding area. Turlock alone, population's up to about 75,000. I guess I don't know the answer to that question. They were still a minority.

Geraci: I'm just trying to get a perspective of how many were there.

01-00:27:42

David: Right. Yeah. Gee, that's a really good question. I hadn't even thought of that. There were how many Assyrian churches? There was, of course, the Church of the East and the Presbyterian church; those were the two big ones. Then there were about four or five different Assyrian churches. I would have to guess there were in the range of, in the surrounding area, probably must've been 500 families.

Geraci: It's a sizeable group.

01-00:28:24

David: Turlock, Denair, Delhi, Ballico, Livingston, Ceres, Keyes, because gee, the Church of the East and the Presbyterian church were each filled every Sunday, each with a couple hundred people, just in those two churches alone; and there were plenty of Assyrians that—[bell chimes] Can you hear with that?

Geraci: Oh, that's okay. We'll live through it. Of all things, it's eleven o'clock, too.
[They laugh]

01-00:29:06

David: One year when my mother came up to visit, when we were still living in half the house, she slept on the couch. Never, ever did it occur to me to peg that clock, the mantle clock. She said she got to the point where she could sleep through the hourly chimes, but on the half hour, when it goes *ding*, it would wake her up. I felt so guilty and terrible. [they laugh]

Geraci: Sorry, Mom, right?

01-00:29:41

David: Yeah.

Geraci: Now, were there any other major ethnic groups that were also coming into that Turlock area?

01-00:29:58

David: No. No, this is long before the Hispanics' arrival.

Geraci: That's what I was thinking.

01-00:30:01

David: It was a Swedish town. There was more than a little bit of attitude against the Assyrians, because they were the people that were coming in and cutting in on the local things. But they were seen as very hard workers. It wasn't long before they all owned their own little farm and were successful.

Geraci: I would imagine most of those Swedes were probably coming from the Midwest?

01-00:30:47

David: Perhaps, but—

Geraci: Whereas California had a big migration from those areas.

01-00:30:52

David: But most importantly, as far as the Assyrians are concerned, is that the Swedes had been there a lot longer and they really owned the town. The fancier section of town, the homes were owned by them and the businesses were owned by them.

Geraci: So was there a lot of Lutheran and Presbyterian Churches?

01-00:31:14

David: Presbyterian and the Assemblies of God, the Evangelical churches. There were a lot of those. There was more than a little discrimination against Assyrians.

Geraci: I was going to say, well, also because they would've been lumped with the Roman Catholics at that point, as far as Catholicism.

01-00:31:37

David: Who?

Geraci: The Assyrians.

01-00:31:40

David: Yeah, but more exotic and more different. First of all, the Assyrians tend to be darker skinned. I'm fairly light. Most of my generation is fairly light, but my father was light skinned for an Assyrian; most of them have a more swarthy complexion. Camel jockey was a common slang—fortunately, not so frequently, but occasionally—sand nigger, were phrases used.

Geraci: So you grew up feeling a few of those pangs of slurs?

01-00:32:20

David: Oh, yeah. No, we were different. We had to toe the line to be aware that we weren't part of the mainstream. But damn it, the hard work and dedication is what always works, what always makes it happen.

Geraci: Well, in those immigrant groups, the work ethic was strong.

01-00:32:54

David: How come we can't figure out a way to carry that out into yet another generation? Somebody help me with that, will you?

Geraci: I'm grappling with that myself. [laughs]

01-00:33:03

David: One generation comes in, busts their butt, they don't have anything. You grow up in that generation watching the struggle and participating in it, and boy, you know it's going to be different for your kids. They're not going to have to that.

01-00:33:45

David: Oh, man. In my father's case, going back to our move to Turlock, he got leukemia. I'll never know whether the doctors were naïve enough to think that a warm, dry weather would be good for him or whether they were such clever psychologists that they realized that this man would really like to go and be in

a familiar environment. But it was part of the motivation behind our moving to Turlock.

Geraci: Now, you were age eleven, twelve when you moved to Turlock?

01-00:34:24

David: Yes, I was eleven when we came to Turlock. When I was fifteen, my father died. He died at fifty-one. So we came out in '47. I was eleven. In fact, it was kind of funny. When I went to register for school—we came during the summer—I found out that they didn't have the classes divided A and B, like we did in Chicago. In the second grade, I had been double promoted one semester, essentially, so I was a half year ahead. I found out that summer that when you came in from a district like that, they made you take the last year over. So I had finished the first half of the fifth grade in Chicago, and I would've had to start fifth grade all over again, because that's the way they did it. So I went to register for school and did not take any of my papers with me. When they asked what grade I was in, I said I was in the fifth grade—I mean, the sixth grade. Finally, this exasperated woman says, "Look, son, what grade were you in last year?" I said, "Fifth grade." "Then please go over there." So I picked up another half year, because I went into the sixth grade. I knew if I had taken my matriculation with me, I would've had to do fifth grade. So I was fortunate in that regard. I worked all through the summers. My mother took a job working at a cannery. One of the things I started to mention, she used to make silk lampshades, years before she'd been married. So she would do these privately for people. It was quite a skill, to be able to get this silk drawn taut like that. I remember once I was going to help her. So I measured the size of the frame that she was using—it was a twelve-inch frame—and I multiplied twelve times pi. She picks up this piece of fabric and—It seems a little silly, but it's easier to show you. So this is the size of the frame. So she goes like this with the fabric: two, three, and one more; cuts it with a snip and tears it off like that; and I'm still doing the arithmetic to figure out what size this thing's going to be. [they laugh]

Geraci: She's done.

01-00:37:42

David: She didn't need no adding machine to know that it was about.

Geraci: That's what you call skill and practice.

01-00:37:54

David: Absolutely. It was just really great. But she worked in the canneries during the summer, and then drew unemployment compensation. I remember her check was twenty-six dollars a week, for the unemployment. I worked mainly in the fields. The single worst summer of my life, I picked onions. They had these *really* huge sweet red onions, which are to this day, my favorite onion, in spite of how miserable a summer I spent with them. A plow went through the field and turned the soil. You talk about stoop labor; it was bent over pulling them

out and shaking the dirt off. But most of the time, it was harvesting melons. A person who could cut the melons, one who could select the mature melons, was by far, the highest-paid person, and there were very few of them. Oh, and here's a little bit of racism to put into the formula. There were no blacks that lived in Turlock. None. Zero. Some of the best melon cutters were black, who would work their way north, up through the Central Valley, harvesting the crops.

Geraci: The true migrant workers, then.

01-00:39:26

David: True migrant workers, but specifically the cutters, I'm talking about, by far, most of them were black. A cutter's skill was based on his being able to identify the ripeness of a melon by looking at it. Occasionally, they'd reach down and tap one and not cut it. But I'd say 99 times out of a hundred, once he reached down with that knife, he was going to cut it. Then they would have to turn the melon, so that you would know it had been cut. Now, watermelon always has a blind spot in the color on the bottom, where the photosynthesis hasn't turned it green. So some would just roll them over on their back, but some would stand them up. So then when we kids came through to harvest them, there would be maybe five of us across, with a tractor trailer moving along, and to windrow them, the guy would pick them up and toss them to the next guy. So the guy closest to the trailer worked the hardest, because he handled every damn melon.

Geraci: You always wanted to be furthest from the trailer.

01-00:40:39

David: Right. So these guys could not get a room in Turlock. There were no blacks in Turlock. They would sleep in a sleeping bag, out at the public scales, the public weigh stations. They would just huddle up in the backseat of their car. They'd cook on a little propane stove, their meals. It was just such a bizarre feeling to think that these guys—They couldn't harvest that field without these guys. There just weren't people trained well enough to do this, that lived there; and yet they couldn't have a bed to sleep in.

Geraci: Makes you think about your own place within that hierarchy, also, doesn't it?

01-00:41:40

David: Oh, man. Oh, boy. This old Assyrian man who we worked for a lot, very early on, taught me to drive the tractor. He would drive it out to the field and get it in the row, and I could stop, start, stop, start, going through, while they windrowed into the trailer. Then when I got to the end, he would turn it around and put it in the next row. Then by the next summer, I was able to drive it myself, from the shed all the way out into the field, and bring the melons back. He also raised chickens, and one year we inoculated baby chicks, 10,000 of them or something like that. That was a strange experience.

Geraci: So you grew up doing agricultural work.

01-00:42:43

David: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Geraci: Now, I take it you're high school age then.

01-00:42:28

David: I'm high school age by this time.

Geraci: Yeah, so this is the way you were spending your summers.

01-00:42:50

David: Summers were always spent doing something out in the fields. It was before high school. One summer I worked in a cannery, Puccinelli Packing Company. The time of year I was working, they were harvesting peaches. They had bought machinery from a cannery in San Francisco that had been destroyed in a fire. You know what heat does to steel. So it was the noisiest damned place.

Geraci: Everything's a little torqued out of shape.

01-00:43:27

David: Everything's screeching and squeaking. Nothing's lining up perfectly. I was on a machine that squirted the sugar syrup into the can. So first the peaches are put in, then the syrup is put then, then the can gets sealed, and then it goes into the retort. I'd get home, take my pants off, and they would stand up by themselves because they were just so drenched with the sugar syrup. In Turlock summer weather, by the time I got home, it was dry and they were just so stiff that they stood up. So my senior year, I went to the vice principal and said, "Is there any chance of getting some kind of job other than working in the field? Is there any request for jobs?" He says, "Well, actually, this drive-in restaurant is looking for a cook's helper. Do you like to cook?" I said, "Oh, yeah, I love to cook." So I got a job as a cook's helper at Hendy's Drive-in. H-E-N-D-Y-apostrophe-S. By the end of the summer, I was really pretty good at it because he let me do a relief shift at his second drive-in, which was in the town of Ceres, C-E-R-E-S. It's about ten miles north of Turlock. Both of these were right on Highway 99. He had two things that he was really, really famous for. One was a barbecued beef sandwich, in which we roasted the beef quite rare, sliced it paper thin, and it had his secret barbecue sauce on it. The other was a drink that he called ahf and ahf, spelled A-H-F and A-H-F. It was a mixture of juices, pineapple juice—Gosh, it's been a long time. Pineapple juice, orange juice and lemon juice; I think that was it. He would freeze it in these steel canisters that you make ice cream in, and then you'd have to temper it to the texture. Did they have gremlins when you were at Cal?

Geraci: No. I did not go to Cal.

01-00:45:55

David:

[At] the football games there was that frozen orange thing called a gremlin. Well, this was like that, except so much more flavorful because the pineapple and the lemon added a real pizzazz to it. And that was what he called ahf and ahf. I would do the prep work for making these things. It was really interesting. In order to keep his recipe secret, for the barbecue sauce, he would tell me how many gallons of tomato sauce and vinegar and the big things to put in, and then he would take care of the seasoning. Well, from across the room, I'd watch him and count how many tablespoons of paprika he put in and how many tablespoons of garlic, and I'm secretly making little notes, so I have the recipe to the secret barbecue sauce and the ahf and ahf. So that was 1953.

Geraci:

So you kind of got bit by the cooking bug, then.

01-00:46:57

David:

Oh, well, yeah. At this point, everything I had done was with food, whether it was harvesting onions or melons or grapes or helping my mom in the canning. Food was of real interest. Then working that summer in the restaurant, boy, it sure beat the hell of working at that cannery or working out on the field.

Geraci:

At least your pants didn't stand up every night.

01-00:47:24

David:

Right. Right. So I came to Cal. Well, I was sixteen when I graduated, and that summer I turned seventeen. I came to Cal, and there was a huge, round drive-in at the corner of Telegraph and MacArthur, called Hy's, H-Y-apostrophe-S. If you've ever seen the movie *American Graffiti*, it's the same round drive-in where the cars parked.

Geraci:

Very typical of that fifties auto era.

01-00:47:55

David:

Exactly. It had been determined to be the single busiest traffic intersection in America, Telegraph and MacArthur. Now, remember, the only way you could get to the Bay Bridge in those days was on MacArthur; and the major north-south arterial was Telegraph. So the number of cars passing that intersection was amazing. I never did find out why or how he got this name Hy's, spelled H-Y-apostrophe-S. The guy's name was Ed Roller, who owned it. So I went to the chef, walked in the kitchen door, to apply for a job as a fry cook. I had to have a job. I had gotten a couple of \$300 scholarships. I'd like to go back to the scholarships for a minute, too. But this guy is looking at me and trying to figure out—I could just see the look on his face, as if it was yesterday—whether to laugh at me or tell me to get out.

Geraci:

He humored you.

01-00:49:03

David:

He humored me, and I guess he's thinking, if this kid is brash enough to come in here and seriously look for a job, maybe he's not afraid to work. Remind you, these are the days when the cooks were World War II vets and Korea vets, who were wearing a t-shirt with a package of Lucky Strikes rolled up in the sleeve of the t-shirt. Here's this kid who's just barely turned seventeen. He says, "Listen, sonny. You ever pop sodas down there in Turlock?" I said, "Oh, yeah, I used to come in on my day off." Well, that was a lie. I had to have a job. My dad had died back then and I had two younger brothers at home.

Geraci:

Right, your father had just passed away two years prior to that, right?

01-00:49:45

David:

He died, yeah. So he took me to the front and introduced me to the front-end manager, and by golly, I got a job as a soda jerk. I had never worked as a soda jerk. I had been around the scene in that drive-in, so I knew something about it. I figured you could get away with not knowing something once; just don't ever let it be twice. So I was asked to make a chocolate soda, and I said to the manager, "Well, now, do you prefer to start with a little ice cream or whipped cream to—" "Well, let me just show you how we do it." The guy put it together and that was it. It was recorded in my brain. I had so much fun at that job. I'll tell you, people used to come and sit at the counter to watch us soda jerks, because of the fun we had. The milkshakes went out in a glass about this tall, with a little, tiny stem at the bottom. We had them upside-down in the refrigerator below the counter. We'd reach in and grab it by the stem, flip it up in the air and catch it in the other hand. The ice cream was scooped to make the milkshakes; this was not a soft machine, this was scooping the ice cream and putting it onto the Hamilton Beach mixer. Again, when you were scooping the ice cream, you didn't just put it like this, you'd flip it up in the air and catch it in the can. Then if the guy running the front, who had to be the manager; the guy had to grab the hot food coming out of the kitchen and the cold food coming from the soda fountain, and assemble them for the waitresses to take outside, the carhops. So if he was ever stuck, he said, "R-O," which meant rush order. So if he said, "Shake one R-O," shake one went, automatically, a chocolate milkshake, and R-O meant rush order. The instant you got it ready, you airtailed it to him. You just yelled, "Shake one I-T-A." I-T-A, in the air. It didn't matter whether he was facing you or not. If he asked for an R-O, you could say I-T-A and throw it, and whatever was in his hand had to be dropped and he had to turn around, or he was going to get hit upside the back of his head with a milkshake coming at him. Well, it got to be that the only thing we couldn't throw was a soft drink with no ice. A Coke with ice was okay, because the ice floats at the top; but with no ice, it would slosh around so much. As I say, people would sit there and watch us. We just had a ball with it.

Geraci:

[laughs] This was a show in itself.

01-00:52:40

David:

It was a show. We just had such a good time with it. So through my college years, I worked at Hy's Drive-in, at Mel's Drive-in at South Van Ness and Mission—that was the number one stand; it was the biggest of them all, a round one. And wow! I got to work at Mel's number one. I was the relief guy that worked two days a week there. There was a Mel's drive-in at Channing and Shattuck in Berkeley, on the northeast corner. Then there was a little restaurant on Euclid. Gosh, I can't remember the name. The block between Ridge and Hearst, on the east side of the street. There've been restaurants in that block forever. I got a job as a cook.

Geraci:

Now, in those days, when you say you got a job as a cook, what were the expectations? Because it's a little bit different than expectations today.

01-00:53:59

David:

Well, it's also a different kind of restaurant. If I were applying for a job at the same kind of restaurant, the expectation might not be too different. But I'm telling you this story because it is the most memorable screw-up that I've ever had in my life. The owner—if you were to use titles, you'd say the owner was the chef—he always cooked the roast. It was a casual college restaurant, sandwiches and salads and soups and stuff like that. So he put the roast in the oven, left, and said to be sure to keep an eye on the roast. He came back like six hours later and said, "Oh, how'd the roast turn out?" I said, "Roast? What roast?" [they laugh] It was still in the oven.

Geraci:

It was done.

01-00:55:04

David:

Oh, my God, was it done! It was done and finished and over with. It shrunk down to this big and it was black. I was never so devastated. I still shudder when I think of that.

Geraci:

It's strange how things like that settle in our mind and we never forget them.

01-00:55:28

David:

I lived at Cloyne Court student co-op my first two years. Of course, I immediately got on the kitchen crew. My second semester, I became the kitchen supervisor, because after all, I was a college student that had restaurant experience. I had worked as a fry cook in Turlock and I was working as soda jerk at Hy's Drive-in. Then my third semester, I became chairman of central food services. We had seven co-op houses and I would oversee the kitchen managers in all seven.

Geraci:

So you're beginning to get a little bit of catering-type training at that point, aren't you?

01-00:56:16

David:

Yeah. My favorite story, my favorite accomplishment, was that people were always bitching about the coffee being so awful. How come we have to use

such cheap coffee? Why can't we have some decent coffee? So I set up a tasting. In those days, Farmer Brothers was the best institutional coffee around. All the finest restaurants bought Farmer Brothers. There was no Peet's Coffee invented yet. I knew that the single biggest problem we had was that the coffee urns were not being properly maintained. You remember those big stainless steel urns.

Geraci: Yeah.

01-00:57:07

David: Well, the coffee oils build up inside it and then the oil, when it gets old enough, gets rancid and has all kinds of bad flavors. Well, it's the easiest thing in the world to clean out. You put in some—There were various names for these cleaning compounds, but it's basically like a washing soda, Arm & Hammer washing soda, which is carbonate of soda. Not bicarbonate, but carbonated soda; it's a very strong alkaline. So we were going to do the—Our central kitchen was at Oxford, that's where the basic food prep was done and sent out to the other six houses. I got there early, completely cleaned out these urns properly, and I made the Farmer Brothers coffee on one side and the co-op coffee on the other side. When the managers came, we had a blind tasting, to see which they liked. All but one preferred the co-op coffee, which was a lot less expensive than the fancy Farmer Brothers. Once the urn had been cleaned and gotten rid of all the schmutz it was a perfectly fine cup of coffee. There was nothing wrong with the coffee. What was wrong was with the way they're making it and the way they're dealing with it, and the way they're not maintaining their equipment.

Geraci: We're going to stop there for a second so I can change tapes here.

Begin Audiofile 2 06-30-2011.mp3

Geraci: This is tape number two. Today is June 30, 2011. Narsai David, Vic Geraci doing the interview. Narsai, when we left off, we had you at Cal. You're now working for the co-ops, which I think maybe we should expand that a little bit, and then you mentioned you wanted to talk about the scholarships, too.

02-00:00:54

David: Right.

Geraci: But I think for Cal students today, they don't realize how big co-ops were in those days and how important they were to student life.

02-00:01:05

David: I'm not sure how it is today. There are more co-ops now than there were then, but that's an interesting question. I really don't know what they're doing now. But for us, there's no way I could've come to school without the co-op. Each of us worked five hours a week. It was really a self-contained, self-sustained thing. There was obviously a work shift manager, there was a president that

was elected annually; the work shift manager, kitchen manager, a maintenance manager. We really took care of the place ourselves. In fact, that spins off another story. There were two fraternities behind us. We were on Ridge Road at Le Roy, and the Betas and the Phi Scis faced Hearst, so the back of their yard butted up to the back of our yard. There was this fun little game that used to go on; we'd lob water balloons at each other's houses and so forth. Well, there was one place at Cloyne Court that was sacrosanct, and that was the library. We subscribed to, gosh, twenty or thirty magazines. We had an incredible collection of LP records and a really, really high-quality music system in there. It was a place where you went to read and to listen to fine classical music. You took turns selecting a record to put on the thing. The rest of the house—indoors, outdoors—crazy things happened; but that room was just sacred. One time, somebody from one of the Betas came over and, in just an amazingly stupid act, overturned a soda-acid fire extinguisher and sprayed it all over the place. Well, that stuff, of course, bleached out the beautiful upholstery in the comfortable furniture, and this time, all-out war was declared. By the time our team had unrolled the fire hoses and started flooding their cellar, our maintenance manager had gone around to the front of their house and cut off their water at the supply source, where it comes in from the street. They didn't have a clue as to what to do about that. If you don't think we lorded that over them for the rest of our lives, that these hotshot, fat rats with all their money, they couldn't even know which end it was to turn off the water. Finally, when their president came over, late in the siege, and pleaded with our president to turn the water back on because it was a Saturday night and the guys had dates and they had to go out, finally peace was declared and we turned on their water. I think they did some kind of compensation for the damage they had done in our library.

But the scholarships. There was one scholarship given in Turlock that was based on grades and financial need. I forget how they were weighed. But there was another guy whose GPA was identical to mine, carried to the second decimal. My father had died two years earlier. We were living on my mother's income, working six months in the canneries and six months drawing unemployment, and I had two younger brothers at home. He got a \$700 scholarship to go to Baylor and I didn't get anything for my desire to go to Cal. Well, a guy who was a year older than I was a very close friend of our next-door neighbor, so we'd become friendly, as well. His family was in the melon packing business. I had a part-time job working evenings for a couple hours, at the Purity grocery store, in the butcher department. I would come in late in the afternoon and slice the lunch meat and cheese for sandwiches and clean the band saw and the meat slicer and the grinder and so forth and put things away for the day. So Phil Olson came in one day. I was behind the counter and he wanted to talk to me for a minute. He said that his mother thought that I had been treated very unfairly in that scholarship thing, and he handed me an envelope with a \$300 check in it.

Geraci: Oh, my goodness.

02-00:06:56

David: She gave me a scholarship herself, for \$300. Then I qualified for a Cal scholarship for \$300. So being able to live at the student co-op —There was no way I could've made it otherwise.

Geraci: And being able to have a part-time job then and work, yeah.

02-00:07:16

David: Well, I was working that job at Hy's Drive-in. I was working, I think it was thirty hours a week. It was a substantial thing; but I didn't have any choice. I would send money home to my mother, even when I was working up here.

Geraci: What about your brothers?

02-00:07:43

David: I'm the oldest, and I have one two years younger and [one] four years younger. So the middle brother came up two years later. I lived at Cloyne only for two years, and that summer, I moved out into an apartment and Ken came up to live with me.

Geraci: So he was going to Cal also?

02-00:08:10

David: No. No, no, no. He just had to get out of Dodge. No, he never did go to college. He did finish high school. Then my youngest brother—My mother finally remarried, some seven years after my dad had died. The guy she married was awfully good to her. She was even better to him. But he had a young daughter, and there was no way that a young man not related to his daughter was going to live in the same house as his daughter.

Geraci: Interesting.

02-00:09:02

David: So my youngest brother went to live with my mother's sister in Turlock for a year, and then the next year, he came up and lived with Ken and me. So his last year in high school was at Berkeley High. So he graduated from Berkeley High.

Geraci: So the three boys are back together then.

02-00:09:26

David: So the three boys are all back together then, living in a house on the corner of—Well, the apartment I had was on University Avenue, south side of the street, right where Bonita dead ends into University, between Milvia and Martin Luther King, which was Grove in those days. Then I rented a house at Hearst and Acton, 1100 Hearst, and all three of us lived there.

Geraci: So it's safe to say the family's close.

02-00:10:16

David: Yeah. Jim, the youngest one, lives just below Telegraph, and Ken lives just above Adeline. We're less than, what is it, a mile and a half spread, the three of us. We see each other frequently.

Geraci: Now, at Cal, what were you studying? Or was it just kind of, I'm taking the classes they tell me to take?

02-00:10:46

David: I need you asking these questions because I drift off. My father wanted me to be a dentist. Now, why a dentist? Well, a dentist has the title of a doctor, is a professional, but has a much easier life than a doctor, because he works his eight hours and goes home; he doesn't have to come rushing in in the middle of the night or whatever. So I was in the College of L and S [Letters and Science], and taking my pre-dent requirements. They didn't have a pre-dent major, so I was just a liberal arts student. But I went to a session once, where they wanted to get a sense of how you work with your hands. We were given a block of plaster and told to mill it into a one-inch cube. I'm very good with my hands and I made a really beautiful one-inch cube. By the time I had made that cube, the thought of standing there looking inside someone's mouth and cutting pieces of plaster mold to make a model in order to cast a replacement for a tooth or something, I thought this is not me. There ain't no way this is going to happen. I became very, very emotional about medicine and helping people. Yeah, so a doctor may have to get up in the middle of the night, but you save somebody's life. So I immediately became a premed student instead of a pre-dent student. That, I was sure, was not going to happen. My grades were—From a kid that had made all A's in high school, suddenly to be getting B's and C's was just devastating.

Geraci: But you're also working thirty hours a week.

02-00:13:25

David: I'm working a lot and I have a lot of responsibility; but I don't have my head in the books, the way I did in high school, where I was also working a lot. So I went to student counseling and they gave me this battery of tests, as they're wont to do, and they showed very clearly that business was really my forte. So the next semester, I changed to a business major. One of the most interesting courses I ever did take was called Bus-Ad 18, taught by a guy named Votaw, V-O-T-A-W, which was business law. But accounting 1-A and 1-B was the dreariest thing I have ever done in my life. I remember having visions of—Oh, my. What's the name of that character in the movie who's sitting over the desk Cratchit, was it?

Geraci: Yeah. Oh, yes.

02-00:14:48

David: With a green eyeshade, on a high stool filling columns of numbers. I thought, what the hell? There's no way on earth. If this is what business administration

is, is putting numbers in the columns—So I changed my major again. Well, no, the first time, I had not changed; I'd changed my direction from pre-dent to premed, but there was no major. But I declared a math major and I took math three, which was—Or no, I had already signed up for math three, which was kind of an overview of math. It was taught by a guy named Polya, P-O-L-Y-A, a very, very famous mathematician who's German. Small man, spoke with a wiry kind of accent. He would come in with this little notebook, about maybe six by nine inches or something, and he'd open it up to see what page he was on. Then he'd close it and he'd address the class. Well, one day he walked in, put the notebook down without opening it, and he faced the class and said, [with German accent] "*Vell*, today, ve begin ze cal-culus." The class kind of gasped. *The* calculus. We didn't begin calculus, we began *the* calculus.

Geraci: *The* calculus.

02-00:16:38

David: I was so impressed and so excited and so thrilled. I've never enjoyed a class or an instructor any more than this man. The next semester, I took math six, which is certainly the toughest thing, academically, I've ever done in my life. It's essentially a whole year of calculus in one semester, because it's like the A and B.

Geraci: Right.

02-00:17:19

David: So it was six days a week, Monday through Saturday, one hour. Eight a.m., Monday through Saturday. It was a real killer. So I enjoyed math a lot. Both my brothers were living with me, picking up odd jobs and part-time jobs and so forth. Well, I played a kind of a father role, in truth. Feels kind of funny to say that, but that's the truth of it.

Geraci: But that's not that abnormal. That's a lot of when the kids have to pick up some of that slack for themselves.

02-00:18:15

David: Oh, no, there's no question. I know that after my dad died, I became, even in the Assyrian tradition, the man of the house. I'm the one that would butcher the chickens and the rabbits and help Ma with things other than just sitting there and doing the canning.

Geraci: So you're a math major now.

02-00:18:51

David: Yeah. In and out of school. I had to drop out one semester. I had a pilonidal cyst. You have any idea what that is?

Geraci: No.

02-00:19:08

David: It's a cyst right down on your tailbone. They cut it out and they have to leave it open to heal over. So I learned what a sitz bath was. You had to sit in one of these things. I forget what kind of powder, salt or something they put in it to keep it—

Geraci: Probably like an Epsom salt or something of some sort.

02-00:19:34

David: Something like that, to keep it flushed out until it slowly healed. So anyway, I had to drop out that semester, and then I went back the next semester. By then, I had started a little business. So I was in and out. I suppose I've got a mental block on it. I was in and out of school a couple times. One time was for medical, and another time because the business was just overwhelming. Then I came back. Finally, I realized that I just was fooling myself. It wasn't me; and I just dropped out formally. So I started in '53, and I think the last class I took was in '58. In fact, it was funny. I went to one of these things trying to get former students to help some alumni sort of thing. Which class do I sign up with? Well, I never did graduate, so I said, "Well, if I had stayed with my class, I would've graduated in '57." So I speak of myself as class of '57. The class of '57, I'm proud to tell you, put together and reprinted the *Cal Songbook*.

Geraci: [they laugh] Keep some traditions alive. I think we've got to the end of the Cal story. One thing I would like to go back and talk just a little bit about—in fact, we can probably finish this tape with—is your years in Turlock. What was it like growing up in an Assyrian community? The traditions, the things you were doing religiously. Because these things seem to have had a big impact on you.

02-00:21:40

David: No doubt. That can actually go back to Chicago, as well. Being the first born and a son, I was the apple of my father's eye. He taught me how to read Assyrian at a young age. I was ordained in the Assyrian church, it's called a reader, qaruya. It'd be the equivalent of an altar boy in the Catholic Church; but the word reader, one actually reads. I would read the lesson from the Old Testament, and then a deacon would read—I forget what that next portion is—and then only a priest or higher could read from the Epistles?

02-00:22:48

David: *Whew!* God, that's such a long time ago; it's a whole world ago. I would, on certain important—even back in Chicago days—on the important holy days of the year, I would go to church with my dad. We'd leave on the streetcar at six o'clock in the morning and take communion. Oh, and in Chicago, I normally went to Sunday school at the Chicago Gospel Tabernacle, which was a place we walked to, not far from where I grew up. There was also Bible school in the summer, Daily Vacation Bible School, DVBS. So that was the regular Sunday thing. But on those special days, I would go with my father to the

Assyrian church. When we got to Turlock, then, it was just the Assyrian church. How old could I have been? Well, [when] I got there, I was eleven; but I'm trying to figure out how—I was a reader by the time I was twelve or thirteen; that's accurate. But then I became a sub-deacon. My dad lived to see me become a sub-deacon, so that means it couldn't have been more than fifteen. But I became a deacon after he had died. I think I was probably eighteen when I became a deacon.

Geraci: A deacon is a very important higher echelon of lay involvement within these religious organizations.

02-00:25:18

David: Oh, yeah. Yeah. It's one step below the priest.

Geraci: Right. So needless to say, religion played a very vital role in your life.

02-00:25:26

David: Oh, yeah. Well, Assyrian and religion were synonymous, sort of. I remember I was working at Hy's Drive-in when they—this guy who ran the Judson-Pacific Murphy Steel Company in Emeryville—It's where they converted cars into rebar. A foundry. The first Assyrian church in San Francisco was, still is, out in the Sunset, at about 45th and Laughton. They bought an old house and then gutted it, and made the ground level into a social hall and the housing level into the church. A first cousin of my mother's was a plaster contractor and he did all the plaster and stucco work, and I got this guy from Judson-Pacific to donate the rebar that we used for the concrete foundation and pad for the social hall. I got some concrete donated, as well. So I was actively involved in helping to build the church. Then even after we built it, we couldn't afford to hire a priest, and the patriarch gave authority to an older deacon, an Assyrian from the old country, who could actually read from the Gospels. That he was able to read from the gospels, and I continued reading from the Old Testament. But then he would do the sermon one week in Assyrian, and I would do the sermon the following week, in English. I was able to use the library up on Holy Hill, the Graduate Theological Union. So I was pretty deeply involved in the church. I couldn't have been more deeply involved. Then I started pulling away from the church. I'm an atheist now. That was tough, because the church was such an integral part of my being an Assyrian. Because everything we did was somehow church related. Parties we went to were generally the weddings that were being celebrated in a hall, after you had been to the church for the ceremony.

Geraci: Well, it's the agricultural, seasonal; the church is seasonal. It's all celebrations. Just the whole life, the cycle of life, is based on this liturgical, seasonal calendar.

02-00:29:40

David: Yeah. Absolutely.

Geraci: What was it like to eat at the David home?

02-00:29:46

David: Oh, my God, my mother was the greatest cook. She was the greatest cook. When my father was diagnosed with leukemia, the menu called for more red meat. Meat is important because the white blood cells are destroying the red blood cells in the body. So we had meat all the time. She would never let us leave the house in the morning, without having eaten an egg. It usually was fried in butter, but occasionally it would be a boiled egg that we would eat out the shell. Remember the old-fashioned, eat it with a teaspoon? She didn't do much baking. She had a couple of cakes that she made. There were no recipes; it was just sort of a basic, rich cake, with lots of eggs and butter in it; and her frosting was a butter that was whipped up with powdered sugar and vanilla for a frosting.

Geraci: Just very simple.

02-00:31:05

David: Very, very simple, very straightforward. I've chuckled a lot over an article. There was an issue of *New York Magazine* that showed Michel Guérard on the cover. He had invented this new style of cooking called cuisine minceur. This was during the period of nouvelle cuisine. He had a three-star restaurant, I believe, and he and his wife opened a spa, Eugénie-les-Bains, and he created spa food, which was very low in fat, low in calories. His claim to fame in this magazine article was a blanquette de veau, a classic veal stew, which is just laden with cream and butter, right? So this new technique he's come up with, he browns the pieces of veal in a thick pot, and then adds huge amounts of herbs from the garden. If my memory serves me, he even had some pine needles, to get some aromatics. Now, that may be a figment of my imagination, but lots of herbs. He covers it, lets it all steam together. Well, now, let me give you my mother's recipe for lamb stew, as learned, developed in that little village of Ada, in Northwest Iran. She would take a piece of meat—usually lamb, but she would do the same thing with beef or pork—she'd trim off the fat; mince the fat really, really finely; render that out in a pan; and then brown the meat in that fat. Those little bits of the brown stuff would just stay in there, obviously. They're more flavorful than some of the rest of it.

Geraci: That's where the taste is.

02-00:33:22

David: So once the meat was browned—I've often said that the square root of her cooking was tomatoes, onions, and basil. But it really was based on what came out of the garden. If the basil was starting to show too many blossoms, she would crop the basil. If the tarragon was getting a little rangy, it might be the tarragon. The oregano, the thyme—whatever herbs needed to be plucked that day went into the pot. Whatever vegetables were ready that day. It could be yellow squash and zucchini squash and eggplant; it could be okra and

string beans. Whatever provender came from the garden that day went into the pot, with all of these herbs and the onions. The lid was put on it and it was simmered until everything was tender. Well, here's a Frenchman who's invented a new style of cooking and given it a new name, cuisine minceur, and that's the way my mother always made her stew. This was just basic cooking.

Geraci: Well, we'll get into it in later interviews a lot more, as we talk about all the different cuisines. But the whole idea of this supposed culinary revolution in going to fresh, seasonal, organic and local is ageless.

02-00:34:52

David: In Chicago, we had a victory garden. We would get on a streetcar and go down to Lincoln Park to take care of our victory garden, during the war.

Geraci: Yeah, it's really not new. I question and I really wonder about that, because when people talk about it, and all these new cuisines, I'm going, well, I ate like that as a small child, because that's the way we got food.

02-00:35:13

David: In my opinion, the only thing new that has happened in cuisine is some of these mad scientist chefs, like [Ferran] Adrià, in Spain, who will use liquid nitrogen as a method of freezing something, to change its physical characteristics. Yes, there are some exciting things that these guys do. I've never been there and I'm not interested in going; but I'm reminded of something that I had at the Winesong!, which is the annual event that raises money for the Mendocino County Hospital Foundation. Some new wave chef at one of the restaurants there made this thing, which he called a pineapple egg. There was this little crouton topped with—I forget the garniture, but on top of that was this marble-sized yellow ball, that looked sort of like it might be the yolk of a quail egg, just glistening and almost quivering a little bit. He tells you to pop the whole thing in your mouth, and you bite down and this thing explodes, and it's pineapple juice.

Geraci: Interesting.

02-00:36:43

David: And you're thinking, well, what? How? What held it together?

Geraci: It's where the senses become confused, and the expectations.

02-00:36:52

David: But more than that, you start wondering about the physical science of, what is this thing? You're visualizing making a gel that coats a ball of pineapple juice. Well, it turns out that the guy freezes the pineapple juice in these little balls, and then drops it into this liquid—pick something; liquid nitrogen or liquid something or other—and it just so totally changes the character of the outside of this thing that you can then let it defrost and you've got just the liquid

inside; but this skin has formed, surrounding it, that holds it all together. So you want to talk about something new in cuisine? Yes, these guys have scientifically found ways to do something. Cooking sous-vide does indeed create a different product, that your grandmother and my mother could not have dreamt of. It did not exist. It is a scientific little game they're playing, and it can be a lot of fun. But come on, folks. I'm interested in going into the kitchen and putting dinner on the table, not finding some way to use frozen liquid nitrogen to physically change the characteristic of food. The families today that have all the money in the world, this is a science experiment gone mad. Was it fun to experience this little thing that I had? It sure was. I went back and got a second one. But is that something that I would want to do to make dinner? Is that something I'd want to do to feed my family? No, that was fun and games. No, you're talking about cooking with naturally grown, simple food. Those chickens that we ate and the eggs that we got, those chickens ran around in the yard and they ate bugs and snails and worms and seeds and wild grasses and weeds and so forth. There was a flavor component that simply could never be matched by a chicken that comes out of a production facility.

Geraci: And they fertilized the soil that they were walking on.

02-00:39:47

David: Absolutely. There's more and more of an interest in returning to that. The part that is really troubling is that I don't see people who get so carried away with the importance of returning to this little backyard stuff, I don't see them dealing with the reality of feeding the millions of mouths that need to be fed. It's really kind of hip to live in Berkeley—There was a woman across the street here that has some chickens. She'll periodically show up at our door with a dozen eggs from the chickens; and I periodically show up with her door with a loaf of bread that I have, that I made using some of those eggs. It's fun for this kind of stuff. It's fun, it's enjoyable. She has little kids that really thrive on taking care of the chickens and harvesting the eggs. But we're talking about feeding 300-million people that have to be fed in this country, and I don't see that there's any way to stop having chicken farms that produce millions of eggs.

Geraci: We're going to get into this in detail. But in a way, what you're saying is the way that you grew up, it is a lost food way, in some ways.

02-00:41:31

David: Well, the way I grew up is a way of poor people growing up. It takes time. You can't very well be out buying fancy food. No. You have to make do with what you have. If you can be growing some chickens and rabbits in the backyard and have a large vegetable garden, while you're off at work, doing whatever poor people jobs[sic] can get—But you know that you're going to have good food on the plate, because it's growing in your backyard, whether it's chickens and rabbits—Rabbits are phenomenal. You get a lot of meat.

There's a reason for saying that. And it's easy to maintain. One year, we raised a calf, and that was a mistake. Our yard wasn't big enough. We fed it well. It produced some delicious meat.

Geraci: It was the good fatted calf.

02-00:42:45

David: A good fatted calf. But you really need a lot more room. It couldn't roam around enough. But chickens and rabbits, gee, that was natural.

Geraci: Did you find a lot of your lifestyle growing up, then, was based on food?

02-00:43:02

David: Oh, for sure. Yeah. Geez, we gave away boxes full of fruit and vegetables. There were nine walnut trees, just on the perimeter of that property. We had an apricot, two olives that my father planted. Those trees were already there when we moved in. He planted a couple of olives and an almond and a couple rows of grapes. Lady's Fingers, that grew up over this arbor. My mother's canned apricots got a blue ribbon every year at the Stanislaw County Fair. Nobody could match hers. She would identify the apricots on that tree that were for her canning jar, and death beheld anybody that went near them. You remember the two-quart canning jars?

Geraci: Yeah.

02-00:44:08

David: There were the round ones, and there were some that were kind of squarish.

Geraci: They were, yeah, kind of rectangular.

02-00:44:12

David: Right. No, square.

Geraci: Square. Okay, I know what you're talking about now.

02-00:44:15

David: A square with rounded corners. Well, she would identify those, the biggest, most perfect apricots where four of them would fill that square. She would put in four and then the next four would nest down in between, like that. You didn't even have to wonder about it to give her a blue ribbon for it. It almost didn't matter what it tasted like. But believe me, she left the pits in, knowing that you get that bitter almond flavor out of the pits. When she made apricot jam—My all-time favorite was her apricot pineapple. She would crack the pits and take that kernel and chop it up and put it into her preserves. Well, if you went to Chinatown looking for those little packets of what they sort of loosely call bitter almond, I think it's actually apricot kernel. I use it in my cooking all the time.

Geraci: It's a wonderful taste.

02-00:45:15

David: It gives you that bitter almond flavor. One of the things that a friend brought for my seventy-fifth birthday was a bag of a bitter orange that I'd never heard of before, called Bouquet, growing on their tree. There was a bag about this big. If not today, then this weekend, I will have made it into—Next time I see you, I'll have a jar of that marmalade for you.

Geraci: Oh, thank you.

02-00:45:51

David: But I'm forever making things into marmalade. We have two bergamot orange trees planted here. This whole front yard was full of favas until about three weeks ago. You missed out on that. I got a little carried away with compost last year. We have a huge compost pile you'll see it out here in the yard. This bin is about six feet in diameter and maybe seven or eight feet high. So we compost everything from the yard and from the kitchen. But last year, I thought that this side of the yard had not really been getting as much nutrient as it ought to, so I went out and bought a yard of chicken manure compost.

Geraci: Oh, that sweetens it quick.

02-00:46:48

David: But there is such a thing as overdoing it, I found out, because the favas were five and six feet tall, but I had half as much beans as I had last year.

Geraci: So they went all to growth.

02-00:47:04

David: It all went to growth, instead of the fruit. So important lesson. Nitrogen is good, and too much nitrogen is bad.

Geraci: Is not as good. Well, actually, I think we're probably at a point where we can stop.

02-00:47:18

David: Yeah, that's pretty close to two hours.

Geraci: That's pretty close. So thank you.

Interview 2: July 12, 2011

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Geraci: I am Vic Geraci, food and wine historian from the University of California Berkeley, Regional Oral History Office. Today's date is July 12, 2011, and seated with me is Narsai David, restaurateur, caterer, specialty food purveyor, vintner, food and wine critic, author, radio and TV chef, and early pioneer of California cuisine, and an advocate for the Berkeley Repertory Theater, the Assyrian Aid Society, and the Alameda County Meals on Wheels program, to name a few. This interview is being conducted in Narsai's home in Berkeley, California. Narsai, welcome to interview two.

03-00:00:44

David: Big thanks.

Geraci: We're getting there.

03-00:00:45

David: Yes, we're under way.

Geraci: When we left off last time we had gotten you up to coming to Cal and those years, so we may duplicate a little, but's pick up right about there.

03-00:00:57

David: Sure. I lived at Cloyne Court from '53 to '55, and I think we discussed what I was doing at the student co-op during those two years.

Geraci: Which is actually crucial to your career in catering. You were learning about feeding a lot of different people.

03-00:01:17

David: Yeah. Yeah, I guess I hadn't quite thought of it in those terms.

Geraci: We talk about planting seeds early in our life.

03-00:01:24

David: No, there's no doubt. Those seeds, though, go all the way back to working the farms, quite literally, then working as a soda jerk, as a fry cook. *Assistant* fry cook; remember, it was my first job at that drive-in restaurant. But working at the co-op and watching the feeding of multitudes, compared to what it had been in the drive-ins.

Geraci: And especially college age, males in particular, who are after quantity, as opposed to quality.

03-00:01:59

David: Volume of food. I can remember there was a kid at Cloyne, who grew up in Petaluma, on a chicken farm. He couldn't tolerate the thought of chicken, much less the prospect of eating any. So whenever there was chicken on the

menu, we'd really hustle to stand next to Nick in the feeding line, because we could get an extra piece of chicken that way. [they laugh] But I was living on University Avenue, and I found a—Well, gadget isn't the right word. This guy had made a little jig, on which to build a fancy, puffed-out kind of dress-slash-gown for a little doll, that he called a Southern doll. He sold me this jig; he was making these things and got tired of it. I changed the name to the Southern Belle, B-E-L-L-E, and found that it was a neat way to make a lot of money with very little effort. It used this material called bump chenille. I don't know if that means anything to you. If you can visualize what a pipe cleaner looks like—you remember pipes, they used to be popular.

Geraci: Okay, pipe cleaners, yeah. Well, pipes were the big thing then.

03-00:03:27

David: Well, visualize that pipe cleaner with colorful yarn or thread, rather than just the soft white. It goes along like this, with a little hump in it, and that's bump chenille. So this came in long lengths, and you'd twist it and maneuver it and bend it into shapes. A friend and I, who also had been working in the drive-in restaurants, decided we were going to take a trip around the country. We loaded up huge boxes of the material to take with us, and we were going to work our way around the country, selling these little dolls. Well, we got to Washington State, where they had this gambling thing. They were punch cards of one sort or another. Again, that's something that's pretty much disappeared. This card was about three quarters of an inch thick material, and there were little tiny holes that you'd pay for a chance, punch through, and what came out, you unraveled this little piece of paper that had the winning numbers on it or whatever. Well, these dolls were a smash hit with the guys selling these punch card things, to be used as prizes. It was so substantial that I decided to come back home and set up a business to make these things. Suddenly I was in the doll business.

Geraci: Which you never expected, right?

03-00:05:12

David: Hardly ever. So next door to the apartment building I was living in on University Avenue, was a little plastics fabricating shop. I went in there one day, looking for a particular type of glue that would glue this bouffant dress onto the plastic doll bodies. Before I knew it, I had hit it off pretty well with the owner of the plastics shop. He was getting ready to expand, and he needed some money. We got along pretty well and he wanted a partner. I managed to borrow \$3500 against my mother's house. A cousin of hers loaned me the money and it was using her house as collateral. I put that money into a partnership in this business, called Plastics by Chapman. His name was Harold B. Chapman, Jr. We moved to a building out at the Stege Crossing in Richmond. It had been part of the research facility for Stauffer Chemical. A huge space. Very, very low cost, because it was all but abandoned. There were a number of interesting projects. One came to mind just the other night; a

segment on *60 Minutes*, about this oil well drilling for natural gas, the fracking technique, and how they go down a mile and then they turn ninety degrees and drill horizontally. Well, one little project that we did for an oil company was that they were having a hard time figuring out where the drill was going. They would start out drilling, thinking they were going straight down but it would go off at angles, hitting rocks and so forth, and they wanted to be able to trace that. So we built—I don't take much credit for this; it was Harold Chapman, who was just one of the brightest guys. If this guy had ever gotten a formal education, he would've set the world on fire. He was just [an] amazingly brilliant guy. A mechanic, a machinist, an inventor—just a very creative human being.

Geraci: He thought in that abstract manner.

03-00:07:48

David:

He thought in that abstract manner, and he worked really well with the engineers who were designing this thing. The drill hole was six inches in diameter. Or it could accommodate something six inches in diameter. What we made was kind of interesting. We laminated together slices of plastic and a very thin slice of copper foil, and created a cylinder that was essentially a six-inch diameter cylinder, by maybe eight or ten inches high. Then we machined out a sphere from the center that was about a three-inch diameter sphere. Then we machined a plastic sphere that was—oh, pick a number. Let's say two and seven-eighth inches in diameter. It was a little bit smaller than the opening in this thing. We set that in and filled it halfway up with mercury. So now visualize this whole thing has been assembled. As it tilts, the mercury gives us contact between the different copper layers, and that's all hooked up and wired up, so that on the surface, on a screen, it reads which angle this thing is tilting at. It was just so amazing how this came flashing back, watching this *60 Minutes* piece on these guys who were drilling horizontally. I said, "Well, wow. I remember when they were first discovering that that was a problem, that the drill could move sideways." Well, one of the other things that we did was to laminate printed material between two sheets of clear plastic. We had a ten-by-twelve-inch laminating press, so we could handle an eight-and-a-half-by-eleven sheet of normal paper. But then we brought a Heidelberg platen printing press, with which we printed on thin sheets of plastic, and in turn, laminated those sheets of plastic between two sheets of clear, which was really, for all intents and purposes—It's the precursor of what's used as credit cards these days, because the image is sealed down inside the plastic. The partnership ended the way most partnerships do; the time came that it just wasn't working any longer and I wanted to get out. He, of course, had no money to give me back for my investment, but this print shop, the printing press that we had, we had set up in a separate location. By this time, we were in a location here in Berkeley, on Oregon Street, below Sacramento. It was the old Berkeley Coal and Ice yard, and it had been divided up into a series of little industrial shops.

Geraci: A mini-industrial park.

03-00:11:05

David: Sort of, yeah. I was able to rent from the land owner. So I took the print shop and the machinery and whatever we had there, as my share of the investment.

Geraci: So you went from plastics to printing.

03-00:11:27

David: So I went from being in the plastics fabricating business to being in the printing business. Meanwhile, restauranting was still in the back of my brain. At the Pot Luck Restaurant, I had started as a relief bartender. It was a job that was sort of the one thing I'd never done in the restaurant business. I had worked as a cook, I had worked as a soda jerk, but I'd never mixed drinks. It sounded kind of fun. You could stand there and talk to people. It just sort of fit me.

Geraci: Taught you a lot of front-house skills, though, didn't it?

03-00:12:11

David: It really does. And it fit my personality, my desires. I was, before long, offered a job as manager of the Potluck. Let me backtrack a minute and tell you about the Potluck. It was created in 1954, by a guy named Ed Brown, down at the foot of University Avenue, on the south side of the street, next door, literally, to the old Southern Pacific Railroad station. Just a cute little old frame building.

Geraci: I'm trying to visualize where that is today. At the base of University?

03-00:13:06

David: Right. Well, you remember where Brennan's used to be, before they recently moved. The building that the Potluck was in made way for a parking lot for the original Brennan's. When Ed built the restaurant, his thought that you, quite literally, took potluck. Whatever he happened to cook that day is what you were going to eat. It was like a little, tiny French bistro and hence, the name Potluck.

Geraci: Just a neighborhood restaurant.

03-00:13:39

David: A neighborhood restaurant. He knew a lot about wine. He was born, I believe, in Canada, spoke French fluently, and did know a lot about food and wine. It lasted until 1958. Then in '58, [Henry] Hank Rubin, who I guess was an old friend of Ed's, bought into the business as a partner to bring in some capital. They moved to Channing and San Pablo, 2400 San Pablo Avenue, right at the southwest corner of San Pablo and Channing. It's a place that now has that Ohmega Salvage operation. Prior to that, it had been Corso's Hardware Store; and the history showed that back at the turn of the last century, it had been a warehouse upstairs on the second floor. So we had a lot of fun with that.

Geraci: It's a well-serviced area.

03-00:14:43

David: Right. From a warehouse to a hardware store to a restaurant, and to now, a salvage store. Does that have it go full circle or what? I really enjoyed it. I was offered a job as manager and thought, no. I'd planned to get married and have children and there's no way I want to be in the restaurant business.

Geraci: It's a tough business, isn't it?

03-00:15:13

David: Well, it's particularly tough on family life.

Geraci: Yeah, because the hours that you're serving or that you're working are the hours that you would normally spend with family.

03-00:15:23

David: Well, the way I phrased it was, when people are playing the hardest, you're working the hardest.

Geraci: Right.

03-00:15:30

David: Nights, weekends, holidays is when you're producing. So I joined the Army. They had this program that was started in, I believe, '58. RFA '58, Reserve Forces Act—'55 or '58—in which you could serve six months active duty and five and a half years in the Army Reserve, in lieu of your military service. Because remember, we had the draft in those days.

Geraci: Right. We had just been through the Korean War.

03-00:16:06

David: Right. So I went in for six months of active duty and was in Washington, D.C. When I got out, I came back, and it turned out that the guy that Hank had hired to manage the Potluck had not worked out and the job was open again. Well, by this time, I had come to grips with the degree to which I really loved the restaurant business. I love people, I love good food, I love good wine; and in the restaurant business, I was able to bring all this together. So I accepted the job as manager of the Potluck.

Geraci: Now, in the military, had you done anything in particular, as far as food training, or just a grunt?

03-00:16:56

David: I'll tell you, not only as I a grunt, but what really is another one of these cute military stories. For those five and a half years in the Reserve, I started out in a transportation company, medium truck, because I got into the Reserve through the guys that I was working with back at Hy's Drive-in, who were all Korean vets. Remember, the guys that had the pack of Lucky Strikes rolled up

in their t-shirt sleeve. Being a college student at that point, and being able to handle the paperwork in the office, I was immediately made company clerk. The captain and I really hit it off well; I just did everything he wanted. By the way, the day that I had time and grade, I would type out my own promotion and take it to him and he's sign it. So it was really a sweet deal. But what am I doing in a medium truck company? Well, that's how I got in there. So then I transferred to a medical unit in Oakland, which was really convenient, because the meetings were held up on Pill Hill in Oakland. So rather than having to drive over to Fort Mason for the weekly meetings—And now I had this MOS of a truck thing, so I immediately was put in charge of the motor pool. One summer, my younger brother Ken joined the Reserve and joined my outfit. He, of course, has made his life in the automotive business. Repair and rebuilding of cars and motors and what. So he was assigned to my motor pool. We hadn't been out at camp for three days, and he went to the commanding officer to complain that I was mistreating him, [Geraci laughs] because I was making greater demands than I was on anybody else—which is probably true. Here I've got a guy I know what he can do. So he transferred—get this—into the kitchen, where he spent the summer working as a baker. Now, he has gone on to make his living in the motor business; I've gone on to make my living in the food business. But here I am, the motor sergeant, and he's a pastry cook. [laughs]

Geraci: A little role reversal at that point.

03-00:19:43

David: The classic Army situation.

Geraci: The snafu, right?

03-00:19:47

David: Absolutely. Situation Normal, All Fouled Up. It was really kind of funny. So all that behind us, I really got immersed in the food business at the Potluck, as the manager. I worked one or two days a week as the relief bartender, and on those days, Hank Rubin would come in. Oh, and again backtracking a minute, the partnership with Ed and Hank had fallen apart, and Hank had gone ahead and bought Ed out of the partnership. So Hank owned the Potluck alone. Then he and another guy, named Jim Bigelow bought Sam's Anchor in Tiburon, and also Cruchon's, in Berkeley. Cruchon's was a restaurant on Shattuck Avenue, a block north of Hearst, on the west side of the street. It had made quite a specialty of sandwiches and soups and desserts. Sandwiches, there were, I don't know, forty or fifty sandwiches available, on six kinds of bread. The two really, really famous desserts were the lemon cream cheese pie and the fudge pie. An endless variety of soups. Well, Hank and Jim owned the Potluck, Cruchon's and Sam's Anchor, all three together. Then when that partnership came apart, Hank kept the Potluck and Cruchon's, and Jim kept Sam's Anchor. Jim lived in Marin County and that was his baby and Hank lived over here.

Geraci: How did both of these men get into business together?

03-00:22:01

David: I frankly don't know how they connected together. Hank, for his part, had been a PhD student at Berkeley, in—oh, my—something to do with food chemistry. He had dropped out at the time of the loyalty oath. He refused to sign the loyalty oath.

Geraci: Ah. A true Berkeleyite student.

03-00:22:39

David: Oh, boy, he was a Berkeleyan. As a matter of fact, Hank, as a kid, had gone to Spain and fought Franco in the Spanish Civil War. He was a member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

Geraci: Whoa.

03-00:22:51

David: He died just last year, I think, November of last year. In fact, just a couple weeks ago, we went to an event, an afternoon put on at Freight & Salvage, by the archives of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Or I guess it's called Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, ALBA. They did a sort of a brief history of its involvement in the war. There was one living member who was actually there and spoke a few words. But Hank's widow and his daughter were there, and we were invited and spent the afternoon with them. So what exactly brought him and Jim Bigelow together, I'm not sure. But anyway, there we were. Hank prided himself on being able to go through mountains and mountains of cookbooks and put together recipes and menu ideas, and he started something called the Monday Night Dinners, at the Potluck, at which there was a five-course meal. Well, soup, an appetizer, the main course, salad after the main course, and then dessert. Each Monday night, from a different country, and served with two wines, usually a white and red, to complement the two main courses. The wines were available at a reduced price, by the bottle or the glass, so that you could have just a glass of each wine with each course. We worked really diligently at developing a wine list. It surprises me, thinking back on it, how we used to hustle to get our share of the wine. It was totally illegal, as it still is, to have what the ABC calls a tie-in sale. You can't restrict the sale of one product based on purchase of other product. But there were plenty of unwritten rules, and it was pretty clear that unless you bought a lot of other stuff, you were never going to get any Inglenook cabernet sauvignon. Basically, it was like one case out of seven that you bought could be the cabernet. We had a waiter, a Persian student who turned out to be the best salesperson ever for white pinot Inglenook. Inglenook made something called white pinot, and I let the staff know how important it was to sell this, so we could get more cabernet. It got to the point that he would come walking up to the bar and say, "WPI. WPI," with a big broad smile on his face. He sold just cases and cases of WPI, which enabled us to get more cabernet. Then one year, they had some cases of the 1958 Inglenook, which was one of the great

vintages of the century, in quarter bottles. They had made quarter bottles, specifically for the Santa Fe Railroad system to use on their dining cars. Came the end of the vintage, they had a stack of these cases left over, and they did not subject that to the usual allocation rules. We were a really good customer and I was able to buy all of that.

Geraci: That'd be the precursor to the split, then.

03-00:27:01

David: That is a split. Yeah, a split is a quarter bottle.

Geraci: Right.

03-00:27:06

David: In champagne, it's generally called a split. But in those days, for railroads particularly, and diners of various sorts around the country, they did use quarter bottles. It was really a kick when a customer asked for a bottle of the '58 Inglenook and I'd come to the table with four-quarter bottles and say, "I'm sorry, but this is all we have. Would you mind?" And I'd open a bottle for each of the four people, and they just got the biggest kick out of it. Each had their own private bottle.

Geraci: If those quarter bottles or splits were around at that time, how come it hasn't caught on so well for restaurants?

03-00:27:57

David: Well, let's face it; restaurants want to sell more than a quarter bottle. Also they're a lot more expensive, as you can imagine. It takes four corks and four capsules and four fills and four seals and four handlings and eight labels, to be the equivalent of one bottle of wine. As a matter of fact, half bottles all but disappeared. It's only in the last maybe five years, maybe seven, eight years, that half bottles are starting to make a comeback. Many, many, and virtually all of the really big name—well, let's use that word cult wines—don't come in half bottles at all.

Geraci: Right.

03-00:28:47

David: So yeah, the move was towards the bigger bottles. The Potluck Restaurant. You want to talk about the Wine Institute; we were talking about the Wine Institute earlier. They gave us a special award, this beautiful, large, framed statement, banner, plaque—I don't even know what to call it for sure—that we had posted in the entryway. They cited us for what we had done in developing a California wine list. Nobody had ever made a California wine list the way we did. We just had an enormous selection.

Geraci: So this is a key, this is very important. The concept of a California wine list for restaurants is new. So by the late fifties, then, there's this idea of a California wine list?

03-00:30:04

David: Yeah, well, by now, we're into the early sixties.

Geraci: Early sixties? Okay.

03-00:30:09

David: The Potluck moved to San Pablo Avenue in '59. We sold plenty of French and German wine. In fact, there was a company in El Cerrito called Connoisseur Wine Imports, owned and operated by a veterinarian named George Linton, L-I-N-T-O-N, who just celebrated his ninetieth birthday, by the way, and is doing very, very well. But he was Hungarian. He is Hungarian by birth, and had developed a deep love of wine, and studied at Davis, got his degree in veterinary medicine and got more involved with wine. So although he had this thriving veterinarian hospital in El Cerrito, out behind the hospital, he built this little warehouse where he imported wine. He had a wholesaler's license, and we bought virtually all of our European wine from him.

Geraci: Now, what's really important about this story that you're telling—maybe we can expand on this—is this is pre- what many people have called the food revolution. It was already going on. This is pre-Kermit Lynch, this is pre—

03-00:31:39

David: Who's Kermit Lynch?

Geraci: [laughs] Yeah. By the late fifties, early sixties, there's already a base started?

03-00:31:48

David: Oh, yeah. Oh, for sure. Yeah. The Potluck—Ed Brown really, in my opinion, deserves credit for having created the first honest-to-goodness neighborhood French bistro kind of place; and Hank Rubin gets credit for evolving that, if I could say, to the next level of having an actual printed menu with options and choices. We haven't discussed what the food was at the Potluck. It started with a large tureen of soup brought to the table. You helped yourself from this large tureen. There were two different soups each night, usually a cream-based soup and a broth-based soup, but not necessarily so. But you got a choice of one for the table. Then followed by a large wooden salad bowl, with three different kinds of dressings. They were in one of those little stainless steel caddies that had three cups in it. There was vinaigrette, a kidney bean and garbanzo mixture, and a sour cream with blue cheese dressing. Then the main course came, and it had rice pilaf and vegetable and the meat. The vegetables we used were frozen vegetables. Peas were the most common; we did sometimes string beans. The rice was just a very simple, straightforward rice pilaf. Things like beef stroganoff. Medallions of beef, the trimmings from the filet, became stroganoff. It was just a very, very quick sauté with a little bit

of finely minced onion, and then the pan deglazed with red wine and a splash of broth, and then sour cream stirred in at the end. Hungarian stuffed cabbage was one of the all-time popular dishes. It was a large cabbage leaf stuffed with a mixture of ground beef and rice, and then it was laid on a bed of sauerkraut, sprinkled with brown sugar and tomato sauce and baked. So you got a little bit of a sweet/sour kind of thing going with that. There was always some kind of fish. The omelets were a real kick. These dated back to Ed Brown, as well. There was a crab omelet, a mushroom omelet and a cheese omelet, I think. Wasn't it cheese? I'm not sure, geez. Then the omelet royale was all of this stuff together. You got the mushrooms, the crab and the cheese all together. I had a chef who just always cracked me up—Robert Boyle—over how we could convert three eggs, three scrambled eggs into an entrée for a dinner. But it was a very, very successful restaurant. Gee, we just did an enormous business. The California wine also really got its push from George Linton, who was not only an avid importer, but he was also one of the founders of the Berkeley Wine and Food Society. It's the only food organization that I've ever joined. We had monthly meetings, at which we did extensive tastings; and then he separately put together a dinner once a week at the old Basque Hotel in San Francisco. There would be anywhere from a low of ten or twelve people, up to as many as twenty-five people. Well, first, it was no host. The rules were that you had to call by the day before, to let his assistant know how many seats to plan. Secondly, you had to bring a bottle of wine. I'll tell you, it was remarkable, Vic, because we exposed ourselves to so much variety in the way of wine. The food was like the classic Basque dinners—simple food, a lot of it, nothing to write home about, just it was sustenance, it was substantial, it was a pleasant environment. With his bringing in so many people, they obviously were happy to waive the corkage charge. In those days, corkage was not the crazy thing it is these days, anyway. The learning experience of it. Somebody would come in with a bottle wrapped in a paper bag, and this was served blind. Then they'd take the wrapper off and it was something they'd bought for sixty-nine cents or eighty-nine cents or something like that. So great first-growth clarets and ordinary jug wine showed up in bottles like that. Always a learning experience.

Geraci: So that's really opening you up to the world of wine and the different wines and styles and tastes and grapes.

03-00:37:53

David: And learning the appreciation. I may have mentioned in our last session, about the trips that I made to the wine country, tasting at the wineries.

Geraci: Right.

03-00:38:07

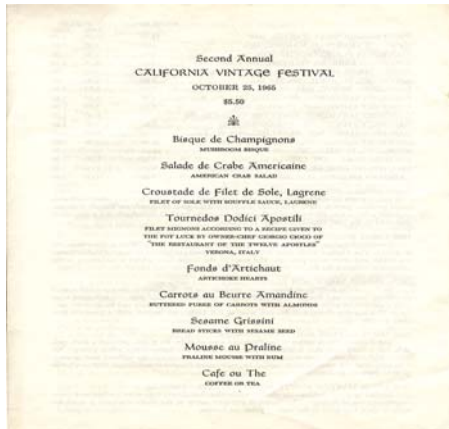
David: It just was something so new and appealing to me, something I had not had as a child, so I wanted to learn more about it. I would buy half bottles of wine for my dinners at home, instead of opening a full bottle of one wine, I'd open two

half bottles. In the early days, it was to find out whether I preferred zinfandel or cabernet or pinot noir or gamay beaujolais or the various things that were on the market. Then pretty soon, I realized how much I preferred cabernet, so I'd be opening a half bottle each, of cabernets from different wineries. Always these little tasting comparisons.

Geraci: Putting up a horizontal and a vertical spin to the tasting.

03-00:38:58

David: Absolutely. Constantly comparing them and saying, wow, I like this one better and I like that one better. Appreciating that nuance of difference was just an important part of the whole learning experience. So we did a special dinner in the springtime and a special dinner in the fall, at which instead of just having two bottles of wine opened—Somewhere, I'll dig out for you some of those old Potluck menus.



(Potluck menu)

Geraci: That'd be great to see.

03-00:39:38

David: Yeah. I'm sure I can find some of those in the attic, where we might have fifteen or twenty bottles of different wine opened, all of them available by the glass on that night, so you could taste.

Geraci: Oh, that's amazing! Restaurants today would never take that risk of having that much open.

03-00:39:59

David: Well, it's slowly starting to happen now, but because of a new technology. They have these devices where the bottle is kept under an inert gas.

Geraci: Right. You pump gas over the top to keep it from oxidizing. But in those days, to have that much open, there's a chance of loss, spoilage.

03-00:40:19

David: Oh, right. Well, we sold a lot of wine. So the Potluck experience ended in 1970.

Geraci: Can we back up for one sec? What was a typical consumer like, coming to the Potluck? Who are the people that are coming there?

03-00:40:43

David: The typical consumer at the Potluck. There were certainly the sophisticated Bay Area urban types, who'd done a lot of travel, had exposure to European wines and European restaurants, and were thinking of this as a place where you could get some of that experience. We had a huge mailing list, and we would send a monthly mailer, announcing what the Monday Night Dinners were going to be and any special events that were happening. People would come in for the Monday Night Dinners and didn't even want to look at the menu. They said, "Just bring it on."

Geraci: Bring it on.

03-00:41:34

David: The Monday Night Dinner was in addition to the regular menu. You could still order a regular meal. But when people came on Mondays, they came for the dinner, pretty consistently. There was a lot of serious interest. It was a European dining experience.

Geraci: But in some way, does that make a community like Berkeley or the Bay Area—let's take San Francisco, the greater Bay Area—a little bit more exceptional, in that is a more cosmopolitan, educated, traveled community?

03-00:42:10

David: There is no doubt that the Potluck and Narsai's and Cruchon's and indeed, Chez Panisse, needed Berkeley as a launching pad. There's no question that we had the audience here, who understood and appreciated. This all rolls into, what is California cuisine? I have frequently given a talk that I call, "The Evolution of California Cuisine." It is very, in my mind, heavily connected to the wine industry. During that period when California wine was doing such exciting things—Realize, Berkeley is almost in the dead center, if you look at the wine producing area—Livermore and Santa Clara at one end, Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino at the other end. In some of the comparative tastings that were going on, in nineteen-sixty—oh, my, let me think here; it would be '64 or '65—I did a tasting at the Potluck of all five of the great montrachets from France, and a Heitz chardonnay from the Napa Valley. Well, it wasn't Napa Valley; it was actually made at Hanzell, which was in Sonoma. But when James Zellerbach—James Zellerbach; let me get it straight. James Zellerbach. Was his name James? When he died, the inventory was pretty much bought by

Heitz and bottled by him. So I did this blind tasting of the six chardonnays, and no, the Heitz did not come out on top; it came in number three. But by far, the most important element of this story is that nobody could say, oh, that was the California wine.

Geraci: Precursor to the great Paris tasting.

03-00:44:45

David: Exactly. The one thing that nobody had given serious attention to was the kind of flavor that a wine got from the oak. Yes, California wineries were making perfectly wonderful wine. But aged in American oak tasted very different from being aged in French oak. Well, when James Zellerbach built Hanzell—which, by the way, he named for his wife, Hannah Zellerbach—he had been the ambassador to Italy, as I recall, and burgundy was his favorite wine in the world, and Clos de Vougeot was his favorite producer. He hired an architect to pattern the winery on Clos de Vougeot; he hired geologists to find a piece of land that most closely resembled the land in Burgundy; and did a thing that nobody had ever dreamt of, he even imported the same oak barrels. Now, why do they use Limousin oak? Because the forest at Limoges is the one that provides the oak for the barrels, that's close by, and the Burgundians have always used that.

Geraci: And it's an established taste that consumers expect?

03-00:46:08

David: No, no, but it's a tradition. Why that particular oak? That was where it came from. The barrels in Bordeaux, that come from Navarre, again, it's the local thing. In fact, it was André Tchelistcheff and—Oh, my. Winemaker down in the Santa Clara area—I'll come up with his name in a minute—who did a study on oak, specifically showing the difference that these barrels made. For instance, they aged Sauvignon blanc in a Limousin barrel, which is what the Burgundians would use, and they aged chardonnay in a Navarre barrel, which is what the Bordelaise would use, and you tasted these wines and it was really confusing because you couldn't figure out, what the hell is it. Because your mind associated chardonnay fruit with that particular kind of oak, which differentiated it.

Geraci: And then on top of that, overlay the New World style, just beginning of stainless.

03-00:47:37

David: Right. But remember, the stainless was probably used more to replace the big concrete tanks.

Geraci: But they even began in production. Sometimes wines were going directly from stainless to bottle.

03-00:47:52

David:

Oh, no, of course. Of course. Yeah, there were plenty. But I'm saying the precursor to the stainless was these concrete tanks. The cheap wine that was not getting barrel aged was produced either in these 100,000-gallon redwood tanks, which were so old and so large that they gave it virtually no wood flavor; or the concrete tanks, many of which had been sealed on the inside with different kinds of plastic materials and paints and so forth over the years, just trying to create a vessel large enough that they could afford. As stainless steel came on, it replaced those. But the flavor that the different oak gave to it is what the real kicker was. So here we had a California chardonnay made in the style of a French white burgundy, and aged in the same oak as a French white burgundy, and nobody could say, ah-ha, that one's the California wine. So when you made reference to the great tasting that was done in Paris—the Judgment of Paris, as it was called, in 1976—no longer were the judges Americans, those provincials that the French dismissed us as so handily. Well, sure, they say their wine is as good as ours, but what do they know? Well, here the French themselves were the judges, and lo and behold, California wine was finally, finally, finally accepted on the world platform. Most importantly by the French themselves.

Geraci:

But the fact that you were creating a California wine list in a restaurant.

03-00:49:47

David:

The California Wine Institute gave us this really major move.

Geraci:

I think that's a crucial turning point in the recognition, even at home. Because fine diners going out at that time looked for French wines on their list first, and maybe Italian.

03-00:50:05

David:

Absolutely.

Geraci:

There would be an occasional bottle, maybe, from California; but to have a list of California wines available?

03-00:50:13

David:

Well, if you could go back in the history and look at the wine lists from San Francisco's great restaurants in those days, there were three French restaurants—at one point, all three owned by the same guy, which has always fascinated me—La Bourgogne, L'Etoile and Le Trianon, owned by Jean Lapuyade, who was partners in them with the chefs. Then Ernie's and Doro's, the Italian restaurant. These five were really the special, special places. European wine is what it was all about. California was just starting to make an entrance into that scene. So yeah, we did a lot with California wines. It was exciting. It was exciting to be around it and to watch it. Gosh, I mentioned that '58 Inglenook a minute ago. Reminds me of a dinner at Narsai's—I'm jumping forward here a little bit. But talking about the wine comparisons, '58, I've always said, is one of the four great vintages of the twentieth century. I

had all four of the great California cabernets, which were Beaulieu, Inglenook, Charles Krug, and Louis Martini. I served them blind. I hosted a dinner for James Beard, in the front dining room of the restaurant. There were three tables of eight. Louis Martini, who was a very dear friend, was a guest. I served these four cabernets blind. Everybody presumed that the Beaulieu was going to be the best wine there, followed by the Inglenook, as a close runner up; and then there would be Charles Krug and Louis Martini bringing up the tail.

Geraci: Battling for third and fourth.

03-00:52:11

David: I could see across the room, as soon as he picked up the glasses, Louis was grinning from ear to ear. He knew what was going on and he spotted it immediately. The Louis Martini was, hands down, so premiere in this group. It was so far above the others there wasn't even a question. It was just amazing. The lesson that he taught me was how critical balance is in making a wine. Beaulieu was rich and lush and just a fantastic wine to drink when you got it, because it just reeked of promise and it was big and full-bodied. Then Inglenook even did a special bottling called cask bottling. It was like the number of the cask. A-8, cask F-12. Their cask bottlings had so much press juice in it. They wanted more tannin, because these heavy tannin things were associated with longevity. Gosh, you'd open one of those Inglenook cask bottles when they were twenty years old and it was like drinking strong tea. The fruit was gone. There was nothing left to resemble wine; it was just that tannin. Louis said, "If a wine is not in balance when it's made, it'll never be in balance. So if you've got a great big wine that has everything going for it, that's fine; but if it's a wine that just has a lot of tannin or just has a lot of fruit, that's not going to work. Well, here we were twenty-five years later. The wine that had the balance in the first place was the wine that was on top. Another example of this that's commonly referred to when talking about French wines in '52 and '53 Bordeaux. It was always said that '52 was the wine to put away for long-term aging. That was the wine that was going to last forever. But '53 was this elegant wine that was great to enjoy now. I can't find anybody who would taste those wines when they were twenty or thirty or forty or fifty years old, that wouldn't agree that the '53 was always the best wine. The '52 never, ever, ever, ever did catch up, because it was so hard and it had so much tannin.

Geraci: But California, for a while, lost this concept of the meritage or the blend or the balance. Even today, there's the complaints. Alcohol levels in wine are up at 17, 18 percent sometimes.

03-00:55:00

David: Well, now, don't get me started, as they say. [Geraci laughs] We're going to get to talking about the Parkerization of great wine. That man, [Robert M.] Parker, has done more damage to the making of great wine than can ever be

spoken. But like you said, we'll come to that at another time. I'm wandering too far off the track, though.

Geraci: No, no, we're not, because what we're really defining is what the Potluck was. I see the Potluck experience for you as almost your formal education.

03-00:55:44

David: It was. That's exactly what it was.

Geraci: You had all these skills that you were learning before; but this is your formal education that's going to push the rest of your career. And I think that's the reason it's important to understand what the meals were, what the consumers were, the surroundings, and the context of the Potluck.

03-00:56:01

David: Yeah, no question. Out of that Berkeley Wine and Food Society I was talking about, which had a membership limited to, I believe it was thirty-two. Thirty-two or thirty-six, something like that. Out of that, grew a couple of subgroups. One was called the First Growth Club; it was eight members. Another one of eight members was called the Burgundy Club. There were several members that were in both of them. I succeeded to a membership in the First Growth Club. One of the founders had died. First of all, the number of eight made sense because you could get eight really nice pours out of a bottle of wine. In the case of the First Growth Club, the goal was to buy a case of each of the eight great Bordeaux, each time there was a great vintage. Well, there are only four classified first growths, but then you can't leave out things like Pétrus. So there were really eight that we identified as the great ones. Any time there was a great vintage, a case of each of the eight was bought. For subsequent years, dinners that we would hold periodically, we would say, well, let's have a dinner of the—pick a date—the seventies or the sixties, and then all eight would be served to these eight guys. We would take turns hosting the dinners.

Geraci: So it was really a nice tasting.

03-00:57:41

David: Oh, boy, what a tasting! You had all eight of the first growths. That's eight bottles for eight guys, so there was a whole bottle each, just of the Bordeaux; and you know there's going to be a little bit of champagne beforehand and a little bit of white wine with the fish and a little bit of port afterwards. [they laugh]

Geraci: It was a happy experience.

03-00:57:59

David: It was the salad of our youth, when we had the ability to consume a volume of wine.

Geraci: That's right, and process that.

03-00:58:06

David: Absolutely.

Geraci: I think this is actually a pretty good place for us to stop for a moment, because exactly, we're at fifty-nine minutes.

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04-00:00:06

Geraci: Vic Geraci, food and wine historian, University of California Berkeley. Seated with me is Narsai David. Today's date is July 12, 2011. This is tape number four of interview number two. When we left off, we were still just finishing up Potluck. We talked about the different types of consumers you had; we were talking about wine.

04-00:00:37

David: Well, talking about wine, I had mentioned that business of evaluating different kinds of oak.

Geraci: Right.

04-00:00:46

David: The name that sort of slipped my mind was Dick [Richard] Graff. I said that André Tchelistcheff and Dick Graff had done a study on the oak used in wine barrels. It had some fascinating results. Everybody presumed that it was a different variety of oak that was being used in these forests. It turned out to be exactly the same variety of oak, but the growing conditions that were so different. You had one of these forests that's in a very low-lying area, with high moisture content, and another that's in a more hilly area, with a very dry [atmosphere]. One in an area where the trees reach really, really tall and high, stretching for the sun, another where they're very low and short and squat and broad of girth—all because of the different growing conditions. Yet, all the same variety of oak. Well, California Cabernet sauvignon grown in Lodi certainly tastes different from Cabernet sauvignon grown in Napa or Livermore or Mendocino. Why shouldn't the oak taste different, grown in different areas? Keep in mind that the amount of money that's being spent, particularly today, on getting that specific oak flavor—The people that made this wine originally weren't using it for that purpose at all; it was the proper storage vessel. When the chateau in Bordeaux made a vintage, they put it into those barrels and they wouldn't sell it until it was two years old. It had to wait long enough for it to develop its character. Then the entire barrel was sold and it was gone. It wasn't a matter of their bottling it and reusing the barrel; they no longer had the barrel.

Geraci: Right.

04-00:02:47

David: It was used once and it was sold and it was gone. It's only in modern times that the great estates have learned that there's a lot of money to be made by

bottling it yourself. But it used to be sold in the barrel, to the négociant. So a bottle of Châteaux Lafite that was bottled in two or three different locations, all of the same vintage—Well, nowadays, if you look at the price of proper French oak barrels, last year I think we paid \$1100 a barrel. Something like two-thirds of our wine goes into new oak barrels each vintage. There's an enormous amount of money being spent, just to get that flavor component. Is it better? Is it worse? I don't know that it's any better or any worse; but it is a familiar flavor. It's a component that we have come to expect from that kind of wine. There're wineries that brag about the wine being 100 percent new oak each time.

Geraci: Or even now, bragging about Hungarian oak, bragging about American oak, a combination of all the different oaks.

04-00:04:03

David: Well, in America—I'm happy you mention that—we're finally growing oak specifically for the purpose of wine barrels. Historically, when we used American oak barrels, they were barrels made out of Southern oak that was historically made for whiskey barrels. It has a very much more open grain and gives much more of that vanilla quality—and there is a lot of vanilla in oak—a very different kind of flavor and a different kind of mouth feel, because of the texture of the wood and how the wine evolves and oxidizes and develops in it. But this is all a learning experience. Now, you could compare a winemaker's choices to those of a chef. He's able to say, I want a little bit of this component and a little bit of that component. This throws back to a tasting I went to at Gloria Ferrer, of Pinot noirs, different clones of pinot noir, grown on different rootstocks. They did this project with UC Davis, attempting to discover which clones and which rootstocks worked best in which areas. So in partnership with Davis, Gloria Ferrer agreed to grow the grapes, if Davis would make the wine. If I remember correctly, they had fifty vines each, of a number of different ones; and then these fifty vines were divided up into five different vineyard areas, so that there were ten vines each in five different areas of the vineyard. Davis took this wine, and you could imagine just the bookkeeping project here, of maintaining exactly which one. Well, at this tasting, here we were; they were using this stuff to make sparkling wine. There were some that were so colorless you'd think it was water in the glass; and some that had such a deep pink color, because even picking them very, very young and immature to get the high acidity that you want for a sparkling wine, they already were getting color extraction from it. The wine master's job was likened to that of a chef saying, well, gee, I think let's try a little blend; a soupçon of this and a little of that. Now, that's going to be too much color, so I'll use a little more of this one. Well, that's exactly what's being done with oak. So a little bit of Hungarian oak gives it a different character, and American oak—What percentage is new oak? What percentage is old oak? What percentage is French? Which percentage is American, et cetera. So it becomes a matter of choice. It becomes a new wave. They never dreamt of this in the old days.

Geraci: That's what puts some of the artistry to it, also.

04-00:07:28

David: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Artistry is the right word. Here's the word palette used for two different palettes, the palette in the mouth and the palette of choices that the oil painter uses or the wine grower uses or the winemaker uses. Mix them and match them and create those components. It happens to be that this has occurred in Europe over centuries of trial and error. It's not by accident that they grow Sémillon and Sauvignon blanc and no other white grapes in Bordeaux. It's not by accident that they grow Cabernet sauvignon, Cabernet franc, Merlot, Malbec, Petit verdot for the red wines, because they have learned that these work together and they work well together. Now within Bordeaux, you could use any one or more of those grapes and have a proper red Bordeaux wine. Some of the best wines are made from just one grape. Some of the best wines are made from a blend of all five. What does that individual producer want to do?

Geraci: Interesting, on top of that, have the role of the négociant, in the great French tradition, who's also blending; can be blending from different vineyards, different varietals, different mixes, to produce even a different style.

04-00:09:05

David: That throws in a real quick flashback memory of Ronald Avery, a great Burgundian—Well, actually, a great wine négociant. But his Burgundies, it was always spoken or rumored or thought, that every barrel of Burgundy that came into the cellar had either a bottle of cognac or a bottle of port dumped into it. [Geraci laughs] So take your pick. Did this particular vintage benefit from a little more sweetness? Or did it benefit from a little more alcohol? Whether it's true or not, I don't know; but I do know personally, from some experimenting that I do in the kitchen as I blend things—You open a bottle of one of these new, outrageous 16 and 17 percent alcohol wines and think, what could possibly have been in the mind of the person who made this? And then you pour a splash of it into a glassful of a very light wine, and wow, it builds it up into something entirely different. So why wouldn't that be happening? There's plenty of argument that says when that night train stopped running down to the South of France, the Burgundians suddenly started making much lighter wines. [Geraci laughs] Nobody will ever know how many tons of those very, very hot-climate Mediterranean grapes, that probably weren't even Pinot noir, got blended into Burgundy. They could legally add sugar. Sounds to me like if I wanted to make a wine, I'd be a lot happier putting in some juice from red grapes than just sugar.

Geraci: Well, so far, we've talked about the artistry of—We're looking at the grape, we're looking at the barrel. We start looking at the field itself, hang times, we're looking at the variations; you said the hot climates producing hotter wines, because you build sugar, so they're of higher content or brix The

winemaker, he's conducting this orchestra of all these different pieces that are out there.

04-00:11:39

David:

I've often said that the big, big, big difference between California chefs, when we talk about what is California cuisine, the difference, for me, between a California chef and a French chef is that we were not burdened by centuries of tradition about how food should be, must be, ought to be cooked. To this day, you don't find very many French chefs who will use fresh ginger, like young ginger, in their everyday cooking, because it was ingrained in their training that ginger is—just an example here—it's a dry, powdered spice that is used in cakes and specialty things. Here, not having been locked into that kind of tradition, but being exposed to the Pacific and learning from the Japanese and the Chinese and the Pacific Islanders generally, wow, ginger, when you get the young ginger, it's almost like a vegetable. You make thin slices of it and stir fry it with some other vegetables. It's not just a spice, it's a component.

Geraci:

It adds so many different complexities.

04-00:13:05

David:

So my feeling has always been [that] the advantage we had was the openness to new ideas. It's exactly what you're saying about the winemakers. Whereas there is certainly good, long French tradition for why those five red grapes are grown in Bordeaux—Well, let's flip to the Italian border and talk about what happened in Tuscany. For so long, they couldn't grow anything other than Sangiovese. It took people like Piero Antinori to come along and say, I don't care whether the law requires it or not; I'm going to plant some Cabernet sauvignon. Now, he was in direct violation of the law when he did that. But by golly, once that bold move of his led to blending some Cabernet and some Sangiovese together, suddenly there was this new invention on the world market called a super-Tuscan wine; and everybody scrambled to get into it, and they're making better wines and more exciting wines, because of that. Well, California, we were starting from scratch. We didn't have any of these regulations at all, and it didn't take very long for somebody to start blending these different things together. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

Geraci:

Yeah. There's the vital energy. Even going back to some of the customs of field blending, which that's starting to have even a little resurgence now, there seems to be more playfulness with American winemakers.

04-00:14:38

David:

Well, there's a lot more playfulness; but I would think that field blending is not—I don't think that's ever going to work like it used to. We do a little bit of field blending, with a small amount of cabernet we make. We had only about three-quarters of an acre of Cabernet franc, and it got to be, frankly, problematic to harvest and crush and ferment it separately, so we ended up just crushing it with the cabernet sauvignon. Now, we couldn't harvest all the grapes in one day; it might take three or four days to harvest the vineyard.

Depending on the different maturity, the Franc might be the first or the last to be picked. So it gave us a little bit of latitude. But since it was only a couple percent of the total, it was just easier to blend it. A lot of that field blending, let's please not forget, came by accident, not by design. When they budded the vineyard, somebody screwed up and mixed different buds, so they had different varieties. In some instances, they weren't even aware that they were different varieties. It wasn't until genetic testing came along that made it so clear to say, hey, wait a minute; this is, and this is not. Look at the Malbec that's now coming out of Argentina and Chile, and the Carmenère. It had been thought that Carmenère was a lost grape that's originally a Bordeaux grape, that had disappeared. Well, somebody had labeled it Merlot when it got down there, and all these years it's been known as Merlot. All of a sudden, oops, wait a minute, this is something entirely different.

Geraci: Which leads to new excitement. Okay, anything else with the Potluck?

04-00:16:46

David:

So the Potluck. I described those special Monday Night Dinners; I guess I didn't fully describe the regular meal. It started with the bowl of soup, the tureen of soup, as I said, and then the family-sized bowl of salad, with the three dressings. The meat came with some rice and vegetable. The dessert was just a piece of cheese and a piece of fruit. Much of the year, it was just an apple and a little—not a wedge, a bar, if you will, of—muenster cheese was the most common thing we used for year after year after year. Oh, and then we had, quote, “French pastries,” unquote, as an à la carte dessert option. Those came from Neldam's Bakery, in Oakland. We used to buy dehydrated onion in fifty-pound drums. Yes. You're looking for the truth; here's the truth. We bought chicken soup base in hundred-pound drums. At the price level and at the cost of what we were serving, we did not make chicken broth from scratch. The Monday Night Dinners were a different story. Monday Night Dinners, everything was made to try to replicate that particular cuisine. The vegetables, we would never serve those frozen peas on the Monday Night Dinner.

Geraci: Now, for the Monday Night Dinners, where are you sourcing your ingredients, at that point? Or are you having problems getting ahold of some of these ingredients?

04-00:18:55

David:

Oh, some. I would go out to the ocean and harvest mussels myself, when we wanted mussels on one of our dinners, because there were no mussels in the market. Most things, we could get. There were restrictions on things, things we simply couldn't find. We had to design the menus around what was available. But cost was usually the big issue. If you wanted something special, you really had to pay for it. Darn it, I wish I could remember the price on the menu. Let me say that in 1972, when I opened Narsai's, our complete five-course dinner—and this was a true five-course meal; we'll go into this in

detail later—the price range of the menu was from something like \$4.75 to \$7.50, for the complete five courses. In 1972, while at the Potluck, it had been less than that. I can't get out of my mind, the picture of the chef sautéing the frozen peas. He would throw in a handful of chopped onions and frequently, some diced red pimento that came in cans, throw that into a large sauté pan with a little bit of cooking oil, and then he'd take a knife and slit one of these two-and-a-half-pound boxes of frozen peas, slit it open and dump it in, and then the whole pan would get sort of tossed like this, for about three turns. It was absolutely delicious. And very, very budget friendly.

Geraci: This is a business. It's hard to turn a profit in a restaurant. You have to find ways to become efficient.

04-00:21:19

David: Well, the Potluck, I have no regrets. I learned a lot at the Potluck. I think the Potluck contributed an awful lot to the scene, and I'm not a bit embarrassed to acknowledge that's what we did. That's the reality. That's what we did.

Geraci: But it wasn't that unusual in that era, also.

04-00:21:37

David: Well, that's true. Yeah.

Geraci: If you compared restaurants nationwide, this is being done everywhere. This was a standard.

04-00:21:47

David: Yeah, that's true. Well, there were two important things that I think the Potluck deserves credit for. One was making really, really good, really tasty food available at a very fair, low price, that was showing some European—generally, that translates into French—feel to it. Secondly, the development of a California wine list. And thirdly, the Monday dinners, in which a tremendous effort was put into replicating these things from different countries and emulating exactly what that would've been. That was always the fresh vegetable, the fresh meat.

Geraci: Now, in the East Bay, who were your competitors?

04-00:22:54

David: There was a small restaurant that opened on University Avenue—it only lasted a very short time—called the Little Lamb, which had a French feel. On Lake Merritt, there was a place called the Mirabeau, owned by André Mercier. Those two come to mind. Other than that, there were places like Spenger's, the seafood restaurant. There weren't very many serious restaurants dealing with European kind of cuisine.

Geraci: So people were probably going across to San Francisco?

04-00:23:46

David:

To San Francisco, right. Yeah. Italian, French food, German food. Gee, that's an interesting question. I'm going to have to go back and do some thinking. What are the restaurants around the scene in the East Bay in those days? There were not too many. Trader Vic's, of course, by dint of being a fancy place. By the way, he was starting to do things with California wine, and got some recognition for that, as well.

Geraci:

That's Vic Bergeron?

04-00:24:22

David:

Vic Bergeron, yeah. So the Potluck. I guess that's that.

Geraci:

Okay. Now, we've got you to the early seventies. One thing we've left out about this mid- to late sixties era is—we've talked about the Potluck—your personal life.

04-00:24:54

David:

Going back to the Potluck. Wasting food is something that just drives me nuts. There is no waste allowed in my kitchen. Not at home, not at the office, not at anything that I have anything to do with. And looking for value is important to me. Skirt steak. Skirt steak is actually the muscle that—It's essentially a diaphragm muscle, and it's sold as part of the plate, when cattle are slaughtered. The part that has the belly, the brisket and the plate are sold off separate from the prime cuts, which would be the shoulder and the loin and the legs. The places that make corned beef and pastrami use the brisket and the plate. For them, then, the skirt steak is a byproduct, so they pack the skirt steak—These are these huge companies in the Midwest, that make the corned beef and pastrami. So it appears on the market in a seventy-five-pound case—fresh, not frozen. The whole skirt steak is about that long. It's damn near two feet long. The center is a nice, thick piece and there's a very tough membrane that covers most of the surface. So you first peel that off. I took the thick part in the center, a twelve-ounce portion, cut a slit in it and stuffed in a thin slice of gruyere and prosciutto, and skewered it with a little bamboo skewer, and we fried that. I was going to say we grilled it, but as you know, the proper definition of grill means on charcoal. I'm talking about an old-fashioned griddle; that's all we had the Potluck. We fried it on the griddle, as a lunch steak. It was phenomenal success. Then the rest of the meat, the irregular portion of that thick stuff, we cut into chunks and made into beef bourguignon; and where it got really thin, we cut across diagonally and used that in our beef stroganoff. Within a year, the price of skirt steak had doubled because the sales reps, seeing what we were doing with it, went to other restaurants saying, hey, there's some one else uses it for.

Geraci:

I've got a lot of this I need to get rid of.

04-00:28:01

David:

It built up a demand for it and the price started climbing, because they finally found a use for it. Well, there's just no justification of the kind of waste that occurs in today's kitchens. I'll tell you, we went to the opening of—I guess I won't mention the name of the restaurant. Suffice it to say that it was destined to become one of San Francisco's great restaurants. But for their grand opening, they borrowed a bunch of silver platters from us that we used for catering. I got there early and went in for a tour of the kitchen. There was a cook preparing swordfish for that evening's dinner, and he had a swordfish bullet that he was trimming to make into a perfectly round cylinder, and as he was cutting it, he was scraping the trimmings off the edge of the workbench. Now, I presume that there was a tray jack and a hotel pan there catching this. For some reason, the chef thought it was important to have a perfectly round medallion of swordfish for the dinner. When I got around to the other side of the kitchen, there was a garbage can there. Now, here's a swordfish loin, which is about as expensive a piece of fish as you can buy—it's just the meat; it's not bones and head and tail and skin and so forth—and the guy is throwing it in the garbage. Wow. It was rare that I was gone for more than a few days at a time, but we were gone for a couple of weeks once. When I came back, in the garbage can in the kitchen, one of the guys on the staff—who was a set designer, by the way, for the Berkeley Rep, a really great artist—had taken a circle of paper and painted on it, "Welcome home, boss," down in the garbage can. Because everybody knew that Narsai looked constantly in the garbage cans, to make sure stuff wasn't being thrown away. I remember one time in the first year we were open, I would let the chef and the sous chef do an appetizer or a soup, without my advance permission, once. If I liked it, then it would be added to the list. No main course or dessert could get on the menu without being preapproved. There was a cold seafood cocktail he had made as an appetizer course, a cold appetizer, with these large flakes of a beautiful white-fleshed fish. I looked at it, I tasted it; it was absolutely delicious. I'm thinking, well, where in the hell did this come from? We don't have any fish of this ilk on the menu. So I asked him and he said, "Well, I needed some fish stock for the Monday night special, and they sent this halibut trim, and it was the belly portion. It had these thick layers of meat on it that was just so beautiful," he said, "I couldn't imagine just throwing it out." So he said, "I cooked it just long enough for the flesh to firm up. Then I took it out, pulled it off the bone, put the skin and bones back in the pot to continue making my stock, and I made the appetizer out of this." Now, see, that's sensible use of resource in the kitchen. Why would you throw away something like that? I'm off on a tangent here, I'm sure.

Geraci:

No, because these years in the Potluck and what you're doing and where we are right now, these are your formative years. When you're talking about these other things, these are things you must've learned there. Waste in a restaurant is costly.

04-00:32:48

David: Well, I learned there, but it all started from my mother.

Geraci: That's out of necessity, we just don't have the money.

04-00:32:55

David: It's out of, waste not, want not.

Geraci: Want not. Yeah, absolutely.

04-00:32:59

David: I'm telling you, when she would start her stew, she would trim off the fat, mince it into really fine pieces and render that out in the pot, then brown the meat in that same fat, as opposed to throwing that fat away and browning it in the fat of choice—the olive oil or butter or whatever else somebody else might use. There's just got to be some sensible way to deal with not throwing food away. I got involved with Mary Risley, who does the Food Runners in San Francisco. A group of us got together once—Michael Bauer, who's now the food editor on the *Chronicle*; Faith Wheeler, a woman who's a publicist, that works with restaurants in San Francisco; and myself—talking about the amount of food that's wasted in restaurants and how we could salvage some of that. So we created something that we call the planned overage campaign. I would go to restaurants and say, “We really need food to help these people, and what I'm asking for is something that I suspect you're currently not using.” I said, “If you have chicken on the menu, the odds are pretty high that the wings are getting thrown into your stockpot. If you have filet, inevitably, the chain gets thrown into the stockpot. If you could take that chain, cut it into chunks an inch and a half long, and once a week, we'd like to get a single hotel pan of food. Because a hotel pan of a meat dish is enough to feed thirty people. If you could put those chunks of either the chicken wings or the filet trim or whatever other kind of trim you have, ladle a quart of leftover soup over it, or stock or sauce or, again, something odd that you're not going to use again the next day; put that pan in the oven for an hour and a half and you've got a perfectly delicious, nutritious meal that'll feed thirty people.” We got a long string of restaurants. I went to one house and was served a meal from what had been brought to them. The chef sending that turned out to be Roland Passot, from La Folie. He used a four-inch-deep hotel pan, so they got sixty portions of food. But I'll tell you, Vic, you could watch the evolution of his week's menu in this four-inch hotel pan. Here were the tip ends of string beans, because he obviously wanted his beans to all be the same length. Then there were some trimmings from some kind of beef, and then there was some other vegetable thing. You could just see that as the week went along, once the idea was established that, hey, this is useful, usable food, it all got put in there. So the house that got that, rather than just putting it all in a pot and stewing it together into a big stew, over a matter of several days, the house cook pulled out portions of it to make a meal. It just is—I don't know, it's basic to the way I function. I tell people when I see recipes that call for making chicken stock by putting a whole chicken—The ones that really drive

me nuts, a recipe will call for one four-to-five-pound chicken, plus three pounds of chicken backs and two onions and three carrots, and it goes through the list. Then it'll say, after simmering this for three or four hours, to save the meat for some other purpose. Now, what are you going to do with a piece of chicken that's been boiling for three or four hours. It's turned into sawdust; there's nothing left there. When I want to buy stock, I'll buy ten pounds of chicken bones and bring them home; and I'll take a bunch of carrots, wash them, peel the entire bunch, top them and clip the bottom, put the peeled carrots into a clean container back in the refrigerator. That peeling is what's going to go into the stockpot. Why put in a whole carrot? The rest of the carrot, I can use in the stew or soup or whatever it is I'm going to make. I'll add that later, so I can eat it. The celery, the tops of celery, the leaves, the bottom of the core that people just cut off and throw away—perfectly fine in the stockpot. I could show you in the freezer right now, a little plastic bag that last night, I used a piece of fennel for something. Well, the outside of the fennel was kind of rough, and those tough stalks are in there. The trimmings from a couple of bell peppers, the top and bottom of onion. Leeks, when that green tip is getting kind of dried out and not too tasty, that goes into this little bag that's in the freezer. Then when I'm ready to make a stock, it all gets thrown in.

Geraci: It's your stock bag.

04-00:38:56

David: It's my stock bag. Well, the same thing happens in a restaurant. Those trimmings, as you're working with them, should be put into the stockpot, rather than into the garbage can.

Geraci: You were talking earlier about defining sustainability. That has to be part of the definition of sustainability.

04-00:39:20

David: Waste not. Now, you're the first person that's made that comment. I really like that. The reason the word sustainable bothers me is somebody will—We were recently at a restaurant. What was it? There was some salmon, and I asked where it was from. At first, I didn't understand, because the waiter, it rolled off her tongue in such a way that I didn't quite understand what she said. When I asked again, it was sustainably farmed salmon. Sustainably farmed salmon. Now, what does that mean? There is no way you could farm something without it being sustainable. What's your definition of Sustainable? Whether it's farming something growing in the ground or something growing in a puddle or in a pond or in a reservoir, sustainable can mean it's someplace where we can keep sustainably producing. I think the intent of the people that originally used that word, in the way that they were trying to convey, has been totally corrupted. It doesn't mean anything anymore.

Geraci: Well, as we get down the line, we'll talk about a lot of those words. Words such as organic, sustainable, environmentally friendly. They're becoming overused and they've lost a lot of original intentions. But they have changed much of the way we do eat, or at least think about food in this country. We'll get into that. Now, let's backtrack just a little bit, into the sixties into the early seventies here. Your personal life. What's going on with Narsai during this time? We've talked all about the Potluck.

04-00:41:22

David: Well, it all happened at the Potluck. [they laugh]

Geraci: That *was* your personal life.

04-00:41:28

David: Yeah, it sure was. Veni came in to dinner one night with two other women. Girls, in those days; we're talking back in the day, when we were still young. One was her roommate and the other was a former classmate from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where they had all been students together. Veni was working as a nurse and her roommate was a schoolteacher or school principal or something. It's that—the French have a word for it that I'll think of in a minute.

Geraci: Kinda of like a kismet?

04-00:42:25

David: Well, kismet, no; the specific when your eyes connect with somebody. Coup de foudre. My eyes connected with Veni and I was hoping to be able to connect here. So I spent a lot of time at the table, at the three of them, to the point that my staff started sort of giggling a little bit about how the boss was spending so much time at that table. I offered them an after-dinner drink, which they accepted, and then they invited me to join them. Wow. I was just really tickled, at this point. It turned out that they were planning a wine and cheese tasting party. I quickly offered to lend them some glasses and help them with the wine and so forth and they were receptive to that. In fact, gladly accepted my offer and invited me to the party and so forth. Then the bartender, who—now this story has a real throwback—he's the guy that gave me my first job at Hy's Drive-in; he was the front-end manager that hired me as the soda jerk. Well, here he was working for me as a bartender, and we were good friends by this time. He came by the table and said, "Mr. D, your wife called and said to be sure to bring home a quart of milk." [Geraci laughs] I laughed and the girls laughed. It never, ever occurred to me that it could've been anything other than a cute little funny comment. So comes the day of the party. I've loaned them all these glasses and helped them get some wine and so forth. The party is breaking up and there're finally four people left: her roommate and her roommate's boyfriend, and Veni and myself. I thought, well things are nice. Veni has the proverbial headache and is going to have to go to bed. She's really sorry and really appreciates the help and so on. I said, "Oh, okay. Well, maybe we could have dinner sometime." She said, "No, I

think not.” Man, oh, man! I walked out of there. I was smitten, but in a very different kind of a way. [they laugh]

Geraci: You were crushed.

04-00:45:10

David: I was smashed or smooshed. Wow! This woman really, really knows what she wants out of life, I guess, and I’m not anywhere in the league. So a couple months went by. It was a miserable, cold night. It was the bartender’s night off, so I was tending bar that night and closing up, and it was late; it was after midnight. Veni came walking in the door, alone, and sat down at the bar. Wow, was I ever surprised to see her. Oh, and one other thing I should say is when I offered them an after-dinner drink, what did she request but Cordon Bleu cognac. Not Cordon Bleu. What’s the matter with my brain? What the hell is the name of that cognac?

Geraci: But she ordered a good cognac.

04-00:46:21

David: The best one I had in the house. That was pretty impressive. So when she walked in, much to my surprise, I immediately reached for the bottle and poured her a glass of it. She said, “You don’t seem like yourself tonight. Are you feeling well?” I said, “No, I’m just tired. I had to get up at five o’clock this morning to take my roommate to the airport.” “Your *roommate*?” Well, her saying, your roommate, question mark, the whole story flashed before my eyes.

Geraci: It became apparent.

04-00:46:57

David: It was instantly obvious. When Ray had come to the table and said, “Your wife called and said to bring home a quart of milk,” that, A, established that I was married; and B, that I must probably have a baby that she needs the milk for. Well, suddenly I’m not married; I have a roommate. Well, six months later, we were married. Why can’t I think of the name of that damn cognac? [inaudible voice] Martell Cordon Bleu. *Whew!* Martell Cordon Bleu.

Geraci: So this is 1964, then?

04-00:47:43

David: Right. So it was ’64, we got married. I continued at the Potluck until 1970. So I was there from 1959 to 1970. I had a small piece of the business. Hank had made me a partner somewhere along the way, but a very small, junior partner. To this day, I’m still not entirely clear why the partnership ended. I know that he and Lil [Lillian] came back from an extended European vacation and he said that he was going to buy me out, that he felt that—I don’t have the exact words, but that I had developed some—it was like a lack of respect for him or something to that regard, and that I no longer loved him. We were like a

family; he was like my surrogate father. Lil, not like a mother, but like a favorite aunt or an older sister. So it was a pretty powerful blow.

Geraci: There was some bug in his bonnet and he never talked to you about it.

04-00:49:21

David: No, we just—That ended it. As I say, we had been so close. I've often thought that had it not been for Hank and Lil getting married, I may not have ended up in the restaurant business. I certainly would not have taken that job as manager, but that the relationship had developed the way it had. So it was a pretty powerful jolt. I was determined I would open my own restaurant. I knew that I could not have a partner, after what had just happened to me.

Geraci: Yeah, I was going to say. Well, this is the second time a partnership caused a problem for you—At least look at the plastic, the print shop, and now with this.

04-00:50:21

David: And I certainly didn't want a landlord. And I certainly had to make a living and I didn't have much money in the bank. I had a number of friends, and even strangers, who came to me, offering to invest in a restaurant. I accepted some loans. My doctor loaned me \$8,000; my attorney loaned me \$10,000; another friend loaned me \$2,000; somebody gave me \$2,000 to be taken out in trade in the restaurant. I had done a couple of catered parties at the Potluck, and saw that I could immediately do the catering to raise some money. I found this building out on Colusa Avenue, in Kensington. Did you know Narsai's Restaurant? You never went to Narsai's.

Geraci: No, I didn't.

04-00:51:43

David: Well, do you know Colusa Avenue?

Geraci: Yes, I know Colusa.

04-00:51:44

David: Colusa Circle? Driving out Colusa—it's maybe ten blocks north of Solano—there's this suddenly just residential area, lined with gum trees, and suddenly there's this little traffic circle, with a two-block stretch of businesses. As corny as it sounds, it felt to me almost like you drove out of town. You sort of left town. You left the business area, went through this ten-block-long row of residences and pretty trees, and all of a sudden there's this little, tiny village. Place had been a grocery store. It was bought by a doctor, to use as a tax shelter. Unfortunately, the grocer had gone broke not long after the guy bought the building, and it had been sitting vacant for six months. The same doctor had also bought some apartments in Berkeley, and it was just at the point that rent strikes and rent control was coming along. He was just so disgusted and fed up with real estate that he wanted to get out, and he sold it

to me at not only a good—Well, I paid a fair price, it was market value, but he gave me very, very good terms. He held back a second mortgage, so that I was able to buy the building. Now, this is 1970, late 1970. In my search for some catering, I heard about the thing they were about to start called the Dickens Christmas Fair. The people that had started the Renaissance Pleasure Faire were putting this thing on, and they were looking for food vendors. So I made samples of a Cornish pasty and cock-a-leekie soup and plum pudding, a little individual plum pudding with a Cumberland rum butter. Took it over and wowed them. They were just tickled to death and delighted with all three. So I had the major food booth for the Dickens Christmas Fair, and thought, gee, I'd kind of like to take a stab at that Renaissance Pleasure Faire, which was going to happen in the spring. I repeated the Cornish pasties and the plum puddings, and then I made some barbecued beef ribs, and also some whole roast turkey legs. I did that for two years, '71 and '72. They do it in the spring; down in Southern California—at that time, it was in Agoura—and then in the fall, in Marin County. I made a lot of money at that.

Geraci: So you were going down south, doing that one, also?

04-00:55:13

David: Right. Yeah.

Geraci: And doing the one up north.

04-00:55:14

David: Right. So for those two years, I did both. We would go through 5,000 pounds of turkey legs and 4,000 pounds of beef ribs on a weekend, on Saturday and Sunday, and God only knows how many Cornish pasties. When we went down to L.A., I found a little bakery that worked—They started at about midnight, in order to have everything up and going by the morning. So I rented the bakery; starting at something like three or four o'clock in the afternoon, was the earliest we could get in. I had a couple of large refrigerated trucks that I rented, and we would be making the pasties there and prebaking the turkey legs, because those things took about an hour and a half. They were a pound-and-a-quarter and pound-and-a-half turkey legs. The plum puddings, I think we made all the plum puddings up here. Up here, I was working out of a catering kitchen that had started out—It was a place called Superior Catering, down on San Pablo Avenue, in Berkeley. They had started out doing a full service catering business, but it evolved into a business where they supplied coffee and premade sandwiches and desserts to offices and various businesses. They, likewise, started like at midnight and were finished by eight o'clock in the morning. This is before the days when they had coffee that's brewed fresh for you. They had these five- and ten-gallon thermoses, stainless steel thermoses, that they would make these fifty-gallon tanks, eighty-gallon tanks of coffee and throw it in these thermoses, and the wrapped sandwiches, and they were out of there. So I was able to rent that for whatever days I needed it. For my regular catering, I would do it out of there; and then for the

prep work for the Pleasure Faire and the Dickens Fair, likewise. So construction got underway. I never did have an architect.

Geraci: Can I make a suggestion?

04-00:58:05

David: Yeah. Good place to break.

Geraci: This is a good place to quit, and we can pick up next time, because we've got about only one or two minutes left on this tape. That way, next time, we can pick up with the catering and then getting into the restaurant.

04-00:58:18

David: Right.

Geraci: Great. Thank you.

Interview 3: July 20, 2011

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Geraci: I'm Vic Geraci, food and wine historian from the University of California Berkeley, Regional Oral History Office. Today's date is July 20, 2011, and seated with me is Narsai David. This is interview number three, disc number five. Narsai, when we left off, we were talking about the Potluck.

05-00:00:44

David: Sort of wrapping up the Potluck.

Geraci: Sort of wrapping it up; that's a good way to put it. I notice you said that you had thought about some things since we last talked.

05-00:00:50

David: I mentioned something about garlic. Garlic, by the early seventies, had become this wonderful, fashionable, exciting thing that young people were having a lot of fun with, and farmers markets were producing dozens of different varieties of garlic. There were purple garlies and black garlies and white garlies. At the Potluck, the only garlic we were able to get away with was powdered garlic. Now, when I say able to get away with, businessmen—we did a large amount of lunch business for all of the West Berkeley industrial complexes and such. The Potluck was, after all, down at Channing and San Pablo. These guys would come in for lunch and come back the next day and say that their wife was angry as hell because they came home reeking of garlic. [Geraci laughs] It got to the point that the only time we ever used fresh garlic was for our Monday night special ethnic dinners from different parts of the world. We used to buy powdered garlic in a fifty-pound drum or a hundred-pound drum. That was the garlic we used. So those were the days.

Geraci: Where were you getting your garlic, your fresh garlic for your Monday nights?

05-00:02:18

David: Oh, we had a local wholesale produce purveyor, an Italian guy named Mario Rolandeli, and Mario took care of whatever we needed. We phoned every day to order for the next day, and he was at the wholesale market and picked it up and brought it to us.

Geraci: That's something I think we should talk about how much this has changed.

05-00:02:44

David: Oh, sure. Sure.

Geraci: A lot. Within my own family, I had an uncle who literally did that for restaurants in San Diego. It finally got to the point where he just couldn't do business that way. It just wasn't profitable for him.

05-00:03:01

David: It wasn't profitable for him to buy the produce and deliver it to them?

Geraci:

Right.

05-00:03:06

David: Really?

Geraci:

They were trying to source all of his materials locally, and prices weren't always the best.

05-00:03:19

David: Yeah, sure, sure.

Geraci:

So you have a very good clientele; but then beyond that, the normal restaurant, they want something a little bit cheaper. They're trying to cut costs, they're trying to be cost effective.

05-00:03:30

David: Oh, yeah. The hamburger joint wants ten cases of iceberg lettuce that they can shred for their hamburgers. They could care less where that comes from. Interesting. I hadn't thought of that. Sure.

Geraci:

So you were just using him as a local source, then.

05-00:03:47

David: Right, right. But in those days, we did not use to go to the produce market. For our special Monday Night Dinners, when we were doing things that we didn't even know what we were doing, we would go out and do some shopping. I think I mentioned the other day that I would go out to the ocean and harvest mussels once in a while. There were no mussels on the market in those days. In fact, I had a doctor, a very dear friend, who was *really*, really concerned when he heard I was going out to get mussels, because you could get dead from those things. [they laugh]

Geraci:

They can be harmful to one's health.

05-00:04:26

David: So I developed a nice friendship with the people at the state Department of Public Health office, here in Berkeley, because it turns out that Public Health controls the mussel quarantine, not Fish and Game department, because it's a health problem. So they didn't have enough resource to go out and collect samples to test for paralytic shellfish poisoning, so whenever I went out, I would bring them—They just needed a 100-gram sample of the meat, so I'd bring them a handful of shells and they'd shuck them out and run them through the test and make sure the rats did or didn't die, or whatever the rats were supposed to do. [they laugh] So I got my assurance that my stuff was safe to eat, and it gave them one more entry into their logs.

Geraci: This is pre the idea of foragers for restaurants.

05-00:05:29

David: Well, pre the idea or the beginning of the idea. Long before anybody invented that word forager, we would go out and find things like that.

Geraci: But those were only for your special dinners, your Monday night, like you said, your ethnic dinners.

05-00:05:46

David: Well, for the Monday Night Dinner, yeah. Occasionally, we would have specials during the week, but every week, that was a special dinner that was entirely different from the rest of the menu. We went out looking for other things. So we had a lot of fun with that. So building the restaurant. Did I tell you about the redwood tank that I salvaged?

Geraci: Yes. I think we did, we talked about the redwood tank.

05-00:06:14

David: From up in the Oakland Hills, a 180,000-gallon tank. We used a lot of that in building the restaurant. We did not have an architect. I had a young man whose father had been a contractor, and he himself was pretty handy with a hammer and saw.

Geraci: Obviously, it's not the Berkeley of today, where the Building Department would just run you through many processes.

05-00:06:38

David: Oh!

Geraci: [laughs] Building codes in this town are notorious.

05-00:06:46

David: Maybe the only thing worse is being in Kensington, which means I have to deal with Contra Costa County, because Kensington's unincorporated. So I have to go all the way out to Martinez for anything that we do. You remember, Narsai's is actually in Kensington.

Geraci: Oh, okay. I didn't realize that that was Contra Costa.

05-00:07:05

David: Yeah, yeah. Kensington is a wedge of Contra Costa County. It's totally surrounded by Berkeley zip codes. The mail comes through the Berkeley post office, so it has a Berkeley zip code, but it's not even in the same county.

Geraci: See, that's the reason I presumed it was Berkeley.

05-00:07:21

David: Yeah. Yeah. It's not even the same county. I wanted some artwork in the restaurant, and I met with some friends. A man named Martin Metal, whose

last name is spelled M-E-T-A-L. In fact, I mention that because in printing the menu, I put the word mister in front of everybody's names, because otherwise, Martin Metal looked like the name of a company. So it was Mr. Martin Metal. He made a reclining nude, about twenty feet long, out of the three-quarter-inch diameter rod that held the redwood tank together. Before you leave, I'd like you to see it. It's out in the yard; you can take a peek at it.



(Martin Metal nude sculpture from Narsai's restaurant, now in the yard of his Berkeley home.)

Geraci:

We definitely want to get some of these on video, during one of these interviews, and talk about them specifically.

05-00:08:14

David:

Oh, sure. Sure. We can do that, too. The way it came about was really kind of funny. I met with him and with Miles Karpalow, the cabinetmaker, in this space. As I said, we didn't have an architect, we didn't have drawings; we were just doing things as we went along. My cousin Samuel David, who came to work for me as my maître d' from the time I opened the place, helped me design it. He was working as a draftsman, so he was able to put down on paper, the crazy ideas we came up with. We stood there at the bar, talking about doing some kind of a sculpture out of these steel rods. It was just sort of churning around meaninglessly, and someone said, "Well, how about putting a nude over the bar?" Everybody sort of stopped for a moment and said, wait a minute. I said, "Seriously, could you do that? Could you make a nude out of that?" He says, "Well, yeah, sure. Why not?" The next thing I knew, we had a nineteen-foot-long nude made out of three-quarter-inch steel rods—his wife posed as the model for it—and that went up against the wall, close to the ceiling, all the way across. We found two slices of black walnut from a tree

that was cut down in Danville. The wood was twenty-one feet long. My original plan for the bar was for it to be sixteen feet long. But when I got these two sticks, twenty-one feet long, I just couldn't bring myself to cut that.

Geraci: Especially if they're nice walnut.

05-00:10:08

David: Oh, God, it's beautiful. It was just like this, two-and-a-half inches thick. One piece was almost thirty inches wide—twenty-eight inches wide, I think—and the other one was about twenty-four inches wide. They were matching slices, came off the same tree. So we used the big one for the bar top and the small one for the back bar. The bar itself, I found in an old Moose lodge in Oakland. It had been built in the twenties and was about to be torn out. So I bought that and reconstructed it. It was sixteen feet long, which was part of—So how do you stretch it out?

Geraci: How do you make all these come together at that point?

05-00:10:54

David: And finding a couple of panels of oak that resembled the kind of vertical grain of this sixty- or seventy-year-old oak, so that we could fit it together. It worked out pretty well. So we got the nude over the bar. Miles Karpalow carved the bar. He carved that mantle up there. You can see how he just sort of followed the natural contour of the wood, but then accentuated it. Here, he did this table, as well. This one is more like his earliest work, where he just pretty much followed the natural contour of the wood, and then did a little bit of sculpting on the ends.



(Miles Karpilow wine tasting table-sculpture in David's home.)

Geraci: So these are all local artisans and artists.

05-00:11:51

David: Oh, yeah. Yeah, from around here. What else did we do to get that place going?

Geraci: Where did one get all of their dishes, silverware in those days, in this area?

05-00:12:12

David: Well, there were restaurant supply companies. Dohrman's East Bay Restaurant Supply. Then in San Francisco, on Mission Street, there was a long string of restaurant supply companies, both new and used. In fact, I'll jump ahead a little bit to a story. We did all of the catering for Bill Graham's big outdoor events, the Day on the Green concerts. One Thanksgiving, for the final performance of the Band, he did a dance at Winterland that he labeled The Last Waltz. He wanted to serve Thanksgiving dinner to 3,000 kids, and he insisted that I not use turkey rolls. He wanted whole turkeys roasted on the bone and carved. I rented a large truck and went down Mission, stopping at all these used equipment stores and buying stoves and fans and things, used stuff. I had a plumber working for me. We installed all these in the basement of Winterland. The basement had windows way up near the ceiling that opened onto the street. So we removed a number of those windows and installed blowers to vent everything, and roasted all the turkeys and the dressing and the sweet potatoes and everything there.

Geraci: That's a few hundred turkeys, isn't it?

05-00:14:07

David: That's a lot of turkeys, for 3,000 people. Then after the whole thing ended, the next week, after we recovered, we loaded the stuff back on the truck, went back down Mission Street and sold it to these same guys for less money than we paid for it. Nowadays, you can rent mobile kitchens, you can rent portable cooking equipment, refrigerated trucks that are designed for caterers. That stuff didn't exist in 1971. '72.

Geraci: Which brings us to another story, once we finish this, in that your catering is also picking up at the same time that the restaurant is starting to really get going.

05-00:14:59

David: Actually, thank you for asking that, because I should go back to it for a second. The truth is that we really had a tough time getting the restaurant going. A 120-seat restaurant, located in Lower Kensington. I was told by the hoity-toity types that lived in Upper Kensington that we were in Lower Kensington. Because to them, Kensington was the part up by the Arlington. Well, they were stuck with us. We were part of the one-and-a-half square

miles that consists of Kensington. It was a little bit out of the way. In my mind's eye, I still think of it as—granted, somewhat dreamily, I guess—it was like you leave town and drive ten blocks out through Colusa, a gum tree-lined street, and suddenly there's this little tiny business section, where there's a restaurant. For me, I had the sense it was like I was going out of town. I was getting away from things.

Geraci: Well, it was another county. [they laugh]

05-00:16:15

David: Yeah. Then a year and a half later, that seventies recession hit. So there's no doubt in my mind that had it not been for catering, we probably would not have gotten off the ground; that catering really made a huge difference for us.

Geraci: Now, did you stage some of your catering at the restaurant itself?

05-00:16:45

David: No. We did banquets at the restaurant, but catering meant off premises for us. We soon became the exclusive caterer for Charles Hitch at the University; for Chancellor Bowker at University House; for Tom Clausen, president of Bank of America; Bill Graham, for his big outdoor events. We developed a bit of a clientele, and it's, you notice, a bit of a cross-section. What Tom Clausen and Mrs. Hitch want for their dinners is perhaps diametrically opposed to what Bill Graham wants when he's feeding the multitudes. I keep coming back to that Thanksgiving dinner. One little comment that I have to attribute to Bill. We've got everything humming. The buffets are set up and their band is about the break and the kids are going to come charging out into the hallways to eat. I said, "Here's that moment of truth, where you just agonize over, what if somebody screwed up? What if something went wrong? What if some thermometer didn't read right and some people get sick? Narsai, remember, you're only as good as your last show." [they laugh]

Geraci: A true showman speaking.

05-00:18:23

David: That was Bill Graham's show. Nobody got sick, to my knowledge; everything worked fine.

Geraci: Well, that is a difficult position to keep control over that much equipment and cooking and processing. In particular, as you said, you had just assembled a bunch of used equipment. You didn't really know each piece of equipment.

05-00:18:49

David: Permits? Permits, did you say? What kind of permits?

Geraci: Permits? [they laugh] They didn't exist in those days.

05-00:18:54

David: No.

Geraci: Maybe that was just as good, right?

05-00:19:03

David: The restaurant. We had both men and women as waiters. Lest you fall into the trap of thinking that is not unusual, in 1972, virtually the only jobs women had in the restaurant business were in coffee shops and drive-in restaurants and hamburger joints and such. The serious restaurants simply did not have women waiters. The women wore ankle-length black skirts and a blouse that had—There was a waistband that had the same colors as our printed menu cover. It was sort of a grapey, purplish color and mauve, sort of. The men wore tuxes and carried a little side towel. It was a formal structure. We had black and Hispanic waiters, we had women waiters.

Geraci: Were any of these college kids?

05-00:20:35

David: Oh, yeah. Sure. Sure. A number of them were college kids. And artists and actors, people that worked at the Berkeley Rep building sets, or even acting. The actors had a tougher time, and they would more likely work in catering, because in the evening, they had to be on the stage; whereas the set designers built their sets during daytime hours and they could come to work at night.

Geraci: Did you adopt any particular style for running your staff, both front house, back house? We talk about the traditional, almost militaristic French-run kitchen. What was it like, I guess, to work for Narsai?

05-00:21:34

David: Well, food and service were the most important. People came to a restaurant to be taken care of. In fact, I could very easily digress onto one of my most painful subjects, which is thinking about so many young people that are in the restaurant business today, who don't seem to understand what the word restaurateur means. It's a simple French word; means restorer. One goes to a restaurant to be restored, to be taken care of, and to be made well.

Geraci: To be part of a pampering process.

05-00:22:16

David: Exactly. Not to get a lot of grief or a lot of hassle. We seem to have gone into a bit of a slump. I don't know if it's starting to pull out of that or not. The chef was tough. There's no question that he called the shots in the kitchen.

Geraci: Who was your chef?

05-00:22:46

David: My very first chef was a Frenchman of Turkish origin, named Marius Levollela. He was from the South of France. The sous chef was a young Israeli kid named Joram Warner. Then it started churning and evolving, and chefs would last a year, they would last two or three years, depending what other kind of jobs showed up or whatever kind of offers they got.

Geraci: It seems to be a transient occupation.

05-00:23:27

David: They really do. Yeah, they do. Some of it is their artistic sensibilities are worn down or offended and they want to do something different. Or they just come to loggerheads with the owner, who wants to do things in a different direction. Nothing seems to last forever.

Geraci: Well, it's like the artist and the patron.

05-00:23:52

David: Exactly. That's exactly what it is. Wine was important from the beginning. I had been collecting wine since I was a college student. Token amounts of wine; I was not a large wine collector. But the collecting idea, grabbing old bottles and saving them, was a very appealing thing for me. That was important in building the restaurant, and the wine was great from the beginning. We started out using a fairly simple wine glass. Then as we settled in and got more serious, I found a better quality wine glass. There's a glass that the Libbey Glass Company has patented. They call it the safe edge, where they melt the glass around the rim, right along the top. If you look at it, you can see there's a little bead of glass around there, which is very, very break-resistant. Some of those things can even fall on the floor and not break sometimes. As opposed to what's called a diamond crack. In the diamond crack, after the glass comes out of the annealing oven, they cut the top off. Remember, this is blown. So there's excess glass up there. So it's cut with a diamond cutter, at exactly the right spot, and just tapped and it cracks off, and it's called a diamond crack. So you get that really nice clean edge; it doesn't have that bead. It also means your breakage is much higher. The glass is more delicate. Just pouring the wine in it sometimes, you can chip the edge. So my markup went up. I started out charging twice my cost for wine. So if a bottle cost me ten dollars, I sold it for twenty. Once I got the new diamond crack edge, I increased it to two and a half times, because I simultaneously bought decanters, and any wine that had thrown sediment, we decanted, just automatically, at the table side. So these cost me more and the time cost me more, so I felt entitled to charge a little more for it. This differs pretty dramatically, by the way, from many restaurants these days that are charging two and a half and three times retail, not cost. Two and a half to three times retail is just shocking to me, when I walk into a restaurant and see these prices.

Geraci: I just had a light afternoon snack on Fourth Street. I won't mention the place. And I have a program for my iPhone that will scan the barcode and tell you what it retails for, and any reviews on it.

05-00:27:19

David: Oh! [laughs]

Geraci: As I'm paying forty-four dollars for a bottle of wine that retailed at twenty-one.

05-00:27:28

David: It's just inexcusable.

Geraci: This isn't expensive wine; this is just an everyday—

05-00:27:36

David: It's inexcusable. If it retails for twenty-one, it cost them fourteen.

Geraci: Exactly.

05-00:27:41

David: So if they're paying fourteen and selling it for—what'd you say, forty-two?

Geraci: Forty-four.

05-00:27:46

David: Forty-four, that's more than triple their cost. I'm a capitalist in my heart and soul. There is no question that I like the idea of making money. But fair is fair. There has to be a give and take.

Geraci: At this point, go to any bar or restaurant in the Bay Area and a ten- to fifteen-dollar glass of wine is the norm.

05-00:28:22

David: This raises the issue of corkage. I find it absolutely inexcusable, egregious behavior for a restaurant to charge more for corkage than the smallest amount of profit they're making on a bottle of wine from their regular list. You'll be surprised, if you search the list, how many restaurants do have wines that they're only making twelve or fifteen dollars a bottle. They're the inexpensive, simple wines. Well, if they're willing to tie up their capital in that wine, if it's a white wine, it has to be refrigerated, which costs money. Occasionally, a bottle slips off the shelf and falls and breaks or the boss opens a bottle to drink and see how it's doing. In other words, there are costs associated with just owning that bottle. Yet somebody brings in a bottle that they just want you to pull the cork on, and you charge them twenty-five dollars a bottle. Now, this bottle, the maximum you could've made on this other one was fourteen dollars and fifty cents, let's say, or whatever the magic number was. Yet somebody brings in his own bottle, doesn't cost you a thing, doesn't have anything to do with you; you have no risk, you have nothing; just pull the cork for him, and you want to charge him more money? It just doesn't suit my sense of sense. [Geraci laughs] I don't get it.

Geraci: No, it's a very convoluted and difficult issue, in dealing with wine prices and wine quality. Were people bringing wine in when you first opened?

05-00:30:25

David: Oh, yeah. Oh, sure. Not a lot. It's something that has evolved a lot.

Geraci: So corkage was, even at that point, something that was—

05-00:30:33

David: Well, in those days, it wasn't too bad because it was fairly new and not too many people were—

Geraci: I guess that's what I'm kind of asking. When did all that trend start?

05-00:30:41

David: It was really just getting underway. We charged five dollars corkage for those days. The next time you come, I will have dug out a file of menus, so that we can have reference points—

Geraci: Oh, that would be great! Yeah.

05-00:31:00

David: —for prices and so forth. But I remember we were getting five dollars corkage. I had a sparkling wine, a very cheap, bulk-processed sparkling wine made for me, that we used for our house bubbly for making mimosas and things like that. We sold it for eight dollars a bottle; people also bought it to drink at the table. It was made for us by a company down in the Saratoga area that I couldn't get one to be really dry, because they put the batches together in huge, huge tanks; but they agreed to increase the acidity for me, so that it had a crisper flavor. It was on our wine list at eight bucks. Well, I'll never forget, this young couple walked in. Guy had this bottle of Le Domaine champagne, which was made by Almaden, that he said was a gift that he and his girlfriend got, and would it be possible to serve it with their meal? Well, of course. I took it to the bar and when we pulled it out of the bag, the price tag fell out of it. They had just bought it at Joseph's Liquor Store on Solano Avenue, ten blocks before they got to the restaurant, and it was already chilled. I think they had paid something like—oh, God, pick a number—three or four dollars for it, and my corkage fee was five dollars. He would've been so much better off with my bottle of eight-dollar wine. It was just so much better wine. It was so much better wine that it was really kind of funny. But yeah, we had corkage. Right from the beginning, people would come in. Then somewhere along the way, when Jerry Brown was governor the first time, he managed to push a law through the state, to allow an opened bottle of alcohol to be in a motor vehicle, if it was not in the passenger compartment. So if you had wine left over, you could shove a cork in it, put it in the trunk of your car and take it home. Prior to that, that would've been illegal. You couldn't have it in the vehicle.

Geraci: Yeah, because it was considered an open container.

05-00:33:42

David: Right. But it couldn't be anywhere in the vehicle. Well, it turns out as long as it's not in the passenger compartment, you can do it. So wine. Coffee. Peet's Coffee had just gotten underway, shortly before we opened. Of course, we were drinking Peet's at home, and of course I wanted Pete's at the restaurant. Of course, Alfred Peet did not have any wholesale accounts and would be happy to sell it to me, but I had to pay for it when I picked it up.

Geraci: That was from his original store, down on Shattuck.

05-00:34:29

David: Yeah. On Walnut and Vine.

Geraci: Walnut and Vine, excuse me, yeah.

05-00:34:34

David: So for six months, that went along pretty well. But business started picking up, we got busy at times unexpectedly. I don't want to serve stale coffee, so I want to pick up coffee only as I need it. If the busboy comes to work in the middle of the day to set up the tables and sees that we're out of coffee, he can run up and get coffee. But if there's nobody there to sign a check, what's he going to do? So I went to Mr. Peet and said, "Look, here's the situation. I can't imagine not using your coffee, but." So he hesitantly and reluctantly agreed to open a wholesale account for me. Twice in the next six months, he phoned to ask why he hadn't been paid, before I had received the statement. He was a funny character, such a funny character.

Geraci: What makes it even funnier is he's not thinking like a large corporate businessman. This is just the little local—Peet's today is, along with Starbucks, one of the large corporate—

05-00:35:56

David: Well, it spawned Starbucks and then in itself, became such a huge thing. He would be—Well, he knew what it was; he lived long enough to see what it had become.

Geraci: Now, this in itself, kind of helps set you aside, though, in that coffee drinking—Peet's is a new concept for American coffee drinkers.

05-00:36:25

David: Peet taught America how to drink high-quality coffee and at a high roast. We had never had coffee roasted that dark, except for an occasional espresso. But espresso, we always thought of as a whole different kind of thing. It wasn't something you sat there and sipped with your dessert. If you walk into a classic Italian espresso shop, or particularly if you're in Italy, that stuff is taken like the cowboy takes a shot of whiskey. It's, *schoomp!*

Geraci: And it's taken standing up.

05-00:37:07

David: Absolutely. Bam! It's like, here's my medication, here's my caffeine.

Geraci: Bam!

05-00:37:13

David: Bam! Whereas coffee, to us, is something that you sip slowly, with your dessert. So I rarely had any complaints, but I learned so much from that man. Maybe a couple times a year, there was something that didn't seem right in the coffee, and I'd go rushing up to him with the beans. He would grind them and brew some and we'd cup it together. I learned from those experiences, more than anything I've ever learned about coffee.

Geraci: I think it's amazing watching coffee tasters when they cup it. It's like watching these high-end, super-sensitive tasters in wine. It's just amazing what they can pick out of there.

05-00:38:09

David: Oh, yeah. Yeah, the subtle nuances.

Geraci: The stories they can tell you about that bean and the way it was grown and what has happened.

05-00:38:16

David: Well, I went through that with him to begin with, to select my blend. The blend varied from time to time, but it was generally about 40 percent African, 40 percent Indonesian, and 20 percent Central American. Central American was a thinner, more acid flavor; the African was always the richest, most creamy, like a mocha kind of thing; and the Indonesian, just a superb balance of acid, good high acid, and plenty of structure. So by the time you put these together, it gave my idea of what coffee—

Geraci: It's like blending wine, isn't it?

05-00:39:04

David: Exactly. Exactly the same thing. It was exactly my idea of what I wanted to drink.

Geraci: Now, prior to Peet's, then, what were people in the Bay Area buying for coffee for restaurant [use]?

05-00:39:19

David: Hills Brothers was the biggest—

Geraci: That was local?

05-00:39:23

David: Yeah, that was a local company, from San Francisco. But it was really not much different from the stuff you bought in a grocery store. You could buy

Hills Brothers in a can, and you could also—I'm sorry, I said Hills Brothers; Farmer's[sic] Brothers. Hills Brothers was the retail one; they did not have the institutional. It was Farmer's Brothers that had the institutional. They delivered it ground, in five-pound bags. The stuff in cans was, by and large, Robusta, which is the least expensive, as opposed to the Arabica coffees. I guess I can't tell you whether Farmer's Brothers was starting to use the—My guess is they were probably starting to put in some Arabica into their restaurant and institutional blends. I think I mentioned to you last time, my experience of the co-op.

Geraci: Right, and cleaning the pots.

05-00:40:39

David: Right, just cleaning the pots properly.

Geraci: Made a world of difference.

05-00:40:44

David: The co-op brand coffee was perfectly fine, thank you very much.

Geraci: But I guess I'm just very fascinated, in that when we talk about the food revolution and the changes going on, coffee is a major part of that change. America's coffee taste in the last three decades have really shifted.

05-00:41:04

David: Oh, my God! Coffee went from being fifty cents a cup to \$3.50 a cup, thanks to Starbucks, which grew directly out of Peet's. You know the relationship there.

Geraci: Right. Right.

05-00:41:16

David: In fact, going back to that relationship for a minute, by the time he had sold out and they built a new roasting plant in Emeryville, when suddenly, instead of my having a complaint two or three times a year, it was maybe once a month or even twice a month, there was something wrong. I went running down each time to cup the coffee with him, at his place in Emeryville. About the third time I did that, I'll never forget his looking me in the eye and saying, "Well, Nars-eye, maybe your taste is changing." [Geraci laughs] Yeah, well, I realized my taste had changed; I needed to find a new purveyor. Because he basically had sold the company, he was there kind of overseeing this massive production facility—which is, shall we say, substantially different from what he was doing at Walnut and Vine. Have you ever been there, in the old store?

Geraci: No, but I've heard the stories, I've seen the photos. This was just a little, small shop, roasted right there.

05-00:42:40

David: Absolutely. The roaster unit was smaller than a fifty-gallon drum. Maybe it would be the equivalent of a thirty-five gallon drum. Visualize something that size, mounted on a frame, and it churns inside and smoke comes out the top. Well, all of a sudden Alfred Peet, for as brilliant a coffee maker as he was, and roaster and taster, running a factory like that was not what he was cut out to do. There were other people that could do that better than he could.

Geraci: And maybe step forward, too.

05-00:43:24

David: Sooner or later, they figured that out. But it was at that point that I decided it was time for me to find a new vendor. Somehow—I still don't know how I connected with him—but a guy named Mike McLaughlin, who was a retired high school teacher, had a brother who was a green coffee bean importer, broker. He decided he was going to set up a small coffee roasting company and sell coffee to stores and restaurants and such. The name was an unfortunate one, Home Gourmet Coffee Company. Mighty trite sounding. Fortunately, down the pike a short distance, it became the McLaughlin Coffee Company. But it was a great learning experience for both of us, because I knew pretty much what I wanted. Mike had never been in the coffee business before. His brother was importing the best coffees in the world, and had him on the right track and got him the best deals and the best qualities and so forth. But his brother wasn't a roaster, either, and we started playing around with this thing to develop the flavor components that I wanted. Mike will tell you to this day that he learned as much from those sessions as I did, because for him, this blending idea was kind of new. For me, that company was new, but I had already done the blending once before.

Geraci: And you had had Alfred Peet as your mentor, to run you through that.

05-00:45:12

David: Absolutely. So how better could I have learned? So we developed a good relationship. In fact, it's there on the table; I brought a pound for you to take home. Be sure to not forget it.

Geraci: Oh, thank you.

05-00:45:26

David: Yesterday, it was roasted. The percentages are still pretty close to that forty-fourty-twenty, but it varies from one season to another. One crop may be more intense or more concentrated or lighter or darker or whatever.

Geraci: The climate's different. This is like the wine industry. Every year, blends have to change—

05-00:45:56

David: It's exactly the same.

Geraci: —and adapt. That’s where the vintner—or in this case, the roaster—really is making major decisions.

05-00:46:07

David: That’s the guy that makes the decision, is that roaster, because until it gets to the roaster—

Geraci: It’s just a bean.

05-00:46:15

David: —you wouldn’t recognize it as having anything to do with coffee.

Geraci: Yeah, it’s a green bean, is what it [is]. Before we move on, one of the other things that seem to be changing at that time, in at least the American appetite, is bread.

05-00:46:33

David: Oh, my! How can I not tell you the story of our bread? We started doing these special Monday Night Dinners; I told you about that. Shortly after we started doing them, this young woman appeared on the scene, named Maggie Mah, M-A-H. Her maiden name was Freeman, but she had married a man whose name was Mah. She and her father came in for dinner a few times, and she brought me a jar of pomegranate jelly. I don’t know, how do you get somebody who swoons over a jar of pomegranate jelly? It was made so perfectly. She had just enough pectin to jell it, and concentrated down the juice to just the right level of acidity and sweetness. It just caught my attention.

Geraci: Was magnificent.

05-00:47:39

David: It caught my attention. She liked to bake bread, and she thought it would be really neat to bake a bread from the foreign country that we’re doing on our Monday Night Dinners. Well, see, she came down with this pottery bowl that was, I swear, this large. It was her mother’s bread bowl. She wore her hair in a sort of a bandana, and she got in there and was kneading the dough in this great big, giant bowl—it was just really amazing—and we had a special bread every Monday. Well, you can’t have a special bread only on Mondays, for the special dinner, and pretty soon I had gone out and bought a 120-quart mixing machine and we started experimenting, and pretty soon, we were making all of our bread for the restaurant.

Geraci: What kind of breads were you making?

05-00:48:39

David: We started out with just a very simple baguette. Then I was looking through some old French cookbooks here, the kind that have those wonderful color plates, that had a picture of an epi, E-P-I. Do you know the epi or epine?

Geraci: Oh, the epine, yeah.

05-00:49:05

David: It's a bread that has the sheaves of wheat—not the sheaves of wheat, but the strands of wheat. I thought, wow, that sounds like something really neat. The first time I tried it, it was an utter failure, because I clipped the dough on the side and moved it over, and of course, it grew right back together. So you have to clip it like this and lay it down; it can't rise back up later.

Geraci: Back up again, okay.

05-00:49:38

David: So we were the first people in the area to have epine on our list, aside from a regular baguette. By this time, I had a pastry chef named Joseph Maximilian Strasser, who was Bavarian, and not only the most competent, most sophisticated, most remarkable pastry chef I've ever seen, but one of the most remarkable workers, hard workers, on this planet. The guy was just amazing. There was nothing he couldn't do. I decided, once we had the breads going and we were make— Well, we were making our own cakes and deserts right from the beginning; the bread was the new thing. I wanted to also start making croissants, because by this time, we were ready to open the little shop in the corner of the building, the market. Joseph was not about to do yeast work; that was below his dignity. He was a pastry chef. Yeast work is for a different class of people, you understand. Yet he took this young guy named Floyd Goldberg, that was working for me, and taught him how to make croissants. We did weekly cuttings of our croissants, against the best croissants we could find anywhere in the Bay Area, and the very next week, we had the best croissants in the Bay Area. This is not a figment of my imagination. In blind tastings, we just consistently— So this guy who couldn't be bothered with yeast work is just such an incredible specimen. He just knows pastries, yeast or otherwise, so well that you want it, he'll make it; he'll put it together. I remember once during the holidays, I walked in, sort of hesitantly approached him with an order, because I knew we were awfully busy. You don't worry about the production. You write the order, boss, we'll take care of it. Two nights, he spent sleeping on the floor in the bar. I couldn't believe it, when I found that out. He had spent two nights sleeping on the floor; he never went home. This guy was just so determined to do it, and the work he did was so beautiful.

Geraci: Sounds like he had a true passion and a true just love of what he was doing.

05-00:52:28

David: Yeah. Yeah, he really, really did. Was very impressive. Chocolate decadence actually predates Joseph. We had a young woman named Janice Feuer, F-E-U-E-R, working as our pastry chef. A friend, who was one of the founders of the Berkeley Wine and Food Society, a physician, and also a founding member of the First Growth Club—I think I mentioned them before, the eight guys—he wanted to do a dinner for Michael Broadbent, the great British wine

writer and merchant. He wanted to do a dinner with a heavy emphasis on port at the end of the meal. We were going to do a serious portfolio tasting, so he needed a really, really rich chocolate desert, the only thing I can imagine to serve with port. So I went to Janice and we talked about it. She had a cake that was almost like a flour-free chocolate cake, that she had learned when she was working at St. Orres, up in Gualala, and was reluctant to use that recipe because it was their recipe. I said, “Well, so I’ll change it. I’ll do something different with it.”

Geraci: But at least give you a starting point.

05-00:54:19

David: I figure if I’m going to make something as dense as I can make and it’s going to have more chocolate and less of anything else— Anyway, it all came together. It worked beautifully. It’s very dense. In fact, before you leave, I have to show you; there’s a painting of it in the kitchen. An artist came in one day and showed us this painting that she had done, just from seeing it in the case. Of course, I had to buy it; I couldn’t have anybody else have my chocolate decadence on their wall. [they laugh] I made it for my management. We had a weekly management meeting, the managers, the restaurant, the market, the catering, the chef, sort forth, office. We’re all there and we tasted new things. A woman named Rachel Harris, who designed most of the catering menus, took one bite and said, “Oh, my God! That’s decadent. That’s chocolate decadence.” Everybody practically stood up and said, you’re right; that’s chocolate decadence, and the name was born.

Geraci: Thus the name.

05-00:55:48

David: The name was born. We served it with a raspberry puree. So that worked pretty well. I made some notes because I was forgetting things when we talked last week. Let’s see if I can catch everything here.

Geraci: I think we could also talk a little bit about staffing. Who were some of the people working for you at that point?

05-00:56:16

David: Good. It’s interesting. Just at that moment, I came across this note about sending bakers to Acme. We had a couple bakers that I can remember, who quit and went to work for Acme, baking bread. They had opened—Well, I guess I don’t remember when they opened, but it was close to the same time we did.

Geraci: Now, Acme is run by—

05-00:56:50

David: Steve Sullivan—

Geraci: Sullivan, right.

05-00:56:51

David: —who started out working, I think, as a busboy at Chez Panisse, and then he started baking bread there, at Chez Panisse, and then went off and started his own company. It wasn't until I read Jeremiah's [Jeremiah Tower]—Can I call it his jeremiad?

Geraci: I read it.

05-00:57:17

David: It wasn't until I read that, that I realized how direct a corollary there was between the bakers leaving my employ and going to work for Steve Sullivan. Because Steve was complaining to Jeremiah that he couldn't find bakers, and Jeremiah suggested he go up to Narsai's. [they laugh] So he started hiring away my bakers.

Geraci: Your bakers.

05-00:57:42

David: I naïvely wasn't troubled by it. I thought, oh, what the hell? The guy's got a better job, he's making more money; he's just at the bottom rung here.

Geraci: That's what life is all about.

05-00:57:52

David: That's what it's all about. Things move on. But it was really funny to see it in print, that that's where the bakers were going. Staff, people would come and go. I had a chef who was with me for a number of years, named Robert Boyle. He had worked for me at the Potluck. Although he stayed at the Potluck when I left, sometime later—well, actually, a couple years later—the Potluck closed. I don't remember what year he came, but he came to me and worked for me. We were very, very close. We read each other and understood each other very, very well.

Geraci: Few words had to be spoken.

05-00:58:41

David: Right. A no-nonsense kind of guy. Did not believe in waste. The question of waste in kitchens still is really troubling to me. The kind of stuff that's thrown away, it's just inexcusable.

Geraci: Well, in a hungry world, throwing food away. But as a capitalist, also it's a waste of money.

05-00:59:10

David: There's no way you can rationalize it. There's just no way you could rationalize it. There's just absolutely no sense to it. My mind flashes back, having mentioned Jeremiah, to Stars and how my favorite thing on his

menu—We'd stop in there more often late at night than otherwise. If we'd been to the theater or some show in the city, we'd stop there late, for a light meal. Veni would inevitably order the hamburger and a gin and tonic, and I would inevitably order one of each of the three skewers and a glass of beer. The three skewers were the meat that they were trimming that day. The pieces that were not the big pieces, the small trim pieces, would get run up onto skewers. On a given day, it could be swordfish, salmon and rabbit; it could be kidneys, ground beef and salmon. Whatever odds and ends they had. Whatever they have, just bring me one of each of the three. There was nothing wasted there; he found a place to use it. My God! Cut it up and throw it away? That just didn't make any sense. So staff, in the waiters, I had very little turnover in the waiters. I'm sure I'm going to offend people who are in the waitering business, who see these remarks, but waiters are clearly and obviously overpaid for what they do, relative to the rest of the people in the industry. Waiters make, frequently, substantially more than the cooks. Really, huge amounts more. Now, the use of credit cards has dampened their getting away without taxes, to a great degree, because with credit cards—

Geraci: There's a paper trail.

05-01:01:43

David: —there's a paper trail now and it's reported and you can't hide it. But back in the days when people paid with cash, or even if they paid by check, the change was returned to the waiter and he put it in his pocket. There was absolutely no record anywhere of how much money that waiter was earning, and it was really disproportionate. I know how critically important the waiter is to the success of a meal. We were talking earlier about restaurateurs. A happy face on that guy goes a long ways towards pleasing the client.

Begin Audiofile 6 07-20-2011.mp3

Geraci: Vic Geraci, interviewing Narsai David. Today's date is July 20, 2011. This is interview number three, tape number six.

06-00:00:12

David: Interview number three, tape number six.

Geraci: Very good. [they laugh] I got it this time. I are a college graduate.

06-00:00:20

David: There you go. There you go. More than I can say.

Geraci: At this point, we left off with staffing and we were talking about tips.

06-00:00:32

David: Right. I felt pretty good about the quality of staff we were able to get. Dishwashers were, I guess, usually the toughest of all, because there's nothing you could do to make it a nice job. It is really crummy. You're standing over

the smells and fumes of that highly alkaline washing compound and splashing stuff around and it's hot and wet. It's crummy. If a dishwasher would get upset and walk out in the middle of a shift or not show up or something, man, everything comes to a halt if there's no clean dishes. So everybody is busy running around. This never happens on a Wednesday afternoon for a banquet; it's on a Saturday night. The house is full of people, the waiters are all running, everybody is busy, everybody is doing something, and all of a sudden the chef doesn't have a clean dish to put the food on because it's backed up at the dishwashing machine. So off comes the jacket, grab the damn apron and get back there and help wallop dishes [they laugh] until things get straightened out.

Geraci: Gives you a new appreciation, right?

06-00:02:08

David: Oh, man. It's a crazy damn business.

Geraci: Now, you mention thing I found interesting, that your wait staff, they were very consistent. You didn't have much of a transition.

06-00:02:21

David: No. I think it's because they made out so well. They made such good money. American Express said that we had the highest check average of any restaurant in the Bay Area, on the credit cards that they processed. That meant these kids were making good money. When people are buying an expensive meal and enjoying themselves, the waiter gets rewarded. So they wouldn't often leave. They'd pretty much stay with us.

Geraci: Also being a good waiter is more than knowing the food. It's having that smile and knowing how to court people.

06-00:03:10

David: How to restore people. Restaurateur. One goes to a restaurant to be restored.

Geraci: Now, were there any of these people that were working for you at that point, front house, back house, that are going to go on to become movers and shakers in food?

06-00:03:34

David: Yeah, I don't know how much they've moved or shaken. Robert Boyle, I mentioned, owned a couple of restaurants. Then got tired of it and decided to start teaching, so he was teaching at San Francisco City College.

Geraci: Now, they have culinary program.

06-00:04:01

David: Right. Yeah. A very good one, by the way. Then he moved to New York and he's now—Well, he's as old as I am, so he's nominally retired, but he was looking for a teaching job there, as well. Chris Lee was my catering manager

for ten years, and when I closed, he went to work at Chez Panisse. He had his baccalaureate in philosophy and he really wanted to go back to school and get a PhD in philosophy. But he needed a job, so he thought it'd be fun to work in the kitchen at Chez Panisse for a while. Well, he got hooked on the kitchen in Chez Panisse and became the chef at Chez Panisse.

Geraci: He also became one of the first of the foragers for them.

06-00:05:08

David: It's very possible. He certainly did plenty of that for me with the things that we used to do with wild fennel and mustard and so forth. He then opened his own restaurant, and you know, Eccolo. Now I'm not sure what he's doing or what he's going to do. This pop-up market is something he's sort of passing time with and having fun with.

Geraci: Let's explain what's the pop-up market is. I'm on their email list.

06-00:05:50

David: I haven't been getting much lately. I think just one in the last couple months or something like that. Well, first of all, in the closing days of Eccolo, he made available some specialty dishes, fully prepared, that you could take home and heat up, like—Oh, my. What's the name of the great bean casserole? Cassoulet, with duck confit and all the sausages and accoutrements. I remember when I got the announcement, I think it was available in two sizes, and one size was already sold out and the other size still had a few portions available, so it was, I guess, a great success. It sold before he could even announce it. So picking up on that after he closed the restaurant, he decided to make some of his sausages and some of those special dishes, like the cassoulet, available to people to purchase. He made an arrangement with this catering business in Oakland. I'm going to draw a blank on the man's name. {Aaron McKinney?}. They gather at his place, with quite a number of other people similar to himself, caterers or small restaurateurs or people that produce specialty food products. There's a woman that grows natural chickens and eggs. Various purveyors assemble on a given day for this pop-up market and they sell their stuff.

Geraci: They'll even sell it online. You can pre-buy it and just pick it up.

06-00:08:10

David: Right. Exactly. But I think if I had to guess, I would say I think he really wants to open a butcher shop. A butcher shop, and making sausages and maybe pâtés, as well. But he spent some time working with this strange, goofy guy in Panzano, called—What is his name? This butcher in Panzano, Italy. The guy is a figment of his own imagination. [Geraci laughs] It is my considered opinion that if it weren't for a couple of American food writers who lionize this guy, you never would've heard [of him]. We rented a house in Panzano for two weeks, and I couldn't find a single local merchant or inhabitant who bought meat from him. They drove five miles to the next town,

where the meat was just as good, at about a half the price. Then he had opened a restaurant shortly before we got there. We immediately booked a table to eat at the restaurant. It was not just a mediocre meal, it was bad. It was embarrassing. The name of the restaurant is an Italian phrase for all meat. It's sort of like a slang phrase. Beautiful space. Architecturally, he did a magnificent job on this thing. Everything that came out tasted like last week's leftovers that had been reheated. I was really astounded, for all the hype that I had heard about this guy. But I'm digressing. I do know that he enjoyed the butcher business. In fact, when I was there, he asked if I'd bring him back two of those spools of twine, the twine they use for tying sausages and such. Well, Dario uses some that's red and white, twirled together. He also wanted a few jars of the different spice mixtures that he used, so I brought those back for him. My guess is that that's what he would like to do. Joseph Strasser has his own bakeshop up in the Washington area. Floyd Goldberg has a bakery down on the peninsula. Not the peninsula, in South San Francisco, I think, or somewhere. Ted Siegel, who was my last chef, opened a restaurant in New York. He returned to his native New York. He ran a restaurant there for a number of years, and then when he closed it, went to one of the local colleges, where he's teaching cooking. Those are just some of the names that come to mind.

Geraci: But I think it's really important to lay those hierarchies out because food ways are passed, either formally or informally. I think within the Bay Area, there were a lot of people, at that era, the sixties, seventies, even into the early eighties, who have trained many of the great people that we have going across the United States today.

06-00:12:37

David: Oh, there's no doubt of that. No doubt of that.

Geraci: Anything else that you had on your notes there?

06-00:12:47

David: Let's see. The catering that I did for Bill Graham. Well, first of all, the stuff for Charles Hitch and for Tom Clausen, University of California and the Bank of America, were always structured, formal dinners. In the case of the Hitches, the most formal that I have ever seen anywhere. She wanted the Russian arm service, where the waiter bent down with the tray and put the food on the plate. She was one very, very tough mistress. I was driving down the Eastshore Freeway one day, and this group of women was about to take off in their little Piper Cubs or Piper whatever kind of planes they call them, to fly across the country, in the Powder Puff Derby, arriving a couple days later at the Elmira, New York airport. I'm driving along thinking, gee, Elmira Airport; I wonder what kind of place that is. A short while later, I get a call from Bill Graham, asking me if I know any caterers in upstate New York. I said, "Where the hell is upstate New York?" Well, it turns out that some music promoter on the East Coast was doing a concert at Watkins Glen, which

is a racetrack, automobile racetrack, not too far from Woodstock. This was maybe three years after Woodstock. It was less than a week before the event, and the guy realized that there was no way he was going to be ready in time, so he called Bill to come in to help. The first thing that Bill noticed—Bill was very big on food—was that nothing had been planned to provide food; neither for the backstage—there were vendors who were going to be selling to the multitudes—for the backstage, for the performers; and for the last three days before the show, there had to be three meals a day for all of the employees, which was about a hundred people, because there was no way they could take time to go out looking for food. The next morning, I was on a plane to Elmira, New York.

Geraci: [laughs] Now, this is a big challenge. You're going to somewhere you've never been, and you're going to have to, on the spot, cater?

06-00:15:50

David: I have no idea what I'm going to do. But the cute part of this tie-in to the Elmira Airport and the Powder Puff Derby is that these women come walking down the hall carrying their trophies. The race has landed in Elmira, somebody has won. So I heard about it the day before, in Oakland, and here it was. So I went to this motel in Watkins Glen and got a room, but the room didn't have a phone in it. So I went back to the desk. It was the only room they had available, but they guy remembered that there was a room that they've stored furniture in, that does have a phone in it. So he would clear a path for me, because this was urgent; I just had to—I started out calling the food department at Ithaca, because I figured these are the guys that really know. They're teaching people to be restaurateurs; they could be a big help. Hell, there wasn't a single one of them there, because they all take off for the summer to do these consulting jobs, where they probably make more money teaching.

Geraci: Make more than they do, yeah.

06-00:17:29

David: So my next move, then, was to finger the Yellow Pages. I found a local caterer who was able to do three meals a day for three days for the hundred people. Then in—Oh, what's the name of the town? It's eighty or a hundred miles away, north. Syracuse. I found a guy who had a full-fledged catering business and a refrigerated truck, because it was also understood that once you got there, you were there, and you would be there at least until the day after the event, if not longer, before the roads cleared enough to get out. There were 300,000 people showed up for this thing.

Geraci: Oh, my goodness.

06-00:18:26

David: The roads were blocked for miles and miles and miles. I had good friends since childhood, living in Connecticut, who I hadn't seen for a number of

years and I thought, well, after the show, I'll go spend a couple days with them. But it turned out that the day after the show, Bill was doing a Leon Russell show at the Ontario Speedway in Southern California. He wanted to be there himself. He had reserved a Learjet to transport him. I had sent my crew from here, with the refrigerated truck and all their equipment; that was a totally self-contained package. I'm sure Chris Lee was there on that one. So I said, yeah, sure, I'd go with him. Well, we were picked up backstage at three a.m., in a helicopter, and taken to the airport in Elmira, where we got on this Learjet, [which] flew us to the Ontario Airport in Southern California. A helicopter took us from the Ontario Airport, over the freeway, into the Ontario Speedway. So when you learn that Bill died in a helicopter, this guy enjoyed helicopters, that's all I can tell you. So I was there for the Leon Russell show.

Geraci: So the catering business for you, as you said, this is stability to help with the restaurant.

06-00:20:32

David:

Oh, gosh. At the beginning, those first three years, the restaurant couldn't have gotten off the ground, had it not been for catering. The times were tough, the economy was in a recession, and people weren't spending the kind of money going out for fancy dinners. So there's no doubt that was necessary. Then by the time we got things going, it had become a really important part of—It *was* a really important part of it, between the catering, the market, and we took over the building next door and made it into our bakery, so that we were also selling breads wholesale, to other restaurants and shops. We made every imaginable kind of bread. Joseph did a rye bread that I labeled Strass rye, after his name, Strasser. It had some grated orange zest, a tiny bit of molasses, and a very small amount of fennel seed in it. It was kind of an unusual combination of flavors, but it was just so good that it became sort of our standard for cocktail parties. And there were various other kinds of rye breads and wheat breads, just a whole variety of every imaginable kind of bread. We baked all of our own pastries. Sausages, tureens. Sausages. The menu at the restaurant was, the meat was predominantly lamb, so we always had a lot of lamb trimming. We would buy lamb racks and lamb loins. In fact, the lamb loins are an interesting story. I would trim out the fillet and we would do a sauté of the fillet, with mushrooms. The loin, we completely denuded of all the fat and the silver skin, seared it on both sides, covered it with a layer of our duck liver pâté, and wrapped it in a pastry crust, along with a duxelle of mushrooms, and baked it, in a very flaky pastry crust. The rack of lamb was the most popular item on the menu, from the day we started, the Assyrian rack of lamb. Second item was the medallion of beef; then third was this lamb loin. One day I was really feeling guilty about all the fat in that dish. You can't have a buttery pastry without it being full of butter. So I changed it on the menu. I used the same cut of meat, but I sautéed it with a really, really magnificent glace de viande, and then sliced it and fanned it out. It was a really beautiful presentation on a plate. Man, the sales dropped to way down

near the bottom somewhere. Basically, the message that people were sending was, hey—

Geraci: Where's the fat?

06-00:24:21

David: —we come here for a special occasion. This is not the way we eat every night. When we come here for a special occasion, we want that special dish that we've been talking about all this time. You can't take it away. It's absolutely correct. You don't want to eat that way every day; but if you're going out to your favorite restaurant for a special dish, that's not the time to be—

Geraci: Well, I always wonder about people who go to restaurants and always order something that they would cook at home. I go to a restaurant to try something I've never had before.

06-00:24:55

David: But on the other hand, you probably have some restaurants where there's a favorite, and sometimes you think, damn, I think I'd like to go get that.

Geraci: Go back, yeah. Now, you talk about Christopher Lee; his Roman artichokes, whenever he made those, I had to have a side of those when they were on the menu. Yeah. Oh, you know one thing we haven't talked about, the Monday Night Dinners.

06-00:25:36

David: I'm just looking here. It says, Monday Night Dinners. What can I say about the Monday Night Dinners? It led to a cookbook, the only cookbook I've done. It's called *Monday Night at Narsai's*.

Geraci: You did that with Doris Muscatine.

06-00:25:53

David: Right. It's a collection of fifty-some-odd menus, complete with all the recipes for them. We did a dinner every Monday night. At the beginning, they were each from a different country. Then we realized that people were much more interested in the French ones than the other ones, so we made a French dinner twice a month, and the remaining nights, we alternated other countries. Then in the spring, we had a spring festival. At these dinners, we always had two wines available by the bottle or the glass, at a reduced price. They were chosen to complement the appetizer and the main course. But for the Spring Festival Dinner and for the Harvest Festival Dinner, we would open as many as twenty different wines that were all available by the bottle or the glass, at a reduced price, for that event. So the cookbook has just a collection of the favorite Monday Night Dinners, plus a couple of these special dinners, like the Spring Festival Dinner and the Harvest Festival Dinner and such like that.

Geraci: Now, where did you meet Doris that the two of you end up doing this book?

06-00:27:30

David: Boy, where did I meet Doris? Probably in the restaurant. I would guess, yeah, they would've come into the restaurant.

Geraci: But she mentioned that they were regulars to these Monday Night Dinners.

06-00:28:33

David: Oh, yeah. No, they used to come to the restaurant all the time, and I'm guessing that that's where I met her. I can't think of any mutual friends, with whom we might've met them outside. I think it was at the restaurant. Friendships developed.

Geraci: Just developed out of that, yeah.

06-00:28:53

David: People start chattering. Of course, she and Chuck knew publishers and there was a book agent that was a friend of theirs, who helped us put the contract together. I mentioned the croissants. Oh, *Gourmet Magazine*, Caroline Bates did an article, in which she said there's something called California cuisine, coming out of Chez Panisse and Narsai's. Neither Alice nor I had any idea what they were talking about.

Geraci: [laughs] I was just going to ask you, how would you have defined at that point, what is California cuisine?

06-00:29:44

David: We were doing the things that we felt like doing. California cuisine, shmazine. We take fresh ingredients and we cook them the way we enjoy them. It was fun. We really had a good time with it.

Geraci: But compared to the rest of the nation, though, isn't this somewhat experimental? Other than maybe like the New York scene, the large cosmopolitan—

06-00:30:14

David: Sure. Sure. New York, Los Angeles, maybe Boston. Even in Washington, D.C., you got some creativity happening because of the mixture of races from all over the world, with the diplomats there.

Geraci: Or with the United Nations there, the diplomats.

06-00:30:37

David: But here is where it has really run amok. Each of us doing our own thing. [they laugh]

Geraci: I like that, run amok.

06-00:30:52

David: 1981, the *Wine Spectator* came along, and we got that award. We got that every year.

Geraci: I guess that's a segue, because seated—Here, I'll have you actually hold it up for the camera. This is the latest edition of the *Wine Spectator*.

06-00:31:12

David: It's a thirtieth anniversary of the restaurant awards, and they managed to pull out this—

Geraci: There's Narsai.

06-00:31:23

David: —picture of me in the wine cellar.

Geraci: Where were you when that picture was taken?

06-00:31:26

David: That's in the wine cellar at the restaurant.

Geraci: At the restaurant itself. So you had a really nice wine cellar, then.

06-00:31:32

David: Well, we had some 1500 different wines.

Geraci: Oh, my goodness.

06-00:31:37

David: I had to be able to lay my hands on an individual bottle that somebody wanted. So the rare things were in these individual tubes in the cellar. These ran from floor to ceiling, these.

Geraci: Were they like a clay tube?

06-00:31:58

David: No, it's a cardboard mailing tube, believe it or not.

Geraci: Interesting.

06-00:32:01

David: I went to one of these outfits that makes mailing tubes. That was an interesting little visit. You somehow visualize there's got to be a warehouse full of tubes, right? No. There's a warehouse full of rolls of Kraft paper, and when an order comes in, they spool this roll of Kraft paper onto a mandrel and apply the glue, and it starts spinning this thing around and forming a tube, whatever diameter you want, whatever thickness you want and whatever length you want. These are the same guys that make those forms that are used for making the highway, freeway overpass column, the round column to pour concrete in. Same kind of stuff. So whether they're making a little mailing tube for an

eight-by-ten photograph or a concrete thing, there's just this huge role of Kraft paper and it gets wound up by these things and gets whacked off. So for the tubes that we had at the bar, I dipped the ends in wood stain to make them dark brown. Then when we laid them together, we put a little squirt of glue on them to hold them firm. They just worked very well. I can tell you now that forty years later, if we go down to the cellar, you'll find that the bottom row on a seven-foot-high stack has gotten crushed a little bit, so that it's going to be a problem getting the bottles out. [he laughs].

Geraci: But still, that lasted that long.

06-00:33:59

David: Oh, yeah. If I had been concerned with it, it would not have been that hard to exchange some along the way, as I saw they were getting a little crushed.

Geraci: Right, compressing.

06-00:34:10

David: Or knowing what I do now, rather than stack them seven feet high, I would've stacked them just four feet high, because I know that's not enough to crush them. I could've put a shelf across there, to go up the other four feet. But it worked well, it was aesthetic, it was appealing, it.

Geraci: Considering the thousands of bottles of wine that you were storing.

06-00:34:35

David: Well, we had 5,000 cases of wine. We had 60,000 bottles on inventory. I just blurted out that I had 1500 wines on the list; now I don't remember, was it 1500 or 1200? Those that were on the list, we had to be able to reach when somebody asked for the bottle. Yeah, we had 1500 wines on the list. You'd go to a restaurant and ask for a wine and the waiter'd be gone for a lengthy period of time, and they said, "Gee, I'm really sorry, but we just sold out of that." Oh, shucks, what a shame. Well, let's try this one. The guy comes back, they're sold out of that one. Pretty soon you start wondering, come on is this list for show or do you really have any of this stuff. So our basic menu had 400 wines printed on it. It cost me, in those days, \$800 to reprint that menu, because it was in color, it was on both sides. I couldn't afford to change it every five minutes. The type-written list, which was the master list, from which you chose the rare and odd ones, that was very easy because we only had two copies of it. If a bartender went into the cellar and brought out the last bottle of an existing item then he immediately ran a line through both books. So that one, there was never any question; that was always up to the minute. The one printed on the basic menu, with 400 wines on that, under no condition could we ever be out of twelve wines. Somehow, I had decided that up to twelve, since they're never going to happen in a clump, they're going to be here and there—Usually, it was changed long before that, but that was the absolute cutoff, under no condition could we be out of more than—

Geraci: Now, with a wine list this extensive and that many bottles, did you have a sommelier?

06-00:37:20

David: Well, my cellar master actually was a young guy, who started out as a busboy working for me, while he was in high school. He showed a lot of interest in wine, and as he got older and got more interested and showed his interest, I made him a bartender, once he was old enough, and we started tasting together. Before long, he was the cellar master. He was responsible for all of the wine going in and out of the cellar, and maintaining it. We sort of learned from each other. We taught each other. It wasn't like there was an established old wine master. I came from a home where, although there was no prohibition against alcohol, there was no tradition of drinking. My mother's brother would come to visit occasionally, and he'd bring beer or wine or whiskey, brandy. What they didn't drink that weekend while he was visiting, was still sitting on the shelf the next time he came back to visit. So we just didn't have any tradition of it in our family. It was learning by experience. Of course, I spent a lot of time visiting wineries. Nothing is as wonderful a way to learn as to go through and taste a whole string of wines.

Geraci: Now, I guess what I'm curious about is, with a list of this size and complexity, say you get a customer that goes, do you have a wine recommendation that's not within your 400, one of your special wines, were you doing staff tastings? How would your staff know what to recommend?

06-00:39:24

David: It's impossible to teach everybody 1500 wines on the list. So beyond the basics, if somebody wanted some advice, then they would call either myself or my cousin Samuel, who was my maître d, or Eric Housh, the head bartender, the cellar master. Then before him, was Don Link, who went on to become the general manager, responsible for all the operations of the business. So any one of the four of us had been involved enough with it and tasting enough of it to be able to answer questions.

Geraci: To be able to make the recommendations, then.

06-00:40:15

David: Right. Right.

Geraci: Because whenever you get a list of wines that large in a restaurant, as a consumer, you're overwhelmed.

06-00:40:27

David: Yeah, yeah. You certainly would appreciate some guidance. If somebody gives me some idea what they're looking for—well, I would like a white wine. I don't like that stuff that's really oaky—well, already, I've got a pretty good focus. Or, well, here's what I'm going to have to eat; what do you recommend we have with this? That's the easy one for me, because it's my

food, my recipes, my dishes; I do have a pretty strong feeling about what will go with them and it's easy to make a recommendation. Okay, the cookbook. Oh, the mailers. I promise you, next time I will have—

Geraci: We'll get to look at some of these mailers.

06-00:41:24

David: We sent out a monthly mailer, announcing the Monday Night Dinners. It announced the two main courses of the meal and the two wines. By this time, the market was underway, and so there were other bits of news. There were sale things going on in the market and special things of one sort or another. There was always something special happening. I remember picking up wine deals—I think I may have mentioned this last time—at the Potluck, when I got that wine from up in Amador County, that was selling for—what was it? Twelve dollars a case or something like that. I was always picking up special deals of one sort or another, and get the word out to friends and they'd stop by. But then if it was a lot of product, then I would list it on our mailer, and it becomes for the general public.

Geraci: Right.

06-00:42:49

David: So between the restaurant and the catering and the wholesale bread and the retail market—Then we would do tastings in the market. In fact, Maggie Mah, our market manager—Oh, you're asking about what other people we spun off. The Market Hall was—Well, let me just count off the number of people. Sarah, whose brother owns the whole complex, had never worked in a market before, until she came to work for me. She spent a year for me and when she left, she opened that. Linda Sikorsky, who was my cheese buyer, started over there as the cheese buyer. When I closed the restaurant, a young man named Scott Miller, who had started for me as a busboy, had become a cook's helper and then became the charcutier—he really, really enjoyed the sausages and the pâtés—when we closed, Sarah hired him over there directly. He's still there, and this is how many years now? We closed in 1985, so that's already, what, twenty-six years. He oversees not just the charcutier, but all the food production for the little taqueria across the street and the place down on Fourth Street. He happened to come to mind, of other people that were spun off from this thing. But I digress. What was I going to say? Oh, the tastings. So Maggie did a chocolate tasting. We got samples of chocolates from people like Ghirardelli and Guittard. Most people aren't aware of what a wide variety of chocolates those companies make. You see Ghirardelli bars in the store—and that's only in the last ten years or so, since the DeDomenico family took over the company. Dennis did launch a number of new items. It was really exciting for people to see, what's a white chocolate taste like, when it's made with real cocoa bean and when it's made with one of the substitute fats? Here's a milk chocolate with vanillin, and here's one with real vanilla. It was just a real learning experience, throughout this whole thing. What's really

kind of interesting is that a young woman named Sandi Brod, B-R-O-D, saw this chocolate tasting we were doing and she then approached—I'm not sure I have this in the correct order—she ended up partnering with Dennis DeDomenico. They live together, just up the hill here. What I can't remember is whether she went to him with the idea of doing a chocolate tasting, or whether after tasting ours, she did a chocolate tasting and dragged him into it. But somehow or other, that all interconnected.

Geraci: Now, when you're talking about chocolate, had Scharffen Berger started up?

06-00:47:21

David: Oh, gosh, no. That's a new thing.

Geraci: That's more recent.

06-00:47:24

David: Yeah, that's more recent.

Geraci: Is that early nineties? I'm trying to remember now.

06-00:47:31

David: Well, it's certainly not before the nineties. I know I had closed before—In fact, Alice Medrich and I met—I had already known her, but I unexpectedly met her at John's partners house. His partner's name was Bob—He was a doctor. He died, sadly, a couple years ago. He had a little apartment in San Francisco, and they were roasting cocoa beans in the oven, removing the chaff by hand, and then grinding them in a Cuisinart. Of course, that couldn't get them really very smooth, but the idea was they were trying to find the different flavor components. Now, mind you, this guy had already built and sold the sparkling wine business, Scharffenberger Cellars. He decided chocolate was something he wanted to play with. So Alice and I went over and tasted, with the two of them, to give them our opinions, because he had already bought all the machinery from a German chocolate manufacturer, a small factory, and the machinery was being packed and shipped over here. But he was starting to buy up the cocoa beans, to get ready for this thing. That's where the whole thing got underway.

Geraci: Then once he sold it to Hershey didn't he then pick up and he's starting a new endeavor.

06-00:49:37

David: He's now selling tofu.

Geraci: That's right, it was tofu. Yeah.

06-00:49:43

David: In the meanwhile, before starting the tofu, he already was the founding father, or would you call it a surrogate father? Not a surrogate father, an adoptive father, of a new pork program up in Mendocino County. He lives still up in

the Anderson Valley, has a huge acreage, with oak forest and a lot of wild pigs running around in it. So they trapped some ten or twelve pigs and bred them and figured out which ones did what they wanted them to do. So they now have selected a breed, they have created a breed. These things are out there eating acorns and digging up roots and bugs and worms and snails and so forth, so he's on the road towards making a really extraordinary cured meat from special pigs grown on acorns, in Mendocino County.

Geraci: That he's bred. No, but it seems that he's one of those people who really moves from—He gets this urge and this passion and he really acts on it.

06-00:51:07

David: Oh, yeah. The Beaujolais Festival. We started doing that, where we would bring in barrels of Beaujolais. The new Beaujolais, it's legally released in France on—I don't remember. It's something like November 15 or October. I think November 15.

Geraci: It's November, yeah.

06-00:51:33

David: Then they finally got hip and realized that it would be better to release it on the same date all over the world, so they pre-ship to the States and other areas, so that on that same date, you can open the barrel of Beaujolais. We used to bring in a large barrel, and then as more and more people got interested in it, it became available. They started selling it in little fifteen-gallons chestnut barrels, the least expensive barrel they could find. Because it wasn't going to age any length of time, it was just a matter of carrying it so you could dispense it, and it looked kind of cute at the bar. Beaujolais dinner. When they built the new symphony hall in San Francisco, we were hired to set up food in the Wattis room, W-A-T-T-I-S. Mrs. Wattis was one of the major benefactors, I think, of building the new symphony—

Geraci: For all of the arts and education, the Wattis name is well known.

06-00:52:50

David: Right, right. So we did that. When Queen Elizabeth came, at the invitation of Mayor Dianne Feinstein, she had a reception for her in the Wattis Room. My biggest kick out of this whole thing was that when it came time to present the queen, all of us there sort of gathered in a big oval line around the room, and Dianne walked around the room with the queen and her consort. He was really intrigued with my name. He wanted to know what the story was with my name. Well, I mentioned Assyrian and he went off talking about ancient Assyrian history and shaking my hand. [they laugh] It was kind of fun.

Geraci: Well, you have to admit, the British did have a lot to do with those areas.

06-00:53:56

David: Oh, boy, did they ever. Prince Charles came to the university. There was some reception for him, at the art museum, and we catered that. No, Pierre Trudeau was at the art museum. We catered that, and we did cater a reception—it may have been at University House—for Prince Charles. So we got some pretty important catering things.

Geraci: Some big events, yeah.

06-00:54:34

David: The biggest party of all, it goes back to Bill Graham. Well, that 3,000 was the biggest dinner and the biggest thing done in one place. But one year, for New Year's Eve, he had a concert both at Winterland and at the Carousel Ballroom; and New Year's morning, we served breakfast simultaneously, in both places. So we served breakfast to 5,000 people. Once again, he was not about to tolerate buying eggs that came out of a container.

Geraci: No powdered eggs.

06-00:55:15

David: We cracked fresh eggs and made scrambled eggs and ham and sweet rolls and orange juice and coffee, the usual. I can't remember whether we had oatmeal or not. The very first thing I ever did for Bill—He really was interested in doing things with food, and sensible food, for the kids. When he first started, he was putting on fundraisers for the San Francisco Mime Troupe, for Ronnie Davis. He put on these things and had me get bushels of apples to put in front of the doors of the theater. So there were red apples and green apples, and as the kids walked in, the idea was to take something healthy and good for you, to try and set a better tone than this just being a place where you go to sneak acid and to do all those other crazy things you'd do. [they laugh] So food was a big deal. The backstage day—What did he call them? Not Day in the Park; that's something else. What the hell did he call it? Day on the Green. I guess it was the Day on the Green, wasn't it? There was just all kinds of good food for the backstage people. These were the artists. Aside from the riders on their contracts, in which they could specify what they wanted in their dressing room. These lists, Vic, they were really hilarious. Two one-liter bottles, or maybe it was one quart in those days, of Jack Daniel's Black Label; one pint flask of Jack Daniel's Black Label; one case Coca-Cola, in bottles; one pound of See's Candies. Every one of them, it was like a kid in a mad hatter's store. Do whatever you want.

Geraci: But those were the pampered stars.

06-00:57:57

David: Oh, my *God!* Pampered stars? It was just nutty. Then for a while he had this assistant—Barry Imhoff was his name—who oversaw all of the food stuff. Are we out of time?

Geraci: No, we have about two, three minutes left.

06-00:58:17

David: Oh. Well, I'll make it quick. Barry was a very big food guy. Big in girth, as well.

Geraci: Literally.

06-00:58:25

David: So he would have me bring whole New York strips, all trimmed, ready to go, and he would specify how thick a steak I should cut to put on the fire for the next guy that was coming down the line. [laughs] It got to be a little bit stupid. But lobster, whole lobsters that we would roast on the charcoal grill, and roast the steaks and whatever they wanted. These were the pampered.

Geraci: They were the pampered stars. Let's go ahead and end this tape, because we're right at fifty-nine minutes. Thank you.

Interview 4: July 26, 2011

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Geraci: I am Vic Geraci, food and wine historian from the University of California Berkeley's Regional Oral History Office. Today's date is July 26, 2011, and seated with me is Narsai David. This interview is being conducted in Narsai's home in Berkeley, California. This is interview number four, tape number seven. Narsai, when we left off last time, we were headlong into Narsai's Restaurant and we had talked about the Potluck. Today, you've got a lot of menus and documents and things, so let's start off with those, because they directly reflect those days.

07-00:00:44

David: Boy, those were the days. I did pull out a few things. Here's a copy of the complete Potluck wine list that we reproduced in this mini format, as a take-away thing that people could have with them.

Geraci: Oh, so these were something you wanted your people to take away with them.

07-00:01:11

David: Oh, yeah.

Geraci: Now, did you have any of your wines for sale?

07-00:01:16

David: Oh, yeah.

Geraci: Because I know like the Wine Cask in Santa Barbara has the restaurant, but actually, they sell bottled wine next door. So what you order off your restaurant list, you can actually walk through a doorway and go buy a bottle to take home.

07-00:01:34

David: Yeah. We did not have a separate retail setup and we did not encourage bottle sales, but we did encourage case sales, and we were able to get wines that many places could not get, because of the volume that we used. So we would get wine and sell it by the case, to people. A California on-sale liquor license automatically entitles you to sell beer and wine off-sale. So the same license covers the off-sale of beer and wine.

Geraci: I didn't realize that. Okay.

07-00:02:14

David: Particularly, whenever I would find a special deal—We were talking earlier about some of the early California Italian families making wine. D'Agostini, up in the mother lode, up in Amador County. When I was a college student, we used to drive up on the weekends. I have a friend who used to, quote, "collect" covered bridges. He would photograph covered bridges all over the world, and we discovered D'Agostini Winery up there. They only had three

wines. There was a burgundy, a reserve burgundy, and a dry white Muscat. I think it was called Malvasia Bianca. Their burgundy was primarily carignan, with a fair bit of zinfandel in it, aged in these great big redwood tanks. And the reserve burgundy was 100 percent zinfandel, and aged for a minimum of three years, in those big redwood tanks. Although they were selling it with screw-cap tops, I asked if there was any chance I could ever get it with a cork. He said that if I'd buy twenty-five cases, I could have it with a cork finish, because he still had a cork press that he just hardly ever used. It cost me \$9.00 a case, and I sold it for something like \$13.00 a case or \$14.00 a case. We used that as our house wine, that we poured by the glass at the Potluck. But whenever I had a delivery coming in, I would let my friends know and they'd line up, so that I'd order extra.

Geraci: Cases.

07-00:04:09

David: They had to come and pick them up on the same day, because we didn't have any storage space. They would be sitting right on the loading ramp. There were just a lot of special deals like that, which we did sell directly.

Geraci: Now, in looking at the wine list, it's interesting, because it's French wines, Italian wines, German wines, listed by country, even by regions; but then there you've got a really nice selection of California. We're talking Martini, Krug, Inglenook, Heitz, Beaulieu.

07-00:04:54

David: Buena Vista, Souverain, lots of wines.

Geraci: But I noticed on the older vintage red wines of Bordeaux, an 1870.

07-00:05:06

David: Yeah.

Geraci: That's quite a little collection going there.

07-00:05:10

David: Well, we had fun with it. There was a guy named George Linton. He's still around, as a matter of fact; he just turned ninety. He was a veterinarian in El Cerrito. Born and raised in Hungary, and a real wine aficionado, who started importing wine and selling it direct to retail, and also to restaurants. George Linton is his name and his company was Connoisseur Wine Imports. He would select wines. I'd mentioned to you that we started doing these special Monday Night Dinners at the Potluck. We would match up wines with countries. If we were doing a German meal or a French meal, the wines would be from Germany or France. He would select wines for us that we could use on these specific events. He was buying wine at Christie's auctions and coming up with things like those 1870s and unusual things, from time to time. Little by little, we started putting them on the list and developing a collection.

Geraci: Just age-wise, it's amazing, the amount of wines you have pre-World War II.

07-00:06:29

David: Yeah. As I mentioned, I don't have any of the regular Potluck menus here. I'm still digging through the attic to get to them. But here's an example of— On Monday nights, we used to do a special dinner, from a different country; and it was in addition to the regular menu. For that dinner, we served two wines, selected to complement the appetizer and the main course. Each of them was available by the bottle or the glass, at a reduced price. So you could have just a glass of each, with each course. Well, then in the spring, we did the anniversary of those Monday Night Dinners; and in the fall, we created something that we called the California Vintage Festival. I did pull out one of the menus from the Sixth Annual California Vintage Festival, from 1969, in October. There were twenty-one different wines available by the bottle or the glass. For this year, we featured the 1962 vintage. So there were eight different 1962 cabernet sauvignons—Souverain, Charles Krug, Charles Krug Vintage Select, Beaulieu, Beaulieu Private Reserve, Inglenook, Concannon, Louis Martini. Then there's a '62 Inglenook Pinot noir, a '62 Inglenook Charbono,

Geraci: My goodness. You can't find a Charbono anymore.

07-00:08:18

David: Right. A '62—get this—Pinot chardonnay, it was called in those days, before they realized that the grape was not related to the pinot. There's Pinot noir, Pinot blanc and Pinot gris. Somewhere along the way, Chardonnay had just gotten lumped into that family and everybody thought it was part of the same family. Well, it isn't.

Geraci: Because of the champagne industry?

07-00:08:42

David: Very possibly.

Geraci: Using those as the two main grapes for champagne.

07-00:08:45

David: Could very well be part of the reason that it just got lumped together in people's minds. Then we had some pretty unusual stuff. Here's a 1960 Hanzell. James Zellerbach—I think we talked about this last time. When he built Hanzell. We only had a few bottles. There were three bottles only, of the 1960, and then ten bottles of the 1965, and some older wines of Beaulieu. Anyway, each of these available by the bottle. So twenty-one different items you could get by the glass.

Geraci: I think one of the things, as I looked at that, the prices on there! Even given the fact that inflation and values today, things are more expensive, wines still seemed to be a little bit more reasonable than it is today.

07-00:09:49

David: Oh, a lot more reasonable, yeah.

Geraci: Even if you tripled that, or quadrupled it, it's still—You couldn't touch those wines in a restaurant for quadruple that price today.

07-00:10:01

David: Well, let's use some examples here. The 1962s, which were the featured Cabernets, it says here that Charles Krug 1962 Cabernet, the regular bottle price was \$4.75. That's served at the table. And we had it on special for only \$4.25. So what's that? About 12 percent reduction? I told you earlier that there was a 20 percent markup.

Geraci: You can't even buy a glass of wine for that today.

07-00:10:46

David: The Charles Krug Vintage Select—that's their fancy bottling—we were getting \$7.00, the regular price for that. But they ranged from \$4.00 for Johannesburg riesling to—Well, the most expensive was a 1957 Louis Martini Special Selection Pinot noir, that was \$11.00 on the regular list, for a bottle. To keep things in perspective, we had a five-course dinner, which cost \$6.00. That was the whole meal. In those days, coffee or tea was included; it was not an extra.

Geraci: I'm just looking at these meals, these wine prices, and these are nicer wines. Has not the modern restaurant, in some ways, priced a good portion of their market, the consumers, away from them?

07-00:11:49

David: Well, how do they say it? Don't get me started. I think the pricing policy for wine in restaurants has just gone nuts. I do not understand why restaurateurs—It's easy to just say, yeah, it's just greed. But it's not just greed; it's a change in the direction and the attitude towards what restauranting is all about. It's gotten to the point that at the better restaurants, there are so many employees in the kitchen, garnishing and decorating plates. There was a picture in the *New York Times* food section not long ago, of a chef putting a garniture on a plate with a pair of tweezers. I'll tell you, it just drove me nuts. A wonderful small restaurant in San Francisco that opened, with about ninety-five seats, we went to the opening night. There were nine cooks in the kitchen that I could see. Now, presumably, there were additional in the back, doing prep work; but there were nine actively engaged in putting up the plates. The chef, instead of being on the line leading the troops, was—If the kitchen is over there and there's a counter where the waiters are picking up, the chef was standing out here with the waiters and sort of pointing at dishes and with a cloth in his hand, touching up spots and so forth. It was like these guys—

Geraci: It's all visual.

07-00:14:43

David: It's all visual, and it's like they've become artistes that want it to look just so perfect. Come on, folks.

Geraci: That's the conductor of the orchestra, as opposed to one of the members of the orchestra.

07-00:13:55

David: I'm baffled by it. So if you're going to have that many employees standing around doing functionally nothing, you've got to pay for that, so that's expensive. It seems to me it's become really easy to just charge more for wine. Then that leads me to my absolute drive-me-crazy thing about wine service, and that is corkage and how they get carried away with corkage fees in restaurants. \$25.00 has come and gone, \$50.00 in some of these places. I understand that the French Laundry gets a \$100.00 now. If the wine is on their list, you can't open it. I was at a dinner at Gary Danko once—first and last time in that place—where corkage was limited to two bottles per party. Per party. A deuce could walk in with two bottles, but we were a party of twelve, and they wanted us to only have two—

Geraci: That's not even a glass per person.

07-00:15:09

David: Well, but the absurdity of it all. A party of two can have two bottles, but a party of twelve can have only two bottles. At that time, they were already getting—it seems to me it was \$35.00 corkage. We're talking more than ten years ago, it was already \$35.00 or more. So it's not as though they weren't making money on it. But it's become this punitive thing, where you either drink our wine, the way we want to serve it to you, or we're going to penalize you and charge you. So it's an attitude that baffles me, Vic. I don't understand it.

Geraci: Well, I guess what I'm saying is that it's become an elitist almost sport, and it has blocked many, I think, people out of participation in this. There needs to be more of these middle restaurants that cater to a broader audience.

07-00:16:07

David: Well, it's starting to happen slowly. There are also wine shops that are getting underway. This month's issue of the *San Francisco Magazine* has an article on a couple of wine shops that have nothing over \$25.00 a bottle, in retail wine shops. We just have let things run to extremes. That movie *Sideways* came out, which pounded Merlot and glorified Pinot noir. Well, overnight, the price of Pinot noir started climbing, such that most of the better Pinot noirs are above \$50.00 a bottle. If I were to say above \$40.00 a bottle, believe me, all of the decent ones are above \$40.00 a bottle. You've got to struggle to find anything for less than \$40.00 a bottle for a Pinot noir. High in alcohol, rich, lush, excessive fruit, excessive oak, excessive, excessive. It's no longer wine that you want to drink with a meal. It's wine that certainly works as a cocktail;

you get a big hit of alcohol and you get lots of lush fruit. But the idea of a bottle of wine to have with dinner—I'm drifting away from the subject.

Geraci: I think what I'm trying to do is set a perspective, as people compare. That was what you were doing then, and in many ways, it has changed drastically for restaurants and restaurateurs. There's a different philosophy that's going to evolve over this time. I think the philosophy has gone beyond good food with good wine, a communal setting, to almost this elegant sport of kings. I don't know if that's necessarily good. This is what I'm asking. Anything else about the wine list, the Potluck?

07-00:18:28

David: Okay, the Potluck wine list. It's about the time we're getting underway at Narsai's. So this was the design of our menu when we started Narsai's.

Geraci: That's a great color combination, too.

07-00:18:47

David: The men waiters wore black tuxedos with white shirt and a bowtie. The women wore a white blouse, an ankle-length black wrap-around skirt that just sort of flowed and then a waistband that had these colors in it, that wrapped around and tied, so it hung down, which worked nicely. My logo is the name Narsai's, with the apostrophe-S, the letters all superimposed, one on the other, to create that ligature, by a guy who grew up here in the Bay Area, Arthur Baker, Jr., who went on to become one of the world's great calligraphers. He lives in New York and has designed hundreds and hundreds of type fonts. Now, this is not our very first menu. We opened in April of '72, and this menu is dated September of '74. But you get a sense of what the menu looked like.

Geraci: I'm going to move this over here just a little bit.

07-00:20:09

David: This center section was the food. There was a lot more space given over to the wine list than to the menu. The meal was a complete dinner, a five-course meal. It included a choice of two soups; we always had a cream soup, as well as a broth soup. There were at least three different appetizers, some hot, some cold. Lamb was the predominant meat on the menu, and so we always had things like lamb kidneys, that were the byproduct of our lamb loin. We would sauté the lamb kidneys with maybe a little mustard sauce or something, as an appetizer. Occasionally, we would do things with brains or sweetbreads. Fish frequently, of one sort or another, shellfish or flesh fish. And pâtés. We made all of our own terrines and various kinds of sausages and pâtés. Then the main course was served with a fresh vegetable and a starch. The most common was a rice pilaf. We rarely had just plain white rice; it was with whole rye berries or whole-wheat berries or with barley or brown rice or wild rice or whatever. Something my mother used to do was to take little short pieces of egg noodle and brown it in butter, just the dry [pasta], brown it in butter and then cook it in the broth with the rice. So it was a rice pilaf that had little brown bits of

noodle in it. The beef dishes always had potato as the starch. Then there was a very simple romaine salad after the main course, and finally, dessert.

Geraci: Now, when you say a simple romaine, what kind of dressing were you using?

07-00:22:22

David: Just tossed in a simple vinaigrette. Actually, we called it citronade, because we used lemon juice rather than vinegar in it, a slightly emulsified dressing, with egg yolk. The idea was to try and avoid vinegar, because of our interest in wine. Even though you don't order wine to have with your salad, after the meal is finished you still have some wine left and you still have this salad there, so we wanted to avoid the vinegar in it. Everything was made in house—pastries, pâtés. We started baking our bread a couple years after the restaurant opened; at the very beginning, we bought bread. But what happened when we started doing the Monday Night Dinners was that we started baking bread to match the country that we were reflecting, and pretty soon we got hooked on it and we just started baking all of our bread.

Geraci: You talked about your baker last time.

07-00:23:38

David: Right. Then in 1978, we opened the little market next door, at which we sold an extensive variety of breads and pastries and the pâtés and terrines and prepared entrées. So we'll maybe save the market for another time.

Geraci: Okay, save the market.

07-00:23:57

David: But going back to this menu, in 1974 there were one, two, three, four—eighteen main courses. The prices ranged from \$7.50, which was the least expensive. That was fresh green fettuccini, tossed with cream and grated Romano cheese. This is the main course, but all of these prices are for the complete five-course meal.

Geraci: Right, this is a five-course meal.

07-00:24:34

David: Five-course meal, including coffee or tea, by the way. So that was the least expensive. Then for \$13.50 a person, we had the saddle of lamb, and we would roast the lamb saddle on the bone, bring it to the tableside on a large silver tray, with a bouquet of vegetables. When I say a bouquet of vegetables, there would always be the pilaf, since it was with the lamb. We would take a crookneck squash, cut it in half lengthwise, scoop it out, stuff it with creamed spinach. In season, we would do the same thing with artichoke. When the artichoke was really good, we'd get the really huge artichokes, carve the bottom out, and stuff it with creamed spinach. There were at least three different vegetables on the plate; some kind of a green vegetable—it could be spinach; in the springtime, inevitably, it would be asparagus. So at tableside,

then, the maître d' would carve the lamb loin off the bone. It was done in a classic way, used by the French for carving wild game, in which—If you can visualize what the lamb saddle looks like, it has a cross-section that's a little smaller than the rack of lamb, and it's about this long. We would slice it lengthwise, so we'd end up with slices, well, sort of like the shape of a slice of bacon, like an inch and a half wide by seven or eight inches long, quarter-inch thick. So there'd be three slices like that. We put the sauce on the plate first, laid the meat down on the sauce, and then the various vegetables and rice and so forth.

Geraci: See, that's a very old tradition, having the maître d' or having your head waiter actually participating in service.

07-00:26:41

David:

Right, in the dish-up. Okay. There were things like—what? We had a poached filet of salmon; salmon quenelles with a sauce nantua; squid that we stuffed with creamed crab and then drizzled with drawn butter and baked in a little casserole. For poultry, there was half of a disjointed fryer, sautéed with mushrooms and a French sausage that we made; a duck salmi—we got the Long Island duckling; this was in the days before we had much duck being grown here in California—that was slowly roasted. Sometime later, we ended up putting a whole roast duck on the menu. Again, something that was carved tableside, for two people. It was the toughest thing we had on the menu, in terms of working out the timing, and let me explain why. Domestic duck does not have a very large breast. When Americans have poultry, they want to see a large breast. Well, a four-pound duck is more than enough food for two people. Obviously, more than enough. But it sure didn't make much of a presentation, because when you carved it at the table and lifted it off that carcass, the breast was just this thin little thing. So I ended up buying five-pound ducks. Well, it was rare that people could finish the whole thing. They always had a chunk of it to take home for leftovers. But the most important thing was the time for cooking it. A five-pound duck takes a lot longer to cook than a four-pound duck, and there was no such thing as partially precooked. I do not believe in that. If we can't cook it for you from scratch, to your order, we're not going to serve it. If it's a special dinner, where it is a featured menu, that's a different story. But if it's one of the regular menu items, we have to be able to make it for you from scratch.

Geraci: What's the wait time? You're looking at least thirty-minutes.

07-00:29:05

David:

Oh, it was at least thirty minutes, yeah. It was thirty to forty minutes. But we had a soup and an appetizer that you were going to have before that, and we notified people that a particular dish took a little bit longer. We had a convection oven that was set at 500 degrees, and it cranked it up and it browned that skin and got it nice and crisp and rendered out the fat and it really did a job. Rack of lamb Assyrian was, from the day we opened until the

day we closed, the most popular item on the menu. We marinated it in essentially, my mother's recipe, with onion, lots of onion. Her marinades were always based on onion. When you get that onion juice to soak into the meat— And then onion turns sweet when it cooks; you got that sweet flavor cooking right into the meat. If it was with lamb, she would use some pomegranate juice. Of course, garlic. Well, onions and basil were sort of the square root of her cooking. That managed to get into almost everything.

Geraci: That's the baseline.

07-00:30:21

David: Right. If she was doing ground beef, she would use marigold leaves for the herb. That was the only herb she used to flavor ground beef, was marigold leaves. With poultry, she would use lemon juice and saffron and maybe a splash of white wine, instead of the pomegranate juice that she used with lamb. So the lamb was marinated in that juice, and then grilled to order. Medallions of beef. Sweetbreads that I named for Taillevent. Taillevent has always been, remains my favorite restaurant in the world. It's a three-star restaurant in Paris. Sadly, it's no longer three-star; they're down to two-star. These sweetbreads were served on a bed of chopped spinach, inspired by a dish that I had had at Taillevent. So that was just a quick overview of the menu, right near the very beginning. Then the décor of the menu changed, as we outgrew that thing, and the design of the ultimate menu was also inspired by the design of the menu at Taillevent. They had a similar kind of paper, a similar kind of size. In this instance, the menu itself is on the front, and then the inside is wines, and the back. So there's an enormous selection. There were some 400 wines printed on this list. We had a total of 1500 wines on the complete wine list.

Geraci: So you still had a separate wine list, for wines above and beyond.

07-00:32:33

David: Right. There was a separate type-written, bound volume. I was absolutely death on a situation where there were a lot of wines listed that we didn't have. Out of the 400 wines that were on here, the absolute limit was twelve. We could never be out of more than twelve items. Reprinting this menu was expensive.

Geraci: That's a very heavy—what? Probably a sixty-, eighty-pound paper?

07-00:33:09

David: Yeah, it's like a hundred-pound book or sixty-pound cover, and it's in three colors. So what I would do is have 5,000 sheets printed with the russet and the blue-green, and held in reserve. Then when we imprinted the black—Let's see. We did 5,000, and then I would do just a hundred at a time, when we would imprint them.

Geraci: How often did you change your menu?

07-00:33:49

David:

There were always important seasonal changes. But since we had the special Monday Night Dinner and a daily special, the basic menu didn't change that dramatically. In fact, we had people that developed such favorites on the menu that I'll tell you, when I did change a menu, I would get more grief. It was incredible. I may have mentioned this last time you were here, about that lamb loin that we used to make. We would take the piece of lamb loin, the same cut that we used for that one we carved at the table. We would sear it, cover it with a layer of our duck liver pâté, lay it on a mushroom duxelles and wrap it in a really, really buttery puff pastry crust. It was sort of like a miniature—oh, what do you call that fancy filet of beef?—Wellington, that's in a crust. It was sort of like a mini version of that. Incredibly rich. That pastry was all butter, the mushroom duxelles was made with cream.

Geraci:

And the pâté.

07-00:35:11

David:

The duck liver was with butter, not to mention the liver itself. I got to the point of feeling guilty about something that fatty on the menu, so I changed it. Used the same cut of meat, seared it in a pan, and finished it with a really, really luscious glace de viande that just sort of stuck to your lips. Really, really delicious. We used, as I recall, some wild mushrooms in the sauté. So we had the same cut of meat, the same amount of meat, very little fat, very, very austere presentation. People did not want it. What happened to that special dish that used to be on the menu? Well, we were not the kind of place you went to multiple times of a week. You went for a special occasion, and it was a special occasion place; you wanted those special occasion items to be there.

Geraci:

This is not McDonald's, that you're visiting daily.

07-00:36:16

David:

You couldn't get away with it. So anyway, under no condition, could there be out of more than twelve items on this list, before we had to reprint it. On the typewritten list, we only had two copies of this bound volume. If the bartender went back to the cellar and pulled the very last bottle of something, when he came back to the bar, before doing anything else, he took out a pencil and ruler and drew a line through that item, on both volumes, so that when you selected something from that volume—

Geraci:

You knew it was there.

07-00:36:50

David:

It was there. It just used to drive me nuts. You'd go to a restaurant and order a bottle and they were out of it. The second bottle, they're out of it. Third bottle, they're out and you start thinking, well is this list just for show or do you really have these? Well, we really had these wines. I don't know if I

mentioned before, we had 5,000 cases of wine in our cellar, so there were 60,000 total bottles.

Geraci: Which is part of the reason why *Wine Spectator* made you one of their excellence awards.

07-00:37:25

David: Yeah, we got the award. What is it called? The Grand Award of—
[background noise] Oh, you're not in the street. Today is street-cleaning day.

Geraci: Oh, okay. I parked in the driveway.

07-00:37:37

David: Right, right. Here's an example of the Monday Night Dinners. This was a dinner from Scandinavia, that we did in 1982. We served a white Rhine wine, a 1978 Hattenheimer Wisselbrunnen Kabinett. So that was a dry Riesling. The regular bottle price was \$14.50, and we had it for \$12.00. So that's close to a 20 percent discount. The glass price was \$2.40. So five glasses to the bottle. Then a 1974 Auxey-Duress, for a red burgundy; \$17.50 was the special bottle price. At this point, we had opened the market. We opened the market in 1978. Now, the market had a complete setup of retail, not only wine, but spirits as well. Any time we got something that was a particularly good value that we felt worked as a good retail item—Because you've got to realize that for the restaurant wine list, we were buying red wines, generally, long before we could put them on the list. We had to put them away in the cellar and age them. But occasionally, we'd find a special deal and we would not only feature it in the restaurant for a special event, but we would also feature it in the market. Then it would be cross-referenced here, so that you'd know that it was available in the market at a special price. So for this Scandinavian dinner, we started with what we called red and white gravlax—alternating slices of marinated salmon and halibut, pickled, and it made a pretty presentation—served with our mustard-dill sauce. Then we had a duck consommé, garnished with crisp duck cracklings, a veal loin glazed with a puree of onions, mushrooms and cheese. That was served with steamed potatoes, browned in butter, and carrots and asparagus that had been thinly sliced and then quickly sautéed. There was a marinated cucumber salad, for after the meat; and finally, an almond and raspberry gateau; and we made a dark, chewy rye bread, with a sourdough starter, for that day's bread.

Geraci: Ooh, a chewy rye with a sourdough starter. How much was that dinner?

07-00:40:35

David: Let's see. This is 1982, and it was \$27.00 for the five-course dinner.

Geraci: Keeping in mind that this is five-course, and a special five-course—

07-00:40:49

David: Special five-course, and coffee or tea were included. [they laugh] I still can't get over how, in the last fifteen years or so, or twenty years, coffee went from being fifty cents a cup to \$3.50 a cup in America, and we seem to have survived it.

Geraci: The patrons are paying for it.

07-00:41:10

David: Yeah. We seem to have survived it.

Geraci: Let's go ahead and we'll put these over here so we can finish those.

07-00:41:19

David: Okay, so we're talking about things at the restaurant.

Geraci: Oh, there's some great photographs.

07-00:41:35

David: Well, here are a lot of pictures of the market.

Geraci: Those, we could get scanned.

07-00:41:47

David: Well, here are a couple of pictures. Here's the dining room in the restaurant. This one is dated 1980, but—Well, from this angle, you can't see the curved wall. Here's the wine cellar.

Geraci: That's actually in the recent issue of *Wine Spectator*.

07-00:42:12

David: That's right.

Geraci: That's exactly the photo in there.

07-00:42:14

David: That's the photo they pulled out. Well, here I am at the bar.

Geraci: Oh, great one of the sculpture.

07-00:42:26

David: The sculpture of the reclining nude. That's made from steel rods that held together this 200,000-gallon redwood tank that I salvaged up in the Oakland Hills. It measured forty-five feet in diameter and eighteen feet high. The staves were three-by-eight. Visualize a three-by-eight of virgin-forest redwood. The grain is so dense that one man could not pick up one of these things. It took two men to carry one. Contemporary three-by-eight, eighteen feet long, you could hoist on your shoulder. Here's some pictures as we're dismantling the tank to salvage that wood.

Geraci: Now, in those days, they used these redwood tanks for reservoir water.

07-00:43:24

David: This was a water reservoir up in the Oakland Hills. It was called the Beacon Hill Reservoir.

Geraci: Put them up on the hills; [that's] how you build your pressure to bring it down to the homes below.

07-00:43:30

David: Right. It was replaced by a two-million-gallon underground concrete vault. Now, unfortunately, I don't seem to have a picture of the curved wall, but we reconstructed a section of the tank, in the original curvature. The restaurant had a fifteen-foot-high ceiling, and we just sandblasted that surface, so that you could see the texture of it, and it was used to separate the main dining room from the banquet room. So it was almost as if you were eating inside this huge redwood wine tank. Well, once again, the nude was made from the steel rods that held the tank together.

Geraci: We talked about that last time. That was done by a local artist.

07-00:44:42

David: A local artist, yeah. Martin Metal.

Geraci: That's a wonderful bar, though.

07-00:44:55

David: You recognize this guy? The young waiter that worked for me?

Geraci: No.

07-00:45:02

David: Somebody that you've interviewed for ROHO.

Geraci: Christopher Lee.

07-00:45:05

David: Christopher Lee.

Geraci: Oh, my goodness! [they laugh] Oh, my goodness.

07-00:45:18

David: When *Over Easy* was started on television—It was a program that dealt with aging in America; Hugh Downs came out of retirement to host it, and I did a weekly cooking segment. So here I am with Hugh. Here's Julia Child, who came on one day with me.

Geraci: I'll tell you one of the great collections that I've had the opportunity to spend almost a week and a half with is the Julia Child collection at the Schlesinger Library.

07-00:45:58

David: We'll just have to get these pictures scanned for you. I'm jumping ahead to the market, but I was very, very excited, very proud of the market. We opened in 1978.

Geraci: This is exactly right next door to the restaurant itself.

07-00:46:14

David: Right. In fact, here's a picture of the building, right on the Colusa Circle. Everything we sold was made in-house—the pastries, the breads, pâtés, terrines. I guess that's a duplicate of that. Entrées, prepared entrées to take out. This was the tasting bar, where you could buy a glass of wine and decide whether you wanted to buy any of it or not. Pastry chef, Joseph Strasser.

Geraci: We talked about him last time.

07-00:47:01

David: Joseph Maximilion Strasser. I think we talked about that dinner I did, the repeat of the Craig Claiborne dinner that was done at Chez Panisse. Well, Joseph made this cornucopia pastry, just as a decorative piece, to sit in the dining room when the people came for that dinner. These are black and white shots, more of the same. This is David, '93; so by then, I was already doing some radio work with KCBS. Well, now, here's some memories. In 1985, a masked ball folderol. It shows a bunch of us characters—Lorenzo Petroni, from North Beach Restaurant; myself; Al Petri, from Alfred's; Mike Catteras, from Trader Vic's; Ed Moose, from the Washington Square Bar and Grill; and Peter Sealy, from Mason's. Bunch of restaurateurs enjoying life.

Geraci: Doesn't get much better than, does it?

07-00:48:41

David: No, that's—This is when we built the new kitchen here at the house. We need to talk about that separately.

Geraci: That's almost a separate interview, in and of itself.

07-00:48:54

David: That's a whole different deal. I did a lot of catering. This is December 14, 1974, at the home of Dr. and Mrs. Benjamin Ichinose, in Hillsborough. Guests, Mr. and Mrs. Victor J. Bergeron, Trader Vic; Mr. and Mrs. Bing Crosby, who lived down the street from them; Dr. and Mrs. George L. {Delanias?}; Dr. and Mrs. Harry Drescher—Harry was one of the founders of the Berkeley Wine and Food Society; Mr. and Mrs. Joe Heitz; Mr. and Mrs. Louis Martini; and I prepared the dinner. Gee, there was one of those dinners I did at the Ichinose home. He decided to raise some trout in a pond that he had in the backyard, originally just for koi. He decided one day he wanted truite au bleu. Now, truite au bleu is the great French trout dish, in which the fish is cooked within seconds of pulling it out of the water. It's poached. It really comes out looking blue, the natural color of the skin, just with a little bit of

acidity in the water. By golly, we did truite au bleu. I mentioned the Crosbys because Kathryn Crosby hosted a morning television show on Channel 5, KPIX, the CBS station, and I was invited to do a cooking segment one day with her. I really hit it off pretty well with both Kathryn and with her producer, Anne Miller, and that led to my doing a weekly segment.

Geraci: Now, this is mid to late seventies?

07-00:51:11

David: Mid-seventies, early to mid-seventies, yeah. After the third appearance, I had to join the union, I had to join AFTRA, and they had to pay me. A grand total of \$29.00 was the union scale for my seven-minute segment. I would've gladly paid them to do it. There were times that before we got off the air, the phone at the office was ringing, for people wanting to make a reservation for dinner.

Geraci: The greatest advertising around.

07-00:51:43

David: The greatest advertising around. [they laugh]

Geraci: And they were paying you to do it.

07-00:51:48

David: They were paying me, on top of it.

Geraci: So do you want to talk a little bit about the show itself?

07-00:51:56

David: *Over Easy*? Yeah, sure. I don't know that I have much I can show you with it. Here, we did a bunch of recipes, Narsai's recipes for *Over Easy*, and they tear apart, into three-by-five cards. I can't remember how these were distributed.

Geraci: Maybe people had to call in?

07-00:52:29

David: Something like that, yeah. Everything that we did could be made very easily for one or two people, because as we get older, we tend to be alone; the family size keeps getting smaller. And it had to be easy to cook. The McGovern report on nutrition had just been released. Does 1976 sound about right for that? And we very carefully followed all the nutrition guidelines in that report, so we dramatically cut down on the amount of fat and calories, generally. So here's a lentil and barley casserole; moussaka for two portions; spinach soup for two; one serving of curried lentils; a salad Niçoise for one; a fish chowder; a fish Provençal; a Greek fish filet; chicken sauté; chicken in a pot, which is one of my all-time favorite recipes. It is so simple and so easy, and you get this beautiful dinner, if you're eating alone or if eating with a crowd. Now, this is one serving. One chicken leg and thigh or one chicken breast, cut in half; a bay leaf; a clove, pressed into a small clove of garlic; half a small

onion, cut bite size; a small carrot, cut in half-inch pieces; a small new potato or red potato, quartered, with the peeling; half a celery stalk, cut bite size; three small sprigs of parsley; a sprinkle of salt; a pinch of black pepper; and a cup and a half of water. It's so simple and straightforward. You put it all together and let it cook for a few minutes and you've got a—

Geraci: But I noticed one tendency in those; it seems that they're very much leaning towards the Mediterranean diet, in these recipes you've just talked about. The use of the lentils, the use of beans.

07-00:54:45

David: Yeah. Some of that just is really my ancestry coming through, too. Growing up in an Assyrian home, these were comfort foods and comfortable foods for me. But if you look for sources of protein and stay away from fat, the Mediterranean diet sort of evolves. You don't have to be in the Mediterranean.

Geraci: To enjoy it.

07-00:55:19

David: California, we're kind of the same kind of stuff as the Mediterranean. Here's a stuffed turkey. Complete stuff turkey dinner for two people. You start with a pound-and-a-half turkey thigh, and I showed how you put it skin side down and run a slit to follow the length of the bone, and carve around the bone and remove that thigh bone. Then make a stuffing or dressing, with—Gee, I think it was three slices of toast. Is that right? What did I call for here? Two tablespoons of oil, a small onion, a stalk of celery, parsley, four or six mushroom caps, some herbs, four slices of toasted stale bread, cut up. So you just mix all this stuff up together, pack it in there; turn the thing over, leaving the skin on, and tie a string around it, just to hold it together; and roast it with the skin on it, so you get that beautiful brown, crusty skin on the top. You slice through it, you've got the meat, the stuffing. We made a little gravy on the side, and you could really, truly have a turkey dinner for two people. Anyway, all the recipes were simple recipes of that nature that could be easily prepared.

Geraci: I take it, then, that this photo really ties into what we're just talking about.

07-00:57:04

David: Right. So Hugh Downs, he actually came out of retirement to host *Over Easy*. It was created by a guy named Jules Power, who had been an ABC executive in New York, worked on a number of very big-name, award-winning shows. He retired, moved to San Francisco, Bay Area, and decided to just do this as his contribution to the community. He did it with PBS. Hugh got such a kick out of being in front of the camera again that three years later, when ABC launched *20/20*, he agreed to host *20/20*. At that point, Mary Martin took over as host of the show and the show lasted three more years. About that time, Reagan went to Washington and disemboweled PBS, and just overnight, that ended the programming for *Over Easy*.

Geraci: Now, you were doing this once a week?

07-00:58:14

David: Yes.

Geraci: Was it KQED?

07-00:58:19

David: It was produced at KQED, in San Francisco.

Geraci: Now, that cookbook, I noticed it said over easy.

07-00:58:38

David: No. No, it was just this little thing, was *Over Easy* recipes.

Geraci: Oh, just that.

07-00:58:43

David: Yeah. We never did an *Over Easy*—In fact, I've just started working on a new cookbook for home use, something that will be simple cooking for everyday use at home. It's not what you plan for a big, fancy dinner party, it's just you go in the kitchen and cook and you can serve a dozen friends or serve yourself. The name *Over Easy* just keeps roiling around in my brain, wondering if I can use a name like that. I don't have my timeframe. Now here, jumping to 1985, Jim Wood, who was the food and wine editor of the *Examiner* at that time, did this article a month before I closed the restaurant. Well, you still can't see that curved wall [they laugh] that I had at the restaurant. This is before I was going to close.

Geraci: We're going to quit this tape right here.

07-00:59:55

David: Okay.

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Geraci: July 26, 2001. Interview with Narsai David, by Victor Geraci. This is interview number four, disc number eight. Okay, Narsai, when we left off, we were just going through a lot of memorabilia of menus, articles. I notice now you have a scrapbook here.

08-00:00:24

David: Lots of pictures. Here's an article in *Western Foodservice* magazine, in 1982. It says, "Vintage David: Thoughts on wine and wine lists from a connoisseur." It was just nice exposure for the restaurant. This was an article that appeared in *Bon Appetit Magazine*, by Jinx Morgan, and this was June of 1981. "Cater Your Own Party. A top professional shows how to plan and prepare a spectacular buffet for twenty-five, fifty, or more." It was really a wonderful challenge, because it gave you all the background material for how to plan and

design a buffet, and then of course, all of the recipes and directions and lots of color pictures.

Geraci: Now, let's go back to that just for a second. These articles that are coming out, as in the wine industry, food and wine writers have a *huge*, huge impact on the success of restaurateurs.

08-00:01:42

David: Oh, my goodness!

Geraci: What you're showing me here is, this is your advertising. This is getting you out there.

08-00:01:49

David: Absolutely. Absolutely. You can't buy this for money. You can't hire somebody to get an article like this. It doesn't hurt to have introductions. I remember when I met Kathryn Crosby and was invited to come and do a feature on that morning television show. It was a chance, and we hit it off. Once we hit it off, with both her and with her producer, then I was able to do some features.

Geraci: Now, does this really help kick start the restaurant and the store?

08-00:02:31

David: Absolutely! Absolutely.

Geraci: So this is a really big event, benchmark, break for you.

08-00:02:36

David: All of these things. The PG&E used to send out a monthly mailer with the bill. One month we were featured in that thing, and there was a long article, a picture and recipes. Wow. Everybody got that in their bill, PG&E, Pacific Gas and Electric. The whole northern part of the state got a copy of that. You couldn't buy that.

Geraci: It's the largest electric territory in, I think, the United States, almost.

08-00:03:07

David: Whew! And man, have they gotten away with murder. [Geraci laughs] So here's our almond cake, which is one of the all-time favorites, served with a raspberry puree. The same raspberry puree that we serve under the chocolate decadence. Then this article, done by Ruth Reichl, in *Metropolitan Home*. I love that she called it "The Narsai Complex." Plenty of double entendres there, but she was talking about the restaurant and the market and the catering and the wholesale complex.

Geraci: Well, just reading these... "American restaurateurs, like the star French chefs, are discovering that quality food can mean big bucks. With a first-class

restaurant/catering business and market, California's Narsai David is banking on the specialties of this growing."

08-00:04:07

David:

Gee whiz, you have pretty good eyes there, fellow. [Geraci laughs] Here's the fillet en croute. This was my variant on a beef Wellington. Instead of roasting the meat inside of a pastry crust, I made a forcemeat of pork and veal to put around the outside of it. So the pork and veal, obviously, the pork had to get fully cooked well done, but the beef wanted to be rare. It made a pretty nice presentation. So here's the artichoke bottom, stuffed with a yellow squash puree, oven-roasted potatoes, and a yellow squash stuffed with a creamed spinach, and then a broccoli spear. So that was the way we presented it. These were our epines. Here's a lobster dish, in which we cracked the claws and cut them on the bottom side, so you could easily pull the meat out, but we left the meat in it. Then the tail, we pulled out, and then we baked this whole thing with the puff pastry crust. So it made really a dramatic presentation. There are three of our pâtés, and of course, recipes for all of these. Chocolate decadence, when we did that chocolate decadence torte. There was a long article in the *Examiner*. I'm sorry, that one was in the *San Jose Mercury News*.

Geraci:

Oh, the *San Jose Mercury*. Okay, and this one down here says, "Narsai's, celebrate thirty-one days and thirty-one nights."

08-00:06:12

David:

Well, this was actually a paid commercial that we put in for the market, one month before we closed, saying that there would be something different on the menu every day, and staple items that were on the shelves had discounts as steep as 60 percent. I can't say it's the only paid ad I ever did, but we very, very rarely bought advertising. But when we were closing, we had to get the word out. Well, there's that article on the chocolate decadence. Now, this was an article that appeared, oh, in *San Francisco* magazine. So we reproduced the article. This is my chef at the time, Robert Boyle. It's a complete description and then a recipe for producing it at home. Here's a painting of chocolate decadence. I have the painting in the kitchen. A woman came into the market one day with that painting and I just about dropped my teeth. I thought, wow! That's my chocolate decadence.

Geraci:

It's amazing. It's almost two female centaurs, only they're zebra bodies.

08-00:07:44

David:

They're just amazing characters. Would I be interested in buying it? Of course, I wanted to buy it. I said, "Sold. How much do you want for it?" I couldn't imagine anybody else having it; I had to have it. I've mentioned my pastry chef, Joseph Maximilian Strasser. The guy was just such an amazing artist. This violin is all made out of chocolate. The bow. The roses are made out of marzipan. Here are some petit fours, as well as a teapot made out of marzipan, and decorated with gold leaf.

Geraci: And then the cups are filled with raspberries.

08-00:08:34

David: Yeah. The cups themselves are marzipan, so they're edible, as well as—

Geraci: How could you eat something that pretty. [they laugh]

08-00:08:46

David: This one, I'm not sure where this article came from. Photography by Bob Skelton. Oh, Motorland menu. The triple-A, American Automobile Association, had a magazine that came out on a monthly basis, and this was a feature in their magazine.

Geraci: Those magazines in that era really had a big impact on advertising for travelers. Now, is that a Concannon wine in the background of that one?

08-00:09:35

David: No, there's a Chandon sparkling wine and a Chateau Coutet.

Geraci: But I notice here, in all of these, you're featuring food, but there's always the glass of wine, the bottle of wine.

08-00:09:47

David: Oh, yeah. There's Joseph Strasser himself, with yet some more of his concoctions.

Geraci: Amazing!

08-00:10:11

David: Okay. Now, I. Magnin. When did we open I. Magnin? Hm.

Geraci: 1981?

08-00:10:37

David: That sounds about right. Well, we opened our market in '78, so obviously, it was after '78, because it was patterned somewhat on the market. They had decided that they wanted to do something with food in the cellar of I. Magnin. In days of old, the City of Paris, which had been across the street, had a really great wine cellar and food market at the lower level. They had gone out of business and were replaced by Liberty House. It's in the building, which is now Nieman Marcus. So there was really no food happening on Union Square, and I. Magnin decided to open a small specialty food market there, with a charcuterie in it. So I took over the charcuterie; I created the charcuterie. The market really wasn't big enough. It didn't have enough gravitas to make it work.

Geraci: Now, this was on Union Square, right?

08-00:12:00

David: Right on Union Square.

Geraci: So this is the same time Chuck Williams is opening Williams-Sonoma?

08-00:12:04

David: Right, right. But fresh food, other than restaurant food, on Union Square, the San Francisco homemaker was not thinking of picking up groceries downtown. And charcuterie items all had to be refrigerated. We packed a lot of things with gel ice because people weren't going home directly. It was an awkward thing. Well, to this date, you don't see much in the way of groceries on Union Square. But they also opened a café at the same time, and so we did the café and the charcuterie. Then the café lasted long after Magnin realized that their mini-grocery store didn't work and they shut it down, but the café kept going. It was just called Narsai's at I. Magnin. It was a simple salad-sandwich kind of thing.

Geraci: Well, this is designed on the old department store idea of women shopping, going out for lunch during the day with their friends.

08-00:13:23

David: Right. Sit down, have a simple meal. Entrée salads. There was a shrimp Louis, a curried chicken salad, a Thai turkey salad, a cobb salad—the original, I want you to know, as I put in quotes, from the Brown Derby restaurant in Hollywood. I can't imagine why people use that word, cobb salad, and do everything except what the cobb salad was all about. The cobb salad is a cobb salad. There's nothing wrong with doing your variation on it, but if you're going to call it a cobb salad, let it be a cobb salad. There was the Mediterranean chicken salad, or you could have it with salmon, for an added \$2.00. Narsai's Caesar salad, or with chicken added. A Caribbean chicken salad, a spinach salad, a salad Niçoise. Then some cold plates. An assorted vegetable plate, with our hoisin dressing; a cheese and fruit plate: Pacific Rim chicken breast, served with mixed baby greens. There were a number of sandwiches: a chicken and California brie on croissant; turkey and Jarlsberg; honey-glazed ham; cold roast beef; roasted eggplant and garlic—that was one of my favorites; a French brie and roasted red pepper; avocado and pesto with Jarlsberg; shrimp salad in pita bread; gravlax; ginger-roasted pork loin; or a tuna salad in pita bread. There were a few appetizers, some soup and sandwich combinations, and then lots of pastries. Häagen-Dazs ice cream sundaes and specialties. Those are the days of Häagen-Dazs ice cream. I think I. Magnin closed in '94. I'm pretty sure that's right. The café stayed until Macy's took over Magnin, and then completely redid the store.

Geraci: So '94, '95.

08-00:15:47

David: Right.

Geraci: You designed the menu?

08-00:15:55

David: Oh, yeah.

Geraci: You were overseeing its operation?

08-00:15:58

David: Right. The menswear was on the lower level of I. Magnin. Wow. I wore some mighty fancy clothes, for mighty low prices, for a mighty long time, [they laugh] because as an employee, I got a 20 percent discount. But what was more important was you normally are not at a store when the sales happened that happened to have your size, right? But I was in and out of that store constantly. There wasn't a week that I wasn't in there a couple times. With the men's department being right there, I just sort of cruised through, and of course I got to know the sales group. So something is reduced 40 percent, and today there's a one-day-only sale, extra 25 percent off; and meanwhile, I get 20 percent off. When the bill comes at the end of the month—Pretty soon, I was buying stuff for less money that it cost to clean it. [they laugh]

Geraci: So those were your well-dressed days.

08-00:17:21

David: Right. Right. Now, this *Cook Off America*, this is again, time-wise, this was done in 1999. *Cook Off America* was a PBS show created by Marjorie Poore Productions, in San Francisco. They sent a camera crew around the country for a year, photographing food festivals and contests and competitions. Then we went into a studio in Vancouver, BC and taped these half-hour shows, demonstrating the recipes that came out of these various events. The Georgia Apple Festival, Sutter Home Winery Build a Better Burger Contest, the Catfish Institute's Online Consumer Recipe Contest, Green County Cheese Days, International Chili Society World's Championship Chili Cookoff and Salsa Contest.

Geraci: That's a mouthful.

08-00:18:36

David: Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Newman's Own/Good Housekeeping Recipe Contest. So we did that for one season. Doesn't really say an awful lot about us. A woman named Mara Rogers and I did the taping. *Cook Off America*.

Geraci: But that's even pushing you further into a wider context of food and wine.

08-00:19:30

David: Right. Right. Yeah, by far.

Geraci: One of the things that I had in my notes, around 1979, Belle Rhodes—she was an Oakland cooking teacher—along with Cecilia Chiang and you, gathered in the spring, in a party to honor Jacques Pépin.

08-00:19:48

David: Oh. What year was that?

Geraci: '79. Belle Rhodes, the name has come up quite a few times.

08-00:20:01

David: Sure. Belle, her name was Ivabelle Rhodes, and she was married to Bernard Rhodes. He was an MD, a dermatologist at Kaiser Hospitals, and in fact, rose in the administrative ranks, so that when he retired, he was the number two person in the entire Kaiser Permanente Medical Group. They were among the founders of the Berkeley Wine and Food Society, and very, very serious wine nuts. They started a vineyard in the Napa Valley that ultimately became Martha's Vineyard. They sold it to Tom and Martha May. He, of the May family, May Company, I can't remember what the family did. But he sold the vineyard to them and they replanted it. But that became the very famous Martha's Vineyard, grapes all went to Heitz Cellars. The Rhodes were investors in Heitz; they helped several small wineries get started. Very, very serious wine and food people, the most elegant hosts. Well, there's no doubt that they did more than any other single couple in our time, in our age group, towards establishing really serious, really considered and considerate entertainers.

Geraci: They're raising the bar.

08-00:22:06

David: Raising the bar. Dinners were always such elegant, wonderful things, and Belle started doing cooking classes and teaching. They lived up in Piedmont, and the dinners always started with champagne and a couple of hors d'oeuvres and ended up with port and great Cuban cigars. Ivabelle had a cigar along with the rest of us. Then they introduced snuff. In retrospect, it sounds like a joke. I still can't believe I actually tried snuff. [they laugh]

Geraci: You had to do it once, right?

08-00:22:59

David: I almost choked to death. Along came Carl Sontheimer, who created Cuisinart. The Cuisinart got onto the market and I have always had a penchant for buying things wholesale. Why buy them retail if you can buy them wholesale? Well, owning a couple of different companies, I was able to use those as an entrée and I got to know the local rep for Cuisinart. Not coincidentally, he was married to a woman who was my market manager. She was the woman who helped me build and design and create the market, Maggie Mah, M-A-H. He and his brother were the distributors, initial distributors for Cuisinart. So I offered to get the Cuisinart at wholesale for Belle, for her students. I charged her \$5.00 more than my cost. Now, I don't remember how much. How much were the Cuisinarts in those days? Could they have been fifty bucks or something? So she would ask me for ten of them, and I would always order eleven, figuring I'd get one for myself. Well,

inevitably, by the time the delivery came, she needed one more because somebody needed a wedding present or something. Gosh, this went on for a couple years, during which time I never did get one for myself, because every time I'd get an extra one, she needed it. But all of our friends had Cuisinarts that they were getting at wholesale cost plus five bucks. Another good friend, Stan Schwartz, also from Berkeley Wine and Food Society days, also a physician—he was a neurologist—hosted a dinner for Carl Sontheimer at his home in Danville. Carl's West Coast regional manager or some title of that ilk was there and sat at my table, and I told him this story about how I'd been providing these things to all of these cooking class students and never did get around—The next morning, sitting on my porch, was a box with every attachment, the largest unit they made, with the juicer attachment and the shredder attachment and everything else they'd ever made for it, was sitting on the doorstep. I still have it; it still works perfectly fine. But Belle really did a lot to raise the awareness of the more serious and formal entertaining. It really became a lot of fun to match the wines with the food. It was her husband, Barney Rhodes, who was the inspiration behind chocolate decadence. Michael Broadbent of Christie's auction house in London was a good friend of the Rhodes, and he would frequently visit them and spend time at their home. So she was always designing meals around Michael and his expertise. He was not only a great auctioneer, but he really knew wine, this man, particularly burgundy, Bordeaux and port. Those were really, truly his bailiwick. He was the auctioneer that did the first Napa wine auctions. I don't know how many he did, but it was *very serious* auctioning in those days. It was the way he did the auction at Christie's. This was a no-nonsense—He sat there and tapped his little stone. It wasn't a gavel, really. No, it was like a gavel without a handle; it was just the head of it and he rapped it down. Belle was so instrumental in bringing all of these people together.

Geraci: Now, you said she was also instructing students?

08-00:27:50

David: Yes, yes. She taught; she taught cooking classes in her home.

Geraci: Oh, in her home, okay.

08-00:27:55

David: Yeah, in her home; and then she started doing them in some retail shop. I forget where it was, but it was always more casual and it was like friends of friends.

Geraci: Obviously, in this one article that I picked up, the fact that Jacques Pépin was going to come to dinner. Her circle of friends includes a lot of big names.

08-00:28:23

David: She reached out to people. Jacques has become a personal friend, a close friend. We're the same age and we've shared a few birthdays and had some

very, very good times together. Yeah. Jacques and Julia Child and Cecilia Chiang. She was close to Cecilia.

Geraci: Because Cecilia was, at that point, just getting the Mandarin going.

08-00:28:53

David: Right. Right. Yeah, Belle was an awfully good supporter to have on your team, if you were going to do something with wine or food.

Geraci: Okay. I interviewed Cecilia, also. In interviewing her, at this time, in this era, she's beginning to do the cooking school type thing in Asian techniques, bringing in people like Danny Kaye was one of the people that spent a *lot* of time at her school.

08-00:29:23

David: Well, he really helped Cecilia big-time.

Geraci: Right.

08-00:29:26

David: He really brought a lot of splash, a lot of panache to Cecilia's classes.

Geraci: But that's back to the point we were talking about; a good restaurant has to have some sort of—It's not advertising you buy.

08-00:29:38

David: Right.

Geraci: There has to be a buzz created, to get people to want to come to your restaurant.

08-00:29:45

David: Yeah. Yeah, that's really true.

Geraci: Let's talk a little bit about the specialty foods that you were selling.

08-00:30:05

David: Ah. Yes. In fact, that mustard. Thank you for reminding me. In 1978, we opened the market. As I said, we were making all of our own sausages, pâtés, terrines, various specialty sauces that we featured from time to time. Then I found a woman up in Mendocino, named Marilyn Douglas, who was making preserves. When I say old-fashioned preserve making, are like twelve jars in a jars in a large pot, standing there and stirring it. She was happy to make preserves for us, with my label on them. I was headed to France and thought it'd be really neat to get a Dijon mustard bottled in France, for our line. So I went to the French agricultural people, SOPEXA, S-O-P-E-X-A [Societe pour l'Expansion des Ventes des Produits Agricoles et Alimentaires], to ask for help and direction, and they gave me names of producers in the Paris area. They provided me a young woman as a translator, and we went out to visit

these places. Well, we landed at one place named Paul Corcellet, who was a very highly respected charcuterie in and around Paris. But in addition, he manufactured a line of mustard that he bottled for many different companies. *Wow*, was I astounded to learn that he made the mustard for Fauchon. Gee whiz, Fauchon, the world's greatest food store. If my dinner menu was patterned on Taillevent, my retail market packaging was patterned on Fauchon. In fact, I'll show. We just found some of the old shopping bags. I'll pull them out to show you in a minute. The kind of graphics we did was inspired by Fauchon's. So here's a guy who makes mustard for Fauchon's is going to make mustard for Narsai's. Isn't this incredible? So we tasted all the mustards and I'm so excited. Now, I know about American yellow poster paint mustard and I know about the Oriental mustard seed that's used in Chinese restaurants and I know about Dijon mustard. But Dijon mustard is a different color, so I really don't know what it is. In the course of conversation, I say to this man, "By the way, what kind of mustard seed do you use?," expecting that it's not the black mustard or the yellow mustard or the American poster paint mustard or the Oriental mustard; it must be another kind of mustard. He says, "American." Well, my French is not good enough really to repeat this in French.

Geraci: Something didn't get translated correctly here.

08-00:33:25

David: Something didn't get translated correctly. So I turned to this young woman who's the translator and reposed the question to her, she posed it to him in perfect French, and he responded in perfectly fine English, "Yes, yeah, oui, oui, monsieur, American, sometimes Canadian." I said, But, but, but—but—but—but—the label says Dijon." "Ah, ha-ha, mais oui, monsieur. There is not enough mustard grown in Dijon to make mustard for Dijon." Well, now, you think back to mustard in the Napa Valley. In the springtime, the fields are covered with mustard. Of course, it grows.

Geraci: That's the cover crop.

08-00:34:13

David: It's this beautiful cover crop. But it's not cold enough for us to develop mustard seed. It's not cold enough for us to have a mustard seed as a crop. That comes from the same area where we grow winter wheat. So way, way up in the northern part of the country and into Canada, the same area that grows the wheat. North America, Canada, Australia, that's where mustard seed is grown. So I came home absolutely thunderstruck. We are growing mustard seed in America, shipping bags of it to France. They are grinding it with French water, French distilled vinegar, putting it in bottles, calling it Dijon mustard, and shipping it back to America. Clearly, I had to make this stuff here myself, using our own product. By the way, I call mine Dijon-style mustard, not Dijon mustard, because I think it's a little misleading.

Geraci: Well, the French get very kind of snooty about their names, anyway. There's many a lawsuit over names.

08-00:35:34

David: Right. But isn't it interesting that Dijon mustard is not made from mustard in Dijon. That's why I said, "I don't want mine to be called Dijon mustard; I want to call it Dijon-style mustard. But it turns out that what they call Dijon mustard has nothing to do with Dijon. So now, what about the color, then, of these mustards? Well, it turns out there really are only three basic mustard seeds, the yellow one and the black one that I've been talking about, and the Oriental one. The mustard that's used, the black one is a hotter, more pungent mustard than the yellow one. The Oriental one is the hottest of all; it has a much higher oil content and a much more pungent oil. The black one is decorticated. That skin, black skin is removed, and that's what's used for making basic Dijon mustard. The American stuff that looks like poster paint is colored with turmeric. That's not the natural color of mustard. Now, the next time you pick up a jar of mustard, be sure to look at the ingredient list. The USDA has ruled that turmeric is first, a colorant and secondly, a flavorant. So you can't lump turmeric in with spices, on an ingredient list. If turmeric is used in a food product, it must be listed separately because it is, first and foremost, a colorant. It is more coloring than it is flavoring.

Geraci: I sometimes wonder about the FDA and some of the rulings.

08-00:37:27

David: Well, this one you could understand, because it is such a powerful colorant. To be honest with you, it really doesn't have that much flavor. Now, if you get fresh turmeric—The Berkeley Bowl frequently has fresh turmeric. It's in the same family as ginger and it's a rhizome. Smaller than ginger, a much more intense color, obviously, and it does have a little bit of an interesting flavor. But once it's dried and powdered, it's like powdered ginger. What is powdered ginger? It's kind of a useless sort of thing, compared to fresh ginger. Anyway, I came home and figured, we're going to make our own right here. Now, we use American mustard, but the ingredients—People don't realize that 80 percent of the weight of what's in a jar of mustard is the liquid. If you read those ingredient lists, water and distilled vinegar is what's commonly used. We use white wine, apple cider vinegar. White wine and apple cider vinegar. Those are the only liquids. We used to use white wine vinegar, but—By the way, I turned this business over to my niece, some ten years ago. It's her business now; she still manufactures this product. But she got a kosher seal on here, and the people that mill the mustard seed don't always have kosher white wine vinegar on hand; they do always have kosher cider vinegar on hand. So we changed the recipe to use the cider vinegar instead of the white wine vinegar. But that's the only liquid in here, is cider vinegar and white wine, which are a little more expensive than water and distilled vinegar. So it is a little more expensive, but that's how we make it. We also make the mustard-dill sauce, which is a sauce that I designed to serve

primarily with gravlax or with steamed salmon. It's an emulsified dressing, like a mayonnaise, with some sugar and dill, and of course, the mustard.

Geraci: Because when I think dill, I think salmon.

08-00:40:00

David: Right, exactly. Right. It really works well with that.

Geraci: Now, you started selling these, then, out of your retail outlet, next to the restaurant itself.

08-00:40:10

David: Right. Right. And then a small amount of wholesale evolved. Well, direct mail, we started selling from our mailing list. I haven't yet dug up examples of our mailers; I'll have those for you the next time. Then retailing it, getting it out into the marketplace, generally.

Geraci: Now, who were you wholesaling to at this point?

08-00:40:42

David: Stores like specialty retail markets. Andronico's, Cala Foods, the Marina Safeway, Oakville Grocery. Think of the more specialized food and specialty food stores.

Geraci: Especially the Oakville Grocery. That's an interesting place because it's unassuming, as you walk up and look at it. But inside there's a treasure trove of specialty items. It's just amazing.

08-00:41:25

David: Oh, yeah. Gosh, that store brings back—Have I ever told you about the sweetbread dinner that I was serving at Harry See's home in the Napa Valley?

Geraci: No.

08-00:41:40

David: We did a lot of catering. Harry See, of See's Candies, had built a beautiful home and planted a vineyard, in the Napa Valley. We were catering a dinner one Saturday night. Maybe a hundred people, give or take. It was a sizeable group, as I recall. The main course was sweetbreads. Well, as you know, sweetbreads are just about the richest piece of meat you can put into your mouth. That and brain. Nothing could get any richer than that. But they don't really have a lot of flavor. The flavor is so dependent on the sauce that surrounds it. Well, we're in the middle of hors d'oeuvres, when we discover that we didn't take the sauce with us. The main dish is sweetbreads; we don't have any sauce. I called the restaurant. It was a Saturday night, they were short one busboy, they were really packed, jammed. There was no way they could let anybody go. There wasn't time enough for me to send somebody from St. Helena, to make a round trip. So I dispatched someone to the Oakville Grocery store. I said, "Buy anything you can find that says beef on it.

Preferably, beef gravy, beef stock, beef consommé, beef soup base, beef base. If it says beef get it.” Meanwhile, I took the parsley stems and whatever other things that we had that might have some flavor value. I raided Harry’s refrigerator and got some onions and garlic and celery. Chopped all this stuff up and got some large sauté pans scorching hot, with olive oil, browning these vegetables, getting them as brown and caramelizing them as much as I could, while they’re off shopping. Once the vegetables had gotten brown, I poured a couple of bottles of really good cabernet on top of it and got this stuff rapidly boiling in a big kettle. Indeed, what came back was things like beef consommé, beef gravy, beef soup base, whatever. All of this stuff just got dumped into this pot. Enough water, more red wine, and it boiled furiously, so that it was not only boiling rapidly and cooking flavor out of all those vegetables, but also boiling down and reducing and concentrating it, until finally, the beef soup base that we put in and those cans of gravy had enough thickening in it that that started thickening it up by itself. When finally, push came to shove and we were out of time, we strained it well and then mounted the sauce with a lot of raw butter. Let me tell you, it was a delicious, delicious sauce. In fact, I wrote a recipe that I called bordelaise a la minute. How to make a really good and proper bordelaise sauce in a hurry, using a can of gravy. You start with a can of gravy and a can of red wine—

Geraci: Because you’re right; there’s enough thickening in that gravy.

08-00:45:30

David: Right, that’s already thick enough, but you’ve got to get more flavor going in it. The red wine gives you the acidity and the depth. By the time it boils down long enough to boil away the excess liquid, the thickening agent is still there. Then when you mount it with the raw butter—There’s nothing that tastes like raw butter. We pulled it off. The dinner was a great success; everybody loved the sweetbreads. Had no idea that we didn’t have our brown sauce with us when we got there.

Geraci: But isn’t that, when we talk about chefs and all these, people don’t realize it’s the creativity and the ability to substitute, the ability to adapt to different ingredients or lack of ingredients, that really separates.

08-00:46:27

David: Step back and punt. Don’t be afraid. Experiment. Push a little.

Geraci: Hasn’t that been a problem with so many of the recipe books? Especially today, where it gives prescribed amounts. A hundred years ago, recipe books did not—We didn’t have standard measurements, so they didn’t give these measurements. People had to be more adaptive.

08-00:46:51

David: The thing that concerns me is that if anything, we appear to be becoming more rigid, rather than looser. You’d think that people would ease up and loosen up a little, but I keep seeing the picture of that chef with his tweezers, putting a

little one piece of a micro green in a particular location on a particular something on the plate.

Geraci: Are we not becoming like the old traditional French?

08-00:47:27

David: Have we just reversed everything and gone back to the formality?

Geraci: Even the formality within kitchens. For years, the French brigade system in running a kitchen.

08-00:47:43

David: Well, that's what we have now. That's what we have now.

Geraci: Yeah. We're going back to it.

08-00:47:47

David: At Narsai's Restaurant, we had 120 seats, nominally; but if we put tables together, we would slide in a couple of extra seats, so we could maybe get a maximum of 140 seats in there at any one time. On a Saturday night, we would traditionally serve between 200 and 250 people. It was always busy on Saturdays. We never had more than three cooks in the kitchen, and it was a complete five-course meal. Soup, an appetizer, a main course, a salad and a dessert. Everything prepared in house, everything cooked to order. Vegetables were fresh, not frozen. The meats were fresh. We aged the meat ourselves. I was very proud of the food that we served. No, obviously, I couldn't possibly do the kind of garniture and decorating that these young people are doing today. But I was telling you the story of one restaurant that had ninety seats, and I counted nine people in the kitchen, during the time of service. God only knows how many people there were there earlier in the day, doing prep work or in the back room, doing preparation. If the brigade gets to the point that each person just has one little tiny thing to do, what does that have to do with creativity? I don't get it.

Geraci: Or station chefs that only do one dish.

08-00:49:24

David: Right. Right. So you wonder why things keep getting expensive.

Geraci: Right. So you're paying for that, in the long run. One of the things we'll get to next time is a kind of side to all of this, is that you also start getting really involved in the Berkeley Rep at this time. We'll do that separately, when we have more time. Anything else? How about the grape growing at that point? You had gotten some vineyards, hadn't you?

08-00:50:05

David: Yeah, that gets going here at about this time, too. 1977, we bought that first vineyard. Look, we bought from Barney and Belle Rhodes, by the way, this seventeen acres of merlot, on the Oakville Cross Road, right next door to

Silver Oak, on the south side of the Oakville Cross. Actually, they bought and planted that in 1968, to merlot. Then this parcel came on the market, about eighteen or twenty acres, between Manley Lane and Bella Oaks, which is on the Rutherford Bench. Barney kept saying he always wanted to plant another vineyard on the Rutherford Bench. Martha's Vineyard is on the Rutherford Bench. Rutherford Bench has the historic claim for being the most exciting part of the Napa Valley. That and then Stag's Leap has developed into a really sexy label. Oakville is a sexy label. Conn Valley, where we grow our cabernet, has become—[There are] a couple of wine makers that like it better than the Rutherford Bench. But anyway, he really wanted to take another shot at the Rutherford Bench, so he sold us the merlot vineyard and he bought Bella Oaks, which he planted the cabernet. Of course, the name of it is Bella Oaks. That vineyard, also the grapes went exclusively to Heitz. So that there's a Heitz Martha's Vineyard and a Heitz Bella Oaks.

Geraci: So your grapes were all contracted out?

08-00:52:08

David: Oh, yeah, we were just selling grapes. We didn't even imagine making wine.

Geraci: Now, at this time, too, weren't people like the Muscatines even starting to invest in vineyards.

08-00:52:20

David: Chuck and Doris invested in a vineyard with Rod Parks, up on Howell Mountain.

Geraci: This is a good, fun, hobby-type thing for people.

08-00:52:34

David: The connection, the involvement? Well, as intensely involved as I was with the Napa Valley—I was in and out of the Napa Valley all the time, and the thought of being able to own a piece of a vineyard was just exciting. It was like feeling a real part of the whole thing. Yes, so that was 1977. Then in 1981, we bought two pieces in Conn Valley, two adjacent parcels. One was some seventy acres and the other was fifty-four acres, owned by the same people. It straddled Conn Valley Road. The fifty-four acre parcel was on the east side of Conn Valley Road, and the larger parcel on the west side. Actually, although the address was on Conn Valley Road, the bulk of the land was actually in Spring Valley, came down on the other side, sweeping down towards Heitz and Joseph Phelps. We planted both of those in Cabernet sauvignon.

Geraci: Who was your vineyard manager?

08-00:54:09

David: A guy named Laurie Wood, who had planted Barney's vineyard, both the merlot vineyard that he sold us and the new Bella Oaks, and then he planted those vineyards for us, too.

Geraci: So is he making decisions as to rootstock you were putting in?

08-00:54:31

David: Right. Right. Well, I was taking his advice. That's a really sore point for me, a real bit of agony in my feelings towards the university, because AXR-1, it turns out that there was a lot of research indicating problems with AXR-1, and the university never raised any flag about problems with AXR-1. Much later, we discover that the company that's selling the rootstock is owned by the brother of the researcher at Davis that's doing the work on AXR-1. No, there was no absolute proof that AXR was susceptible [to] phylloxera; but there was enough proof that there was a problem.

Geraci: The science hadn't been taken fully enough to the extreme step—There was a question. There was an if, and they released it with that if.

08-00:56:02

David: Yeah, but my point here, Vic, is that in proper research, when this kind of information showed up, I think it was incumbent upon the university to say, warning flag; something isn't working here. Let's take a look. But they didn't do that.

Geraci: I think that's what I was trying to say. Red flags came up and no one responded.

08-00:56:27

David: But the university never did send out that warning. I'm troubled by the fact that the guy who is selling this rootstock is the brother of the guy who's doing the AXR research at Davis.

Geraci: What makes it even worse is this is at a time when the industry is expanding. It's exploding, not expanding.

08-00:56:46

David: It's exploding.

Geraci: And this rootstock is being spread all over, from Southern California all the way up through Northern California. Throughout the state, it's being used.

08-00:56:57

David: Well, we suddenly had some twenty-five acres of cabernet on AXR-1 that was not working. I ended up selling that seventy-acre piece in Spring Valley, which just really broke my heart. It was the single most beautiful vineyard on God's earth. Even the address in Spring Valley was pretty sexy. Sold it to one of the partners of Merryvale, who ripped it out and replanted it. But I figured I

couldn't possibly afford to—I had three vineyards, all on AXR-1. The Merlot, of course, that had been planted back in '68, when nobody knew any better. I can't complain about the Merlot vineyard. But to think that in '81, I was planting on AXR-1 and there was plenty of evidence out there that it wasn't right.

Geraci: What made it even worse, I think, is that it's expensive to rip out a vineyard and plant a new one. Especially depending on the trellis systems you're putting in.

08-00:58:37

David: Just the thought of putting in the vineyard is so high to begin with.

Geraci: It's not as if you can graft over it, because your rootstock is bad.

08-00:58:45

David: It's the rootstock that's the problem. That's what you have to replace. As I say, that left a bad taste.

Geraci: Well, I'm going to ask you one more question and then we're just about done with this tape. Show us your shirt.

08-00:59:04

David: Oh. [they laugh]

Geraci: That kind of ties to the wine.

08-00:59:09

David: My shirt. How many years did I judge at the—It started out being called the Los Angeles County Fair Wine Judging, but it has evolved now into the Los Angeles International Wine and Spirits Competition.

Geraci: It's one of the big ones.

08-00:59:31

David: Oh, my, it is a very, very big one. Gosh, I started judging there back in the seventies, and I judged for more than twenty years, before—Oh, suffice it to say that I had a bit of a falling out with the guy that ran it and I decided I didn't want to do it anymore.

Geraci: It wasn't worth the battle.

08-00:59:59

David: Well, I didn't like what I saw. There were a number of us that dropped out. Then it got reorganized some years later, and I got invited back and I started going back. It's a very serious judging. They do a hell of a job. They've added olive oil in recent years, too. They've just added spirits, as well, so it's become quite a major event.

Geraci: Well, we're just at one hour on this tape, so we'll go ahead and finish off here.

08-01:00:36

David: Okay.

Interview 5: August 2, 2011

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Geraci: I am Vic Geraci, food and wine historian from the University of California Berkeley, Regional Oral History Office. Today's date is August 2, 2011, and seated with me is Narsai David. This is interview number five, discs number nine and ten. Narsai, I think beginning in the early eighties, your career starts to take a little bit of a new turn, and that's towards media—radio, TV. You start doing some interesting things in that area.

09-00:00:43

David: Well, it certainly gets moving faster by the eighties, but it really started shortly after I opened the restaurant, in the early seventies. 1972, I opened the restaurant. A friend got me an invitation to appear on Owen Span's morning talk show on KGO Radio, and we spent an hour talking about wine and food. We hit it off pretty well and I started doing that fairly regularly. Then she got me an introduction to Kathryn Crosby, who was doing a morning show on Channel 5, on KPIX, the CBS station. I hit it off pretty well with Kathryn, as well as her producer, Ann Miller, and I was soon doing a regular weekly feature there. So that one, I think we may have even talked a little bit about that before.

Geraci: We talked a little bit about that one, yeah.

09-00:01:45

David: And how exciting it was to me, because I would be demonstrating a recipe, and before I got off the air, the phone at the office, at the restaurant, was ringing with people wanting to make a reservation for dinner. After my third appearance, I had to join the union, and then they had to pay me the grand sum of \$29.00.

Geraci: Did you have to join Equity?

09-00:02:07

David: Actually, AFTRA.

Geraci: AFTRA, okay.

09-00:02:10

David: American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, AFTRA. I got the huge pay of \$29.00 for each appearance. Hell, I would've paid them \$129.00 to be on, for the publicity. [they laugh]

Geraci: For the publicity. That is really the beginning. It goes back to Julia Child, basically. But the sixties, you're talking about early seventies.

09-00:02:35

David: Early seventies, yeah.

Geraci: This is the beginning of the new phenomenon of food radio, food TV.

09-00:02:41

David: Right, right.

Geraci: Actually, the birth of, I guess we could almost say, the celebrity chef also.

09-00:02:48

David: Well, yeah, I would have to say that between Julia Child and Jim Beard, you probably have 200 percent of the beginning of celebrity chefs in America. You just hadn't heard that much about the names of chefs—certainly, not on a national basis—until the two of them came along. After the war, and particularly in San Francisco, famous French chefs—Jimmy Coulot, at Le Trianon, had Paul Dufour, who many credit with being the most important influence of French cooking on Northern California cuisine, was Paul Dufour, coming to San Francisco. But there were a few locally-known chefs. Chicago had Louis Szathmary at—Oh, what was the name of his steakhouse? My mind just went blank.

Geraci: You'll remember later.

09-00:04:05

David: But Julia and Jim became the national names.

Geraci: At that time, Craig Claiborne, in writing about it, this is really pushing that celebrity status, I guess, because in the fifties, sixties, even into the early seventies, when you went to a restaurant, the chef was someone hidden in the back, that people didn't know. They knew the front house and that was about it.

09-00:04:39

David: Yeah, it's true. You had to go to France to find the idea of the famous chef. Restaurants were named for the chef. You went to Bocuse, if you were going to go eat Paul's food. So chefs started getting some recognition. The radio and television stuff, Jacques Pépin certainly came on the scene and made an important contribution. He took the exotic French cooking and made it approachable, made it understandable. It didn't have to be a mystery. Those first two books he did, the technique and the method, are filled with pictures. It was like a television show with still pictures. Who'd ever heard of a cookbook that had—It was page after page of photographs, full-color photographs, showing you exactly what to do.

Geraci: That begins an era of food photography.

09-00:05:45

David: Right. Well, but not only photography of the finished product, but in the kitchen, step by step for how to make it. How do you make a puff pastry? How do you make a vol-au-vent? How do you deal with the subtleties of getting the textures and the appearances right? Then simultaneously

happening on television, as well. More talk on radio. In San Francisco, let's see, it was again, in the early seventies—I can't tell you exactly which year; no, not the early seventies, the mid- or late seventies, late seventies—that there was a guy named Joe Carcione, C-A-R-C-I-O-N-E, an Italian guy who was a produce merchant at the San Francisco Wholesale Produce Market. He did a segment on KCBS Radio called *The Green Grocer*. He had this wonderful accent and a very opinionated, fascinating character.

Geraci: But that in itself told us something as a nation. We were starting to have availability of produce that we had never seen before, and people didn't know how to select it. They didn't even know what it was, in some cases, what to use it for.

09-00:07:24

David: Yeah, more and more. And that hasn't stopped; that's going full tilt now. Last time you were here, we were talking about purslane, or pigweed, as we called it as kids. Verdolaga, it's called these days, because a Spanish name like verdolaga sounds a lot more interesting than purslane. What the hell is a purslane? It sounds like a lane in the street or something.

Geraci: [laughs] Or pigweed.

09-00:07:48

David: I have it growing out in the garden now.

Geraci: Wonderful. [they laugh]

09-00:07:56

David: We used to, as little kids in Chicago, go out with my grandmother to the end of the streetcar line, out into the forest, woods, and harvest wild garlic and ramps and wild leeks, to make a springtime dish during Lent. That stuff is in the markets now. Whoever imagined a wild garlic or a ramp being sold in a grocery store? Dandelions. We used to pick dandelions in Lincoln Park when I was a kid in Chicago. All of a sudden, there they are in the market now. It's a produce item.

Geraci: Or on hillsides. I know in San Diego County, you had the small artichokes, sweet anise, all on the hillsides. I can remember my aunts going out and just harvesting.

09-00:08:54

David: Sure. There's a guy that started a business a few years ago, who sells spice mixtures. He started out selling fennel pollen. How in the world do you capture pollen? Well, if you've seen how wild fennel grows out in the countryside that you were just talking about, where entire hillsides are covered with these plants that are four feet and five feet tall; and if you go when the blossom is just right, you just sweep through there and you could just fill a basket of it falling off the branches. We had a couple plants that Veni planted

out here in the front. There was a break between the boxwood hedge and where the dahlias were planted, and the neighborhood dogs used to walk into the garden right at that spot. So to provide a little barrier for them, she put these fennel plants. It wasn't long before they were five feet tall. They became such a barricade that aesthetically, we didn't like them and we took them down. But during that period, wow, I was harvesting fennel pollen right in my front yard. Those fennel fronds are just so delicious, as well. We never were able to get the nice heads of fennel, though. These things just automatically shot up into these tall, gangly plants.

Geraci: The wild stuff around here is mainly for the frond itself.

09-00:10:25

David: Right, right.

Geraci: Yeah. So this is all coming about, then, at this same time, and each one seems to be fitting into the other. Necessity is the mother of invention, I guess.

09-00:10:47

David: Yeah, but just exposure and awareness is a lot of it, too. People bringing it to market, things that we considered weeds. Going back to purslane a minute, it really took the interest of Mexicans in the Hispanic markets asking for it, because they were familiar with it and they ate it and they had a name for it, verdolaga. All of a sudden, I see this stuff in the markets and I'm thinking, wow, verdolaga; that looks just like pour-pih-kheenah; that was the Assyrian name for it, pour-pih-kheenah. Don't try to spell that one. [Geraci laughs] P-O-U-R-R-dash-P-I-H-dash-K-H-E-E-N-A-H, pour-pih-kheenah. Well, the French is pourpiou; how much different is that? Purslane, pourpiou, pour-pih-kheenah, verdolaga. How about cilantro? All through my growing-up years and through my college years and well into the restaurant business, that was called Chinese parsley.

Geraci: Epazote.

09-00:12:22

David: Well, epazote. That one, I have a hard time with. That's still not used very much.

Geraci: You now find it on a regular basis in a lot of markets.

09-00:12:31

David: Right. Right. I've got to digress here for one minute, because that's a bit of a pet peeve, is the number of really credible chefs who will talk about putting epazote in beans to eliminate the gas. Well, that simply is not true. Now, there's a little sidebar here that's worth looking at. First, its Latin name is chenopodium, and chenopodium is, in fact, a chemical that's used for deworming dogs, okay? So if you were to use enough of it, it would certainly clear out the GI tract. But the amount that's used in flavoring bean dishes is

hardly going to make any difference in the amount of gas that your body has. It's so easy to degas beans. The scientists right here at the USDA field station in Albany, California did the research on it. For the life of me, I can't understand why people still keep putting this bad information in books. The problem is that our body doesn't have the enzyme to break down some of the complex carbohydrates in beans. Therefore, they pass through the stomach unaffected by the digestive system. They get into the small intestine, and there, they finally start to ferment, and that gives us the problem. Well, if you drop the beans into a large pot of boiling water, boil them for two minutes, put the lid on it, take it off the heat and let it rest for an hour, drain it and discard that liquid, and you get rid of 85 percent of those carbohydrates that create the problem, without losing any of the nutritional value of the beans. That's pretty simple.

Geraci: Because the bean itself, as it comes in contact with water, goes through the process of imbibition, and that's where it's giving off its gases as it's swelling and reconstituting itself with liquid. So that would be the effective way then. Anyway, we kind of digressed a little bit. I think a good digression, in that the time was right for these radio and TV shows, and you were right there on the cutting edge of that.

09-00:15:03

David: There was a real interest in it; that is true. I certainly enjoyed it. I also spent some time—oh, it was more than ten years—at KTVU, on their morning show. At first, I was doing a segment once a week myself, and then I started hosting a chef once a week and then doing a cooking demonstration myself once a week, so that I was there twice a week. In 1984, I made my first appearance at KCBS. I came in as a stand-in for Harvey Steiman, S-T-E-I-M-A-N. He's gone on to become the editor at large for the *Wine Spectator* magazine. From the time KCBS ended talk shows in 1990, he's been at the *Spectator*. I came in to sit in for him when he was away. Enjoyed it a lot, so I started a Saturday program called *The KCBS Saturday Kitchen*, and that was from ten o'clock until noon. Then in 1985, after I closed the restaurant, I wanted to do more talk radio; I was really hooked at this point.

Geraci: You were hooked on it.

09-00:16:30

David: I proposed a two-hour evening show, from seven to nine, Monday through Friday. They were very interested, but before we could get the contract signed, CBS nationally, signed up—How can I blank on his name? The most famous talk radio person, nationally syndicated guy. Not on food. They signed him up, starting at eight o'clock, so there was only one hour available, from seven to eight. I accepted that and we did *Narsai and Company*. So Monday through Friday, from seven to eight in the evening.

Geraci: Now, this is syndicated nationally?

09-00:17:23

David: No, no. *Narsai and Company* was just a San Francisco talk show. Then I continued the Saturday morning ten-until-noon show, as well, so I was on six days a week.

Geraci: That's a full-time job.

09-00:17:42

David: Well, it was a bit of a job. Then in 1990, KCBS became all news and they ended all their talk shows and offered me the job as food and wine editor. I would file thirteen ninety-second features each week. There were two a day, Monday through Saturday, and then one on Sunday. Each of them ran three times through the day, so they would alternate—number one, number two; number one, number two—all through the day, starting at 10:53 in the morning and going until 2:53 a.m.

Geraci: TV time, right?

09-00:18:26

David: Yeah. [they laugh] I give recipes; I reviewed cookbooks and wine books. In the days of the talk show, I would frequently have guests and actually interview people on air, or have somebody with me for half of the one-hour show. In the current format of doing these little features, I occasionally do fifteen-minute interviews that are filed as a podcast, and then I extract some of my ninety-second features out of those podcasts, and at the tail end of each ninety-second feature, I'll say, to hear the complete interview, go to—

Geraci: Right.

09-00:19:19

David: But yeah, media, food and wine media became important. Wine, look at all of the magazines. *Wine Spectator* was started as a little tabloid-size newsprint thing in Southern California. I can't remember the name of the guy that started it.

Geraci: Wasn't it *Wines and Vines*?

09-00:19:40

David: No, that's a separate one.

Geraci: Oh, is that separate? Okay. But Marvin Shanken had brought?

09-00:19:45

David: Well, Marvin Shanken *bought*.

Geraci: Right, bought that.

09-00:19:48

David:

I'm trying to remember the name of the guy he bought it from [Bob Morrisey], but I draw a blank there. Look at the empire he's created. It started with the *Wine Spectator*; and then he added *Cigar Aficionado*; and now he has the other magazine that deals with spirits. Well, *Wines and Vines*, you mentioned, has gotten going; there's the *Wine Enthusiast*. *Patterson's Weekly*, which was just a spirits magazine, done just for the trade—if you owned a liquor license, you automatically got a subscription to it—has now taken on a whole new image, with a heavy emphasis on wine, and is becoming more and more wine-oriented. Andy Blue either bought it or bought a share of it, after he left *Bon Appetit* magazine. [chimes]

Geraci:

For whom does the bell toll?

09-00:21:06

David:

Yeah. [laughs] Let's see. Television and radio. Julia Child, of course, really captured us with her television stuff, more than anything else. I think what she brought that was most important was that, A, it was okay to make a mistake; the world was not going to come to an end. I have two sort of flip sides of Julia. One, my wife Veni made a navarin of lamb once, following Julia's book. I came home and the entire kitchen counter was covered with pots and pans and bowls and containers and things. She was doing it step by step, as Julia specified. It was absolutely delicious; but I showed her, the next time she wanted to make a navarin of lamb, how it could be done in about one-fourth the time, with one-twelfth the amount of clutter in the kitchen. But as a learning experience, she saw step by step, what it was like. Second half of the Julia story: The day that I fell in love with Julia, she was making a charlotte on television. I had, by then, been doing a little bit of television myself and so I was really astounded when she lifted the mold off the charlotte and it collapsed on one side. I physically gasped and I thought, oh, well, surely, they're not going to show—They're going to bring out another one. She slowly turned the platter, where the collapsed side would face her and be away from the camera, and it was as if she was patting a little baby's bottom. She said, [impersonating Child's voice] "Well, that happens sometimes, and you just turn it the other way, so the guest sees the other side." Man, I was hooked!

Geraci:

It just relaxes the viewer. Then there was the incident where she dropped the chicken on the floor.

09-00:23:30

David:

It was just so wonderful that this woman, who had become bigger than life, could deal with it so realistically. Yeah, that *does* happen. We rarely served soufflé in our restaurant. Occasionally, we would schedule it for a special dinner. If somebody wanted it and ordered in advance, we'd be happy to make them a soufflé. But I always thought it was just not nearly worth the trouble. It was exciting, it was fun, and that was about it. But I'll never forget my chef, Bob Boyle, telling me about a restaurant he had worked in where the maître d'

was always prepared to say the right thing when he delivered a soufflé. He'd take it to the table, and when he would spoon the chocolate into the chocolate soufflé, occasionally, he would dip the spoon in and it was obvious the whole thing was undercooked and it would collapse. He would just spoon in the sauce and say, "Oh, the chef makes this so perfectly, it's always so nice and soft inside." The very next table, he might have one that had been baked long enough that there was hardly any soft left inside at all; it was just risen up so high and gotten so dry that the guy would spoon the same chocolate sauce in, and with the same degree of aplomb, would say, "I can't believe how the chef can make these stand so high every single time. Let me give you another spoonful of sauce." [they laugh] The marketing and the magic of it. It was the magic, because it was something so unusual, nobody had seen it before, with special treatment. You go to a fancy French restaurant to get cherries jubilee over vanilla ice cream, or a chocolate soufflé. Then people like Julia letting you see that it's not impossible to do this at home; it's just another dish you could put together.

Geraci: Well, a spirit of adventure with food. Being willing to experiment.

09-00:25:49

David: Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid.

Geraci: Yeah. Be willing to experiment. I guess in the case of French cuisine, not to be afraid of all the rules. It's so codified, all the techniques, the traditions.

09-00:26:09

David: Vic, I'm often asked, and I've talked many times about the evolution of California cuisine. I feel really strongly that the absence of that codified set of rules that you're talking about is what enabled the creation of what came to be known as California cuisine. Those of us that were accused of being involved in—I remember *Gourmet* magazine said that Alice and I were doing something called California cuisine. I asked Alice what that was; she had no idea. She asked me if I knew what it was. We were just cooking what we felt like cooking. We were not locked in by the centuries of tradition that a French chef was locked in with. We have this wonderful exposure to the Pacific and the Pacific Islands and tropical fruit and spices like fresh ginger and fresh turmeric and things like this. We taste these things in Chinese cooking, we like them and we adapt them to our use. I'll tell you, you'd have a hard time finding a French chef, in those days, that was even willing to look at fresh ginger root, because Escoffier, and Kareme before him, and Taillevent before him, knew that ginger was this dry powder that came from India and was used in spice cakes and such. It had its place and that was the end of it. You just didn't go any further than that. Well, we weren't locked into those traditions. We didn't know any better. We didn't go to any school. We didn't work in our uncle's kitchen, doing something by some rigid code. We enjoyed cooking and we did what we felt like doing.

Geraci: In a way, though, that also changed the makeup of how a kitchen was run at the commercial level. You don't have the military brigade system that the French developed to keep these rules in line.

09-00:28:25

David: Well, yeah, but I'm really worried that we're heading back in that direction. I really worry, Vic, that the pendulum may've swung back the other way. An absolutely marvelous restaurant in San Francisco opened just maybe two years ago, with ninety seats. Splendid restaurant; we just loved it. I counted nine cooks in the kitchen, from where I was sitting. The chef was not on the stove side of the kitchen directing the troops, he was on the waiter's side, with a little side towel, touching up any spot on the plate and making sure that the garnishes were just right. It was like he was directing this orchestra. Everybody had a specific, assigned task. There was a photograph in the *New York Times* food section a couple months ago, showing a cook, with a pair of tweezers, locating some microgreens on a plate as a particular garnish. This goes beyond the word precious. So I'd rather see a little more loosening up in the kitchens.

Geraci: Isn't that role you just described that the chef was taking on, that's almost the role of the expeditor, isn't it, in a larger restaurant?

09-00:29:58

David: Well, in a larger restaurant, an expeditor would be the person that just makes sure each order is coordinated, so that two orders of sweetbreads, one order of veal kidneys and one order chicken breast come out at the same time for this table. That third dish of sweetbreads isn't going to be needed for another five minutes over here. But you're right. In a sense, the chef is doing more of that and less of actually controlling the cooking. I like to see the chef with a spoon in his pocket, that gets dipped into a sauce and is tasted frequently, because the proof of the pudding, et cetera. I think when you do too much codifying of the precise way it needs to be done, you just loose too much.

Geraci: Now, in doing these shows, does Narsai have an actor side? Is there a side of you that enjoys that?

09-00:31:13

David: Oh!

Geraci: A frustrated actor, I guess, maybe.

09-00:31:15

David: Oh, a frustrated actor? I thought I was just an actor, period. Oh, I enjoy it, yeah. Yeah, there's no doubt. No doubt, I enjoy it. The camera turns on and I have fun with it. I'm able to be relaxed and enjoy it. It's not frightening. The first few times I was on a television camera, there was some real concern to what to do.

Geraci: Did you have any traumatic moments, like Julia Child, where something didn't turn out? Or was it one of those where you already had the finished product done before you got to pull it out.

09-00:31:55

David: Well, usually, when I did these features in various morning shows, earliest, we had seven minutes to do a food feature. That kept getting chipped down, until it was down to about four minutes. So you had to do so much advance preparation. I wanted to show the raw ingredients from the beginning and how I start the dish. Say I have a chicken. Well, my infamous chicken mole. I had a four-minute segment; I was doing it for a Cinco de Mayo holiday weekend, on KTVU. The pieces of chicken had already been browned in a pan, along with some sliced onions. Then I took the chicken out of the pan, poured in a cup of broth, with the fire turned up really full tilt, and deglazed the pan and transferred all of that into the blender; a spoonful of peanut butter, some raisins, some sesame seeds; there was chili powder and I forgot what else; whirled that around for a few seconds, until it was smooth. Then I put the pieces of chicken back in the pan, poured this sauce over it, put a lid on it and said, "Now, let that simmer for twenty minutes, until the chicken is tender. And voila, over here, here's one that's already completely done and ready to go." I have a standing challenge to a cook that I really respect, who's done a lot of work with Mexican food, that I'll put this up against his mole anytime. His, according to his cookbook, takes four days to prepare and the recipe covers four pages of the book, because it specifies four or five different kinds of peppers, and some are fresh and some are dried. Some are roasted and peeled and then cooked, and all these different steps. I'm thinking, the average person is not going to do this.

Geraci: They don't have time to.

09-00:34:26

David: They're not going to make a mole; they don't have the time or the inclination. Now, what is chili powder? You buy chili powder in a store; it's a blend of various kinds of mild chilies, generally. There's some hot chili in it. Depending on the brands, the cheap ones have salt and other stuff to stretch them; some have some herbs in them. But by and large, it's a blend of mild chilies. Why can't I just use that? When I put in a little square of my baker's chocolate, in that blender which has the boiling hot liquid from the pan, it melts instantaneously. Putting in a spoon of peanut butter; all moles have some kind of nuts in them. There is no way on earth you could grind nuts as smoothly as commercial peanut butter in your blender at home. You're not set up to do it. Well, everybody's got peanut butter at home. So what if it's not almonds or pecans or walnuts or some other nut? It's a nut, and it's not as if nobody uses peanuts. They use a lot of peanuts in Mexican cooking. So the peanut butter was already there, it's already ground nice and smooth. You're going to adjust the hotness of the dish with your own chili peppers, anyway. So I go back to the archeologist in this guy writing his cookbook. I'm sure that

he's in this restaurant in Mexico, where the guy uses a blend of these three chilies. Since they probably mature at different times of year, some of them are dried, some are smoke dried, so that they're in like a chipotle, and some have been cooked and canned, because that's just the tradition for the way they do it. Well, that doesn't mean that if the guy came into an empty kitchen and was asked to make a mole with what he could put his fingers on in the market, he would still do all of that stuff, because you can achieve a very similar kind of thing.

Geraci: May I ask who the chef was?

09-00:36:45

David: Yeah, Rick Bayless.

Geraci: Okay, it was Rick Bayless. Have you tried any of Diana Kennedy's recipes?

09-00:36:51

David: Oh, yeah, I've got a lot of her cookbooks. I knew Diana; I've met her.

Geraci: Wonderful lady.

09-00:36:57

David: Just a real sweetheart. She's the one that really taught America how to cook Mexican food.

Geraci: Good regional dishes.

09-00:37:05

David: Right. This newest book of hers that just came out is a beautiful coffee-table book to look at. It's huge. Well, it's not a folio size, but it's pretty big, and full of pictures. You could just sit here and flip through it for the pictures. No, what Rick has done, I think is important. He's recorded very, very accurately and scientifically, I guess would be one word, a historian, recording exactly what's being done and how it's being done. But there also comes a time of saying, hey, wait a minute. We've got to do this in a regular kitchen at home, where we don't have all of those resources and we don't have four days to make a pot of chicken mole. Carol Field's first Italian baking book, called *The Italian Baker*, which really taught us how to bake Italian breads—Well, first, I've learned everything I know about making, whether it's panettone or panforte or any of the various Italian breads, very, very well, from that book. She really, really gives you the specifics. But when I see a recipe that says three quarters of a cup of flour plus one tablespoon, that kind of stuff drives me nuts. Now, I don't question that when she saw this recipe being produced at some particular bakery, that she must've taken very careful record of how many kilos of what kind of flour went in there and how many kilos of water went in there, and when all this got translated down—But wait a minute, folks, here's something that's, I think, pretty important. Most Americans do not use scales to weigh their ingredients; they use volume measure. If you

were to measure flour by using one of those measures where you scoop into the bag and scrape off the top, by scooping it in like that, you have compacted the flour in there, so that there's a lot more flour by weight in that measure than there is if you have a clear glass measure and you spoon the flour into it, like this. What difference is that one-tablespoon going to make? Or a different view. You can make a bread with two cups of flour to a cup of liquid, and it's going to be a really light, airy bread, like a sandwich bread. You can also make a bread with three cups of flour to each cup of liquid, and it's going to be a dense, firm bread, like a heavy sourdough or a rye bread or something like that. Well, if you've got that much latitude, what's with one tablespoon? I think people get worried. It's like, oh, my God, this thing's going to explode if I don't do it right. If I don't measure it exactly right, the recipe's not going to work.

Geraci: It's not rocket science.

09-00:40:53

David: No. I think people get intimidated into being afraid to experiment with things.

Geraci: In a way, that's been the direction of our—Cookbooks have changed dramatically over the last century. I think one thing was the standardization of measurement has made a huge deal; but we're almost scientific cooks, as opposed to—I don't know how to explain it.

09-00:41:26

David: Well, no, you've explained it very well, is that we're so worried that it may blow up if we don't do it exactly right. More people are buying scales. The idea of weighing the ingredients. It's a perfectly fine idea, if you're weighing ingredients. But gosh, if you have a mixer in a commercial kitchen, where you have to weigh out forty pounds of water, some five gallons of water, or 112 pounds of flour, it'd be kind of silly to be scooping that into a measuring cup. Gosh, in a commercial kitchen, they weigh the water by a flow meter that measures the liquid coming through the pipe. You set it to deliver thirty-two pounds and it delivers thirty-two pounds. My five-quart KitchenAid mixer, I can knead three pounds of dough, so I make two pound-and-a-half loaves at a time. For that small amount, a couple of tablespoons more or less, one way or the other, it's not going to—

Geraci: Yeah, it doesn't—Anything else, then, about this time period, as far as radio, TV? Was there anyone else doing radio or TV spot shows in the Bay Area at that time?

09-00:43:16

David: There wasn't much on a really regular basis. Harvey continued doing the *KCBS Kitchen*, as I said, until 1990.

Geraci: That's when he went to *Wine Spectator*, right?

09-00:43:28

David:

Right. When KCBS stopped doing talk. There were other people that would do some occasional—Gene Burns, even now, has a show on Saturdays, on KGO Radio, that is pretty much food and wine oriented. I read that—well, now I can't tell you which station it is—one of the casual talk stations is starting a Sunday, two-hour food show. Morning television still has chefs that do a cooking demonstration. But the big change is the Food Network, and then all of these endless things that are happening on the Internet. Chow this and chow that and chow hound and—

Geraci:

Everybody has a food or a wine blog going.

09-00:44:35

David:

Yeah. Complete with moving pictures.

Geraci:

Yeah, even Facebook now is filled with—Wineries want to be up on Facebook, restaurants want to be up on Facebook. Twitter; they're moving to a different genre. Also I could see where the small local or regional shows—this actually started nationwide—are being replaced by, as you mentioned, number one, the Food Network, but national syndication of food programs. So there's less and less need for those local shows.

09-00:45:15

David:

Yeah, I guess on the cable show—The regular big three networks aren't doing much of that.

Geraci:

Well, you have the TV show *Hell's Kitchen*; Jamie Oliver was doing some.

09-00:45:37

David:

Yes, yeah, yeah. What's the name of the guy that beats the hell out of the young acolytes? [they laugh]

Geraci:

That's reality TV. That goes to a different genre somewhere along the way.

09-00:45:55

David:

Larry King was that guy whose name I couldn't come up with before.

Geraci:

Oh, it was Larry King, okay.

09-00:45:58

David:

CBS signed him up to start his show at eight o'clock in the evening, and so that's when I created *Narsai and Company*. We made it from seven to eight, instead of seven to nine.

Geraci:

So you had to bend to Larry King. [they laugh]

09-00:46:11

David:

Yeah. Long before I even knew who the guy was or what they were talking about.

Geraci: One of the things that we had also talked about, you're starting in this media; you also did, at least in one example, a menu for a local little pub.

09-00:46:29

David: I had completely forgotten about that, that little brewpub.

Geraci: This was in about 1989.

09-00:46:35

David: Yeah. These guys started this little brewery, and they wanted some simple pub food and some ideas. They were hardly restaurateurs; they were brewers.

Geraci: Now, this is Triple Rock.

09-00:46:52

David: Yes, Triple Rock Brewery, in Berkeley. The only thing that I did with other restaurants in those days was just on a friendly basis. I'd be happy to give people ideas, suggestions, but I wasn't involved in anything.

Geraci: So you haven't really done any restaurant consulting. Which it seems a lot of chefs and restaurateurs, later on, they'll do a lot more consulting.

09-00:47:26

David: No, mine has always been much more casual. I have a lot of friends in the business and they ask my opinions, which I'm happy to share with them. But no, I've not done any consulting, as such.

Geraci: It's during this time, also that we have the development, I guess, of what becomes known as the gourmet ghetto.

09-00:47:57

David: Ah, the gourmet ghetto. Herb Caen, you know, coined that phrase.

Geraci: Oh, I didn't know that. It was Herb Caen. Okay, great.

09-00:48:02

David: Yeah. The gourmet ghetto. He was joking about how only in a place like Berkeley could the word ghetto apply to something like food. The gourmet ghetto, in and about the environs of Chez Panisse, Shattuck, between Cedar and Vine. Actually, the first was The Cheese Board. Meg [Elizabeth] and Sahag Avedisian opened that. Boy, I'm in trouble if you want to talk about dates, but I would think that was in the late sixties. Then Pig-by-the-Tail opened up on Shattuck Avenue, and that was the first charcuterie to open in the Bay Area in several decades. Charcuteries had disappeared.

Geraci: Who opened that?

09-00:49:30

David: Two women. A close connection with Chez Panisse. I'll come up with the names. This is still in the seventies, yeah. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, that would've

been the early seventies. Well, I opened Narsai's in 1972; Chez Panisse opened in '71, so it was just like the fall of '71, Chez Panisse opened. It wasn't long after that Pig-by-the-Tail got going. Then The Bread Board.

Geraci: Okay, The Bread Board.

09-00:50:22

David: Alfred Peet, around the corner, with Peet's Coffee. Alice Medrich opened Cocolat, that was north of Vine, on Shattuck. And there was a little produce market that had been there all along, right on the corner. It was run by a young guy. These are names that Veni could come up with in a minute. Veni, are you anywhere nearby?

Geraci: I hear her footsteps.

Veni David: Did you call me?

09-00:51:11

David: Yeah. You remember the name of the guy that had the produce market on Shattuck?

Veni David: Oh, Ron Fuji?

09-00:51:21

David: Fuji. Ron Fuji.

09-00:51:32

David: He's still in the produce business, but he's a wholesaler.

Veni David: Yeah, it's still called the same thing.

09-00:51:36

David: Yeah. But it was some sort of generic name for a produce market.

Veni David: Right. I suppose I could look it up in the Yellow Pages.

Geraci: We can always look it up later.

Veni David: Yeah, because I don't think it's ever changed. Ron is one of these people, he's second generation or third generation produce. Whatever is hot, he's selling.

09-00:51:59

David: And then that woman Jean—

Veni David: Upton.

09-00:52:03

David: —Upton, who opened the kitchen store. Remember the name of that?

Veni David: I think it was The Kitchen.

09-00:52:09

David: Just called The Kitchen, maybe? It was on Shattuck Avenue, but downtown Berkeley, not that far north. She was also one of Alice's original partners.

Veni David: She probably saved Alice.

Geraci: She had business sense.

09-00:52:28

David: She was an important element in the success, in the establishment.

Geraci: Alice will admit now that she did not have much business sense.

09-00:52:38

Veni David: Well, the early years were really funny, about Alice, because somebody would bring in a duck and she'd say, "What is it worth?" They had no idea; they would just come up with—Alice just knew what she wanted, then she found people to make it happen. [laughs]

Geraci: That was her skill.

09-00:53:02

David: Yeah. Absolutely.

09-00:53:04

Veni David: She had a whole bunch of protectors, is the only way I can describe it, people that stepped up. As soon as that dream began to waiver a little, there were and still are there.

Geraci: I guess that's my question. We're talking about the gourmet ghetto. We're talking about these protectors, these people. What is the spirit? What is it about this little local place, Berkeley, California?

09-00:53:30

David: Well, I think it's a lot more than just food. I think in Berkeley, first you can't escape the fact that you have a very, very liberal, very highly educated, very sophisticated town, with the history of the university and the Lawrence Lab up on the hill, and these businesses in West Berkeley that depended on scientists and technicians who had engineering skills and laboratory skills. There was a pretty sophisticated bunch of people around here. When Alfred Peet opened up Peet's Coffee, all we knew about coffee was that it was that ground-up stuff that came in a can. Or you could go to the big supermarkets and run it through a grinder and get that wonderful smell. It's funny, when you got home and made a cup of coffee, it never smelled as good as that grinder that you were grinding it [in]. Well, all of a sudden, with Alfred Peet's, it not only smelled really good, but it also tasted really good. I've often said he taught America how to drink fine quality coffee and how to drink high-roast coffee. Roasting it to that higher level just added so much more complexity to the flavor. The Cheese Board. It's not that people didn't appreciate these unusual

things, but where would you get them? How could you get them? It took somebody with the Avedisian's dedication to find the sources for these different things. This was also the days in which Californians started to make cheese. It used to be that about the only cheese made in California, other than Monterey Jack and a few other sort of straightforward, simple cheeses—That was about it. There was the Marin Cheese Company that made schloss, English breakfast, Brie and Camembert. I was just forever fascinated by the fact that all four of those cheeses started out with exactly the same mixture of milk and culture; that the entirety of their difference was the shape of that little container that they were aged in. It created entirely different flavor components.

Geraci: Interesting.

09-00:56:23

David: Exactly the same stuff. Ig Vella—who sadly just died a couple months ago—at the Vella Cheese Company in Sonoma, he and his father also owned the Rogue River Creamery, on the Rogue River in Oregon, where they made blue cheese. Many of the young people in the contemporary cheese world speak of him as the godfather of California cheese.

Geraci: As one of the early pioneers.

09-00:57:00

David: Well, he not only was an early pioneer, but unlike almost any of the others, he was willing to help the young people. When Laura Chenel started making goat cheese, Ig was more than happy to share ideas and answer questions for her.

Geraci: But back to the Berkeley thing again. Because it is a major university, it was international.

09-00:57:25

David: Oh, my. We had the exposure and we had the interest in travel.

Geraci: Very good, yes.

09-00:57:32

David: KQED Television started charter flights to Europe. The first time we went to Europe was on a charter flight organized by KQED. An entire flight. You bought your tickets in advance and they booked an entire flight. It was nonstop, San Francisco to Amsterdam. Why Amsterdam? Because it was much less expensive to land there than in the big cities. Let me tell you, the people that got off that plane were interested in food and wine and learning cultural differences.

Geraci: They were there to absorb as much as they could, from something that was different.

09-00:58:14

David: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Geraci: Let's take a break from right there; we'll change tapes here.

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Geraci: Today's date, August 2, 2011. Seated with me is Narsai David. This is interview number five, tape number ten. When we left off we were talking about the gourmet ghetto, in the spirit of, why Berkeley? Why did it happen here? I think it's a convergence of many things.

10-00:00:32

David: Well, we had, earlier on, talked about why California cuisine developed here. In all of these areas and in each of these answers, date back to the fact that it's a university town, where there's a lot of curiosity and a lot of intellectual capacity, as well as curiosity. But let's also not forget how important the California wine industry was to this food evolution. We're pretty much centered between the great wine production areas. Whether you go from Santa Cruz and Livermore to Mendocino and Sonoma; you could go a couple hours east, up into the mountains of Amador County, Napa, Sonoma—it's right in the heart of it. And agricultural just generally. Turlock thinks of itself as the turkey capitol of the world. Also—I grew up in Turlock—the world's best melons come from Turlock. Tracy is halfway from here to there, and that's where all the beans are grown. One little sideline, Peter, too is that so much is dependent on people responding to exposure. Beans, through most of our lives, there were lentils, black beans, great northern white beans, or regular navy beans, lima beans, black bean, a white bean; that was about it. Well, all of a sudden, as an interest in beans has developed—and a lot of credit goes to these restaurants and shops, charcuteries in Berkeley that are using ingredients like this—hell, they're growing scores of different varieties of beans in Tracy now. You can get those great big black runner beans and the great big white runner beans, and the Christmas lima beans, and names of things that you've never even imagined of or heard of before. We have the fertile soil in which to grow these things and people are interested in it; here it is, right now.

Geraci: I guess that's something that Californians tend to forget. We do have this juncture of the Mediterranean climate and soil, a capability agriculturally to be one of the top agricultural producers of the world, just California. We do have this cornucopia here. I think we tend to kind of take that for granted sometimes. Especially as you move towards San Jose. We think Silicon Valley. We lose track of the fact that agriculture is at the base of this state.

10-00:03:53

David: Oh, boy, is it ever. Is it ever.

Geraci: Let's start talking a little bit about—The farmers market movement really becomes more important. Farmers markets have been around since people

have been around. But the post-World War II years, they take on a new look, a new feel, and we're starting to move. As we had moved to industrial food, we also started to realize—There again, Berkeley being, I think, somewhat of a leader, at least at the front edge, of looking at farmers markets.

10-00:04:30

David:

It was well past World War II. It's not just post-World War II. The real importance of farmers markets doesn't start happening until much later. We're talking about really into the early eighties, I think, before you get that much activity in the farmers markets. There have always been farmers markets, but those which had been were the wholesale farmers markets. Even to this day, you could go down to the Oakland Wholesale Farmers Market, or the San Francisco Produce Market, as it's called, and buy a whole case of produce. Ninety percent of the merchants would be happy to sell you a case of whatever you want. They're not going to give you the same price they do when Berkeley Bowl rolls up and buys a whole truckload.

Geraci:

A whole truckload, right.

10-00:05:27

David:

But they'll be happy to sell to you. What changed was when individual farmers came to markets that were designed specifically for retail. We mentioned in the last hour, Joe Carcione, the Green Grocer, who was a wholesale grocer in San Francisco. He got hooked up with a group in Emeryville that created the Emeryville Public Market. Within the public market, the started doing a farmers market that Joe was very actively involved with. He got me coming over there and I joined the board. That business aspect of using it to tie into the neighborhood sort of drifted away; but out of all of those contacts and connections, grew something that we call the Pacific Coast Farmers Market Association, PCFMA. We created this corporation and I was elected as the first president. In fact, I served as president for some ten years, before I thought it was time to move on and let somebody else take over. When I retired—gosh, it's probably ten years since I retired; I'm sure it is; it's at least that—we were up to something like seventeen separate farmers markets. That means market days in a week. It is now approaching seventy. It is the biggest farmers market organization in the country. In fact, it's sort of been the biggest from five minutes after we got started, because we expanded so rapidly. It just brings together lots of farmers in so many areas, where they have direct contact with the consumer. And out of it has grown yet another thing called CSA, California Supported Agriculture. Today is our normal delivery day. You may have noticed when you came in, the empty box at the front on the deck. We subscribe to the Frog Hollow Farms. They produce organic tree fruits, mainly stone fruits—cherries, apricots, peaches, plums, nectarines. Pluots are the big deal these days. The plums are disappearing off the market; they've been replaced by pluots. I just love these hybridizers. They blended plums and apricots together and ended up with—Well, there are many, many different subvarieties, but they've divided them into two

categories. Those in which the plum characteristic is dominant are called pluots, plum-apricot; and those in which the apricot characteristic is dominant are called apriums, apricot and plum. So we get a weekly delivery of this stuff. But a couple years ago, they made an arrangement with Kaiser hospitals and clinics, and there is now a weekly farmers market at every Kaiser facility in the Bay Area. It's one morning or one afternoon a week. Then Sibella Kraus was working on creating the Ferry Plaza Farmers' Market. As a matter of fact, we loaned our, at that time, director to the San Francisco Ferry Plaza group, to show Sibella how to create that market. So we felt really happy and proud of being able to offer that assistance to them. Of course, you need to have a very large bank account, if you're going to shop at the Ferry Plaza Farmers' Market. Some criticism is made, and not unfairly, of some of these farmers markets that, frankly, have gotten frighteningly expensive, where the farmers are able to get a lot more. Now, I'm a businessman; I've been a businessman all my life, and I applaud anybody who can succeed in a business. Particularly somebody who can grow the produce and bring it to market and sell it and do well. I think that's wonderful. But once in a while, I look at some of these things and I start squirming, because—Well, it's the definition of capitalism; what the market will bear, I guess is the answer.

Geraci: But they've grown dependent upon a community that has more disposable income.

10-00:11:16

David: Oh, my. Oh, yeah. These are not the kinds of farmers markets that my mother would go to when we were down in Turlock. No, this is the upscale stuff.

Geraci: So there is an incentive, then, for small—This is the era that we're talking about, also—agribusiness becomes *extremely* important for feeding this nation, and land prices in California are skyrocketing at the same time. It's hard to get started in a little small commercial agricultural venture, at this point.

10-00:11:57

David: No, you see more and more people planting empty lots within cities. There are cities passing ordinances simplifying the rules, so that somebody could do that. So you could take the empty lot next door to your house and grow vegetables in it and sell them to your neighbors or sell them in the community, without having to go through the normal craziness of licensing a full-scale business. But we really need to also be careful—And this is a very uncomfortable point for me to talk about. I'm very much in favor of growing food without pesticides. I'm very much in favor of holding down the carbon footprint by keeping things local. But I'm very much in favor of everybody in this country getting a decent meal at a decent price. That cannot happen without the large commercial farms. It just can't be done. We're just fooling ourselves. We're joking with ourselves. One need only drive down Highway 101 to the Central Coast or drive down Highway 99 or Highway 5 and see

hundreds of thousands of acres—not hundreds, not thousands, hundreds of thousands of acres. We can't feed this country without production on that basis. There are not that many acres of land in this country that have the proper soil, the proper exposure to the sun and the proper availability of water to be able to do that. You can't do that everywhere.

Geraci: Well, as we talked about earlier, California has that juncture point of those key ingredients. Also you need a labor force and we have that.

10-00:14:17

David: Now, don't get us into politics here.

Geraci: [laughs] No, I'm not. But I think one thing that's been interesting for me—I tend very much to agree with you on the need for the large corporate or agribusiness—but that these small farmers and this local movement have, in many ways—there again, through the university system—we're now talking integrated pest management; we're now talking more sustainable practices, brought about by small farmers, but trying to use them at the large corporate level, also. So it's kind of raised the bar for everybody.

10-00:14:54

David: Absolutely. No, whatever we can do to cut down on pesticide, I think is critically important. But we do not need to mislead people. I can tell you from firsthand experience, all those years at the farmers market, the number of farmers who would openly say to people that organic means no pesticide—Organic does not mean no pesticide. One only need go to the State of California and get a list of agricultural pesticides used in the state of California. The last time I checked this, the document was about ten pages long. Every item listed is described as authorized for organic or prohibited for organic, or authorized conditionally—I forget the wording they use. What does that mean, conditionally? An example would be if there were some exotic storm or some unusual, once-in-a-century infestation of the locusts or something and they were going to lose all of their production if they didn't do something. There are times in which something could be used. But I added up the equivalent of two pages worth of products that were acceptable for organic growers. Well, now, does organic mean that you're using less-noxious material? Or does it mean no pesticides? Well, it does not mean no pesticides.

Geraci: Because no farmer can survive, if they're losing their crops continuously.

10-00:17:00

David: And there are certain things that you just always have to do to avoid that. [coughs]

Geraci: Need to take a little break?

10-00:17:17

David: Yeah. [audiofile stops & restarts]

Geraci: Okay, back on tape. So we were just talking about, I guess, really a definition of organic and what it means or really doesn't mean.

10-00:17:29

David: I think it's imperative. At Pacific Coast, for instance, we prohibited farmers from putting up a sign that said no pesticides, because our decision was, either you're meeting the standards of organic, so that you can be a certified organic farmer, or you're not. To say no pesticides, you could easily claim that you use no pesticides but not be certified organic, because of the conditions of something that's in your soil or the pesticides that drift over from your neighbor's field or whatever other conditions might prevail. Either you are certified to be organic or you're not. So you can't play with those words. You can't use them to mislead people. Marion Nestle, who's a very dear friend, a college classmate—I may have mentioned this to you before; one of the leading nutritionists in America; she's written such important books and really understands American food production—was utterly thunderstruck when I told her just a few years ago, that organic farmers have a long list of organic pesticides. She had not been aware of that. Now, somebody as knowledgeable and as sophisticated as Marion just was not aware of it.

Geraci: Because she was dealing, I think, more with the production side, looking at ingredients. Her five-ingredient mantra.

10-00:19:06

David: No, but regardless. What I'm saying is if somebody that sophisticated is not aware of it—Then the guy at the farmers market puts up a sign that says no pesticide, or the farmer says, yeah, organic means no pesticide—No, it doesn't mean no pesticide. Why lie about it? Yes, you use a lot less pesticide; yes, you use a lot less noxious pesticide; yes, we would all love to get rid of pesticides. But there's no need to mislead people. Tell them the truth. Tell them what we're doing.

Geraci: There again, the reality of I don't think we can ever get rid of all pesticides. We are moving, as I said, to the integrated pest management, using more biological, using other species to eradicate certain things; but there's still the bottom line; farmers are businessmen.

10-00:19:56

David: Absolutely. Well, look at the vineyards, the degree to which we've learned to plant wild grasses in the vineyard rows, because they harbor insects that feed on the kinds of critters that were doing damage to the grapes. So we've dramatically reduced the amount of pesticide. This biodynamic, which is sort of the new luxury class of organic production, the first time I heard about biodynamic, I frankly, figured it was a joke. When they talk about taking cow manure and packing it into a bull's horn and burying it for a certain length of time, then taking that up and seeping that in water to make a tea, which you then spray throughout the field—I'm thinking, well, okay. So you're basically spraying the plants with a thin tea made out of cow manure.

Geraci: It gives new meaning to BS.

10-00:21:13

David: [laughs] It's a new meaning to BS. I discounted it and I thought, this is just somebody's hype. Well, then I went out a couple years later for a field visit, a seminar that was given by a biodynamic advocate. It finally registered to me that what really, really made the difference—and I applaud these guys for this—is that they have become so much more acutely attuned to what the needs of their orchard or their vineyard or their field crops are, because of the degree to which they are so sensitively committed to it. They count the days on the lunar calendar. There are certain things you do when the moon is at certain different positions. Well, after you get past thinking, oh, yeah, this is just a lot of hocus-pocus, if the moon can move the tides and move the oceans up and down so many feet by the phases of the moon, then what about all this liquid that's going up and down the plant, the tree, the vine, the root? I'm sure the moon has some impact on that. The bottom line now, for me, is that a true biodynamic grower, one who really, truly is keyed into this system, is one who is observing the impact of the time of day, the time of year, the temperature, the moisture quality, the moisture conditions of both the environment and the soil. That person is so much more attuned to what the needs of those plants are that they can do it with less pesticide. They can manage the needs of that plant.

Geraci: They become better stewards.

10-00:23:37

David: Absolutely. That's 99 percent of it, is they have become better stewards. It's so easy to give your employees a schedule that says, every tenth of the month, you spray with X-number of ounces of this per gallon, and on the fifteenth of the month, you spray with this, and on the twentieth of the month, you spray with that. It's just a catch phrase. It's a catchall, takes care of it, you don't have to worry about it. Well, that doesn't mean you're making a better product; it just means you're more sure that at the end of the month, there's going to be enough product to sell, that you can pay your bills. Now, if you want to get more intimately involved with what the real needs of that thing are, well, now you've suddenly learned a whole different thing about that plant. My guess is you not only increase your production, but you dramatically decrease your cost, because you're not wasting all that money on these pesticides and things that aren't needed.

Geraci: Chemicals and chemical application is a very complex issue, by our state and federal laws.

10-00:24:41

David: Not to mention expensive.

Geraci: Yeah. Every operator that's out there has to have special training, has to have special licensing, just to purchase or mix chemicals. Now, I guess one thing

that comes in, also is the fact that we tend to—I think Americans, in particular—forget, because we’re so separated from nature, that just because I use a pesticide or I use the bull’s horn mixture, [it] may not work next year, because these insects go through how many generations and they’re going to evolve, also. So by becoming a steward, I have to be on this vigil constantly.

10-00:25:23

David: You’re watching that evolution.

Geraci: Right, and you get to understand that evolution. Would that be a fair statement, then?

10-00:25:31

David: I think that’s absolutely accurate. That’s absolutely accurate. Go back to those Native Americans who were doing these techniques and burying the fish heads underneath the plants. The part I like best is the way they used to bury lobsters, because they just never imagined eating a lobster, so they would use that as a fertilizer and bury it.

Geraci: Well, in New England, in the prisons in the colonial time, that’s what you fed the prisoners, because it was cheap and nobody else wanted it.

10-00:26:02

David: That’s right. But these people learned the power of planting that fish head there and the need that it fulfilled for that plant. Out of that, and watching the tide and the moon, [they] grew these things that work; they make sense. You used the word sustainable a minute ago. I have to tell you, that’s a buzz word that’s very troubling to me.

Geraci: Well, it’s like organic.

10-00:26:38

David: Well, to me, it’s much, much more of a problem than organic, because organic now has legal definitions. Now, the word organic is used in many misleading ways. But if you say that you are certified by the certified California organic farmers organizations, this is an organization that certifies that you are using certain techniques and only certain chemicals. There’s a legal definition for it. But what is the meaning of sustainable? This dirt will sustain agriculture, whether you put anything into it or not put anything into it. So what do you mean by sustainable? If I don’t put any fertilizer in it at all, that means it’s sustainable, and the minute I put in fertilizer, it’s no longer sustainable? Or they’ll use the word sustainable in farming of fish. What is a sustainably-farmed fish? We were at a restaurant recently that announced the daily special was salmon, some kind of salmon, the waiter said. I said, “Excuse me, what kind of salmon did you say?” I had to ask a second time for a repeat, before I finally realized that she was saying sustainably farmed. Sustainably farmed salmon.

Geraci: You thought it was a type of salmon.

10-00:28:10

David: I said, “What type of salmon is sustainably-farmed salmon?” Sustainably-farmed salmon. Now, what the hell is sustainably-farmed salmon? There was an article in yesterday’s *New York Times* about this ongoing problem in Chile, on the salmon farm. They’re the world’s second largest producer of farmed salmon, after Norway, which is the country that created it. They have this terrible problem, where this disease component—I forget; I don’t remember whether it’s a mold or a bug or something—that infests it. The article points out that they’re taking these infested salmon, or the eggs, and moving it to pristine waters and contaminating them. It’s just marching its way across the country and contaminating more and more areas. Well, if you can keep growing it, I guess you can call it sustainably farmed? Then different grocery companies will suddenly announce that—I know Chilean sea bass, for some time, was being marketed by Whole Foods as sustainably produced. Well, I’ve talked to some very, very important people in the world of aquaculture, and there is no such thing as sustainable Chilean sea bass production, because the volume that’s being taken out of the water is destroying the fishery. They were harvesting fifty-year-old fish. You don’t have to kill too large a percentage of the population that’s fifty years old, before you destroy its ability to maintain its population. So sustainable, what? Give me a definition for sustainable, or please, use another word.

Geraci: Could it be that properly, the definition is that when we talk about sustainable, any time that man intervenes, you have counteracted, really, it being sustainable? Human intervention.

10-00:30:34

David: Well, that’s scary because that would say, let’s not do any fishing at all.

Geraci: Well, there are the people that go to that furthest extreme.

10-00:30:44

David: Well, but I say we do know that if a limited number is harvested each year or each season, a population is sustainable. We also know that if you go beyond a certain number, you can very quickly decimate a population. I think our predicament is that the population of the earth is growing far faster than the population of the fish in the sea, and the focus is always on some certain ones that are really sexy. Tuna, bluefin tuna, my God, Japanese will pay tens of thousands of dollars for a single fish to be flown in immediately to Japan, to be cut up into slices for sushi. Clearly, there’s no way to grow enough of that. If aquaculture has to be the way that it’s done, it seems to me there are ways to do it. I went up and visited the Sterling fish farms in Galt, up above Sacramento, where they’re producing sturgeon and producing really splendid caviar, really, really high-quality sturgeon caviar. They have learned an awful lot in how to do this. How long has it been they’ve been at that? Twenty-five, thirty years, I guess, at least. I remember when we first tasted the farm

sturgeon, it always had kind of a musty, muddy, grassy, unpleasant quality to it. Well, it turned out that they were eating the algae growing in the tanks, and that that algae contributed to that funny kind of flavor. There was no way to really keep the water clean enough. Because after all, you're growing these things in a tank and the waste matter from the fish, as well as the decomposing food that was not consumed by them, ends up contaminating the water. Well, it turns out that the original tanks were rectangular, like a great big swimming pool, and all of those corners were areas that captured stuff and kept it. The new tanks are round and the bottom is sloped, like a bit of a cone. Twenty-four/seven, things are filtering down through there, so the droppings, whether it's the animal droppings or the surplus food, is being washed down that slope, pumped into a filter. All these solids are filtered out. The water itself is aerated, to get rid of the nitrogen and the carbon dioxide, and to add oxygen to it, before it's brought back in as fresh water. There is none of that strange smell or flavor in the sturgeon; there is none of that strange smell or flavor in the caviar. Talk about approaching things scientifically. These guys tag every single fish that is being grown for [caviar], all the females. As soon as the fish reaches a certain minimal size, the males are sold off for meat and the females, of course, are grown out. It takes something like eight years to achieve maturity, sexual maturity, to make the roe. In nature, it takes eleven or twelve years, but in a confined environment, where there's a constant source of feed and a constant temperature control and so forth, it just happens a lot more quickly. Well, now, these guys are not leaving behind contaminated waters, because it's all being done in a tank and the stuff is being, twenty-four/seven, filtered out of it and kept cleaned up and removed. Well, what's being filtered out and removed becomes fertilizer somewhere, because it's very easily separated. But when you're salmon farming, [there are] a couple of things that are happening that are so important. First of all, the salmon insists on being a carnivore, so you have to grind up other fish. The amount of fish you have to harvest to grow a pound of salmon is off the charts. Secondly, you pretty much have to do it in open water, because it's a little tough to contain them in tanks. It can be done. I visited farms in Hawaii twenty years ago, that were doing it; but they just couldn't get enough money for it, so they gave that up. The same farms are now producing blue lobster and some giant prawns and such like that. I suddenly feel like I'm on a soapbox, Vic. I'm sorry.

Geraci:

No, no, no, no. I think going along with this is that we're talking about aquaculture here, fish. I think this also can be applied to cattle and pigs. We say sustainably grown cattle and pigs. In a world where feedlots have become notorious—North Carolina, most of the rivers are fouled now, from all of the pig urine and pig feces that's gotten into the water systems. What *is* sustainable and what does it mean? So I think this is a good discussion, because for the foodies, there again, for this community, this is an ongoing discussion.

10-00:37:04

David:

Absolutely. As long as we keep producing more human beings on this planet, we have to find more ways to grow more food. You can talk all you want about how people ought to learn to eat more vegetarian and less meat. In fact, we eat a lot of vegetarian food here. On the days that Veni and I eat home alone, I would say 90 percent, well, 85 percent of our meals are strictly vegetarian. No risk of our becoming vegetarians, but we're sort of giving our body a chance to make up for [they laugh] all that we're doing to it the rest of the time. But look what's happening in countries like China. As soon as people are making just a few pennies, the demand for pork has just skyrocketed. They can't raise enough pork to satisfy the demand. They can't raise enough fish to satisfy the demand. There is where the problem comes in. How can you increase the production without damaging the environment, without damaging the quality.

Geraci:

Well, I think complicating it, too is the same people that are saying, well, I'm going to be a vegetarian, or a true vegan, want their organic, sustainably-grown vegetables, and there's not enough land space that we can grow this much vegetation just for food, considering that at the same time, we're growing vegetation for fuel products, we're growing vegetation for plastic products.

10-00:38:51

David:

Who was it that was editorializing just recently that biofuels are such a serious mistake? That when you talk about the ultimate carbon footprint, there's not only the cost of growing the plants that you're going to make into the biofuel, but when you take into account the degree to which that increases the cost of corn and soybeans that are raised for food, then it compounds itself in such a way as to just make a mockery out of the word sustainable.

Geraci:

I guess if you follow Willie Nelson or a few of the others and you get your grease from the local Burger King or something like that.

10-00:39:48

David:

On a local level, I think that's perfectly fine. Here in Berkeley, we have this outfit that collects the grease from restaurants. That's salvaging a waste product. That's converting waste into something that's useful. Look at these two kids that graduated from Cal just a couple years ago that are now growing mushrooms on the spent coffee grounds from Peet's Coffee. Have you seen that?

Geraci:

No, I haven't.

10-00:40:20

David:

Oh, man! They're growing the most delicious oyster mushrooms. They've built a plant. They started in Berkeley and now they've moved to Emeryville and expanded substantially. They have a contract with Peet's and they collect thousands of pounds of coffee grounds from all the Peet's cafes in the Bay

Area. Now they're even packaging this in a box that's maybe like the size of a liter or so, that you tear open the top and add so much water every day, and grow your own oyster mushrooms. Absolutely delicious. No, they don't taste like coffee. They draw the correct nutrient out of those coffee grounds. When you're finished growing it, you dump it in your garden, because it's just perfect compost. It's already been composted for you.

Geraci:

I hadn't heard of that. So this discussion in what we're talking about now is with the farmers markets and with the movement. So you say by the mid-nineties or so, then you quit working for the farmers market?

10-00:41:34

David:

Well, as president, yeah, I lasted about ten years. Yeah, that would've brought it into the nineties. I'm still close to them; I talk to them frequently. Al Courchesne, the owner of Frog Hollow Farms, was one of the founding members of the board, as I was, and he's still on their board. Every year at Halloween, they bring me two giant pumpkins that I put out here on the porch. Every year the game is to guess how long they're going to last, because as soon as one of them gets a soft spot, I cut them up and pass them around to the neighborhood and everybody is making pumpkin soup. [they laugh]



(Narsai David on his front porch with two Frog Hollow Farms pumpkins.)

Geraci:

While we're still on the topic of farmers, Alice Waters speaks a lot about, and people give her credit for, being one of the pioneers who starts contract farming. She wants certain things in her restaurant, and in order to get these products, she's asking farmers to grow them.

10-00:42:44

David:

Yeah, well, that all dates back to when she had people growing the baby lettuces in their backyards, for her mesclun salad mix. But there was no way she used enough of it for a commercial farmer to mess with it, to get a wide variety of little baby lettuces and so forth. That has really spawned a business unto itself. Todd Koons, who was one of the early people that worked at Chez Panisse, went off and started—was it TK Farms or TKO or something like that? Todd Koons. TK something like that. Growing these various baby lettuces and made it into a substantial business. No, that's wonderful. If you've got somebody that can use enough of it, and let's be realistic, and can pay enough. Because it took the kind of reputation and following that Alice had developed, to be able to pay enough money for that to happen. There was a young woman, Charlene Rollins. She worked at Chez Panisse for a while, as a cook. She married this guy named Vernon Rollins, and they went up to Boonville and started the New Boonville Hotel, in which they were going to grow all of the produce they needed for the hotel, right there on the grounds. They had this huge garden and they had chickens and I believe, rabbits, and lots of produce. Well, the place was a very quick success. They couldn't possibly grow enough produce to satisfy everything the restaurant needed. But there's more and more interest in that. There are more and more chefs now who are actually growing their own. Not only like Alice, asking growers to produce particular varieties of things for them, but actually taking a lot. Jesse—oh, boy. What's her name? Down on the peninsula. Jesse Cool, C-O-O-L. Has a restaurant where she grows a lot of stuff of her own and has been doing all organic for a long time. So there's more and more of this.

Geraci:

On the East Coast, Dan Barber doing that same type of thing including raising his own pigs.

10-00:45:42

David:

Flea Street Café is the name of her place. Flea Street Café.

Geraci:

So I think that makes a big change for at least the higher-end restaurants, in what they're serving and their claims for this new—California cuisine's being built upon really fresh ingredients, and as much as possible, local ingredients.

10-00:46:12

David:

Well, Locavore is another new word.

Geraci:

Is another new word. Would you like to comment on [that]? That one's another problem. Just how do you define local? [David groans] Given the fact that most things that we buy in a grocery store travel a minimum of 1500 miles.

10-00:46:35

David:

Well, not fresh produce.

Geraci:

Not fresh produce, but I'm talking the items that we're looking at.

10-00:46:41

David: A lot needs to be done, a lot can be done, a lot is being doing. I applaud the desire to reduce travel time. But let's not get away from that initial thing we were talking about earlier, which was that we've got a lot of people to feed and you can't grow everything you need everywhere in this country. You go down to that Salinas area, you're talking about the salad bowl of America. There are not very many places in America that can grow lettuce.

Geraci: And not to the extent that they can grow it.

10-00:47:22

David: Exactly. But on the flip side of the coin, I went to a conference once—I was moderating a panel discussion—and this guy [who] was responsible for all of the private label products for Whole Foods was on my panel. He was so excited about this organic apple butter that they were selling. It was made in Vermont, but it was made from organic apples grown in California. I couldn't make this thing ring. He just seemed absolutely oblivious to my questions, when I was saying things like, well, if they don't grow any organic apples in Vermont, couldn't you get somebody in California to make apple butter for you? Well, no, it couldn't possibly be as good as what this guy was doing. I'm thinking the vision of this truckload of apples, going from California to Vermont to be converted into apple butter, to be trucked back to California, just somehow didn't compute.

Geraci: Talk about a carbon footprint!

10-00:48:43

David: Oh! Driving down Highway 5 in the fall. Well, it'll be starting this month, when tomatoes start harvesting. I swear, you pass just as many eighteen wheelers of big open-top tank—not tank but—What the hell do you call a truck that's just open on top?

Geraci: The half type of tank thing, yeah.

10-00:49:14

David: Right. Tank truck? No, it's not a tank truck, because they're round. Anyway, you pass just as many traveling south as you pass traveling north. I'm thinking, couldn't all these factories get together and buy from the guy that's close, instead of—If some of these trucks are going south, there must be factories down there. If there are factories down there, then why are those trucks bringing tomatoes north?

Geraci: You get into a complex world, there again, of contract farming.

10-00:49:47

David: Absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah, yeah.

Geraci: They're all based on business decisions, as opposed to being based on pure logistical decisions. One of the things, in staying with this kind of same

framework, we've talked about the farmers markets, we've talked about the growth of, I guess, education, with TV and media, and how that's helping make all this food ideology change. At the same time, we also have new merchandizing of food products and we have cooking schools popping up *all over* the place.

10-00:50:29

David:

Well, not only cooking schools all over the place, but look at all that's happening on the internet. You don't even have to sign up for school, you don't have to pay any money; you could just go online. People don't want to bother looking at a cookbook anymore.

Geraci:

Epicurious.com.

10-00:50:46

David:

I have to confess that if I come up with a thought of cooking something that I've never cooked before, or somebody brings me a gift of, I don't know, a piece of meat or an unusual fruit or vegetable, it sure is easy to sit down at the computer and type a few words into that internet, and suddenly I have a half dozen recipes in front of me. I then get the sense of what I'm looking for, and I can go in the kitchen and do something with it. But yeah. It's all there. You just push a button.

Geraci:

It seems like when it comes to cooking schools, there's a lot of them that are starting up in the seventies and eighties in the Bay Area. It's still popular. People take vacations today in Europe, they'll go to places in Italy and France, to do a one-week cooking school.

10-00:51:44

David:

See, that, I think, is a lot of fun and I think makes sense, if you've got the time and the inclination, to really be able to have a vacation, go experience a different country, a different environment, and at the same time, eat some pretty good food and come home having learned how to do it. I think that's pretty neat. But when I look at some of the cooking schools around here, particularly the ones that claim to be teaching professional cooks, that really, really troubles me, Vic. We have cooking classes in our community colleges. San Francisco City College, Diablo Valley College, Contra Costa College. What's the campus at Lake Merritt, in the Oakland—Not Merritt. I'll think of it in a second. All these, I think, teach perfectly wonderful classes to students who want to get jobs as cooks, and it costs a few-hundred dollars a semester to go there. It's nothing. Then you get an organization like the California Culinary Academy, that's getting, the last I checked, \$51,000 for a sixteen-week program.

Geraci:

With full student loans and the whole nine-yards.

10-00:53:30

David:

Now, take a quick look at this student loan thing. I learned an awful lot about it that was very painful, frankly. This \$51,000, it's apparently fairly easy for a student to qualify for a loan from the government. They collect their \$51,000 when that kid starts the program. Some of those kids aren't in there for a month or two and they realize there's no way on earth they're going to work this, and they drop out. They owe the \$51,000, and it's going to be a long while, if ever, the government's going to get that money back. But meanwhile, the school has gotten their fifty-one-grand, and they're out there promoting their ability to teach you to become a famous chef at a school like this. There are schools like this all over the country that are opening up, that are really making a lot of money and are not teaching anybody anything that I would want—I, when I was in the restaurant business, absolutely was turned off when I saw somebody's résumé, said they'd gone to one of those schools.

Geraci:

Because we have the Culinary Institute.

10-00:54:49

David:

Well, that's something else. The CIA, Culinary Institute of America that produces very, very serious cooks. They have very serious chef instructors and there's a real dedication. I'm intrigued that the French Culinary Institute now has a campus in the Bay Area.

Geraci:

I didn't realize that.

10-00:55:08

David:

Yeah, they just launched, I think, last month. Jacques Pépin is one of their deans of instruction at the New York campus, and he's involved with setting up the school here. But their opening classes were pastry classes, and I can't remember the name of the pastry chef instructor.

Geraci:

Then you have, as you said, a lot of small programs.

10-00:55:42

David:

But these small programs, the community college things, I used to be on the advisory board at San Francisco City College, and I still help at Contra Costa College. They really do a good job of teaching people the practical experience of what it takes to work in a commercial kitchen. It's a community college; it just costs a few bucks.

Geraci:

I think what's most important in what you just said, they know how to work in a commercial kitchen. Restaurants are not the only place that we require people with culinary skills. There are schools. Look at the large businesses now. You go down to Google or some of the big ones down there, they have their own chefs and their own kitchens for their programs. Personal chefs.

10-00:56:31

David:

Schools, the colleges, private schools, charter schools need food for these kids. No, you're right; there's all kinds of need for commercial or industrial

cooking. It's not just learning some fancy things to make your next fancy dinner party at home.

Geraci: Did you do any instructing yourself, in any of these educational programs?

10-00:57:03

David: No, not in those. I would make guest appearances and give talks. I've told you about the television cooking stuff that I've done. But no, that kind of teaching, I've never done.

Geraci: That didn't appeal to you.

10-00:57:22

David: It's pretty demanding. There's a lot of advance prep that's needed, to be able to do a good and proper half-hour demonstration, or an hour. I did those classes at I. Magnin. Sorry, not at I. Magnin, at Macy's. I. Magnin, I had the café. But at Macy's, for some years, I did have those Saturday morning classes, for an hour. It takes a lot of prep work because a lot of that food takes more than an hour to prepare or to cook. But the student needs to see all phases of it, condensed down into that one hour.

Geraci: Which means you also have to have a finished product ready before you start.

10-00:58:24

David: That means I have to have a product in various grades of development. There's got to be the obvious raw ingredients at one end and the finished product at the other end, but then the in-between stages, to show how it evolves, so that somebody really has a sense that they touched it and felt it. And everybody gets a taste of it at the end of the hour, so you've had to make enough of it for that classroom of forty or fifty people to taste it.

Geraci: Well, we still have a little bit of time on this tape, and I think what I'd like to—No, we don't have enough time. We're at fifty-eight minutes.

10-00:59:02

David: I was going to say, I think it's pretty close.

Geraci: It's pretty close. So how about we just stop for here for today.

10-00:59:06

David: Okay.

Geraci: Thank you.

Interview 6: August 30, 2011

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Geraci: I am Vic Geraci, food and wine historian from the University of California Berkeley, Regional Oral History Office. Today's date is August 30, 2011, and seated with me is Narsai David. This interview is being conducted in Narsai's home in Berkeley, California. This is interview number six, tape number eleven. Narsai, welcome back again.

11-00:00:27

David: Well, Vic, thank you. Welcome to my home.

Geraci: We've just finished going through a lot of articles and memorabilia and things that you had set out to kind of help your memory a little bit. I know that some of this will be backtracking for us, but let's go ahead and backtrack and take a look at some of these and see what kind of memories we get. It'll help fill in the story that we've built thus far.

11-00:00:54

David: It's kind of easy to just jump and skip and things get out of sequence.

Geraci: Well, life isn't always orderly. I think the first one was this great article we have here.

11-00:01:06

David: Oh. [chuckles] I love that title.

Geraci: Guru.

11-00:01:10

David: "Guru of Gastronomy." This was in the *Modesto Bee*. I grew up in Turlock, and Modesto, of course, was the county seat of what was Stanislaus [he pronounces it Stanislaw] County, when I grew up; it now has changed to Stanislaus County.

Geraci: Speaking of getting a little hoity-toity on you there.

11-00:01:31

David: Yeah, no kidding. A homecoming for Narsai David. Actually, I went down to do a fundraiser for the Stanislaus County Medical Society Auxiliary. Tickets were \$35. Can you imagine? The days when you could do a fundraiser and charge only thirty-five bucks?

Geraci: The year on this is?

11-00:01:52

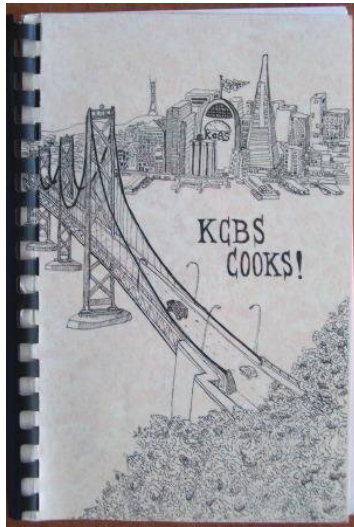
David: '88, so it's not that long ago. What's that? Twenty-three years ago.

Geraci: It's one of the great photos of you, doing a radio show.

11-00:02:02

David:

I enjoyed that, yeah. Remember, I started at KCBS Radio in 1984, with *The KCBS Saturday Kitchen*. Then in '85, when I closed the restaurant, I started the evening show, *Narsai and Company*. That was Monday through Friday, from seven until eight o'clock, and then we continued the *Saturday Kitchen* from ten until noon. We would frequently, on that Saturday show, report live from locations elsewhere. We'd call in. In terms of taking phone calls, it didn't matter where I was; I could be sitting anywhere and be answering phone calls. But in the meanwhile, I might spend the first half hour interviewing somebody at that event, whether it was a food event or a wine event or a charity event or some public event. So it was a lot of fun.



(Narsai David's recipes from his KCBS radio shows.)

Geraci:

So as we get towards the end of the eighties and into the nineties, you seem to be doing a lot. In fact, I think it's almost a defining part of your career. You begin doing a lot of these types of events. It's both media and your experience in catering, as a restaurateur. All of a sudden, now you've got this new skill that you've found out about yourself, and I think I've heard you mention it a lot; you liked being onstage. Give you a microphone and Narsai was happy. You have a new emcee role.

11-00:03:32

David:

Well, if you think back to my restaurant days, that's what I did in the restaurant. I did not want to be locked up in the kitchen. I was perfectly happy to be in the kitchen during the day, developing recipes, developing menus, developing techniques, and making sure the food was going to be what I wanted it to be. But once the doorbell rang, I wanted to be in front with my audience. I wanted to conduct the orchestra from out front, where I could see the reaction. I could run through the kitchen and see what was happening

there, tweak things, correct things, adjust things, and get back into the dining room. But if my primary responsibility workshop in the kitchen, I couldn't be spending much time with the guests. I wanted to be out there with the people and communicating.

Geraci: Isn't that what, in some ways, separates restaurants that are successful from those that are not successful? People want to go to a restaurant and they want to rub elbows with the chef. They want to be part of this process. You see this in the wine industry a lot. People will do anything, just to say hello to a winemaker.

11-00:04:46

David: Well, there's no doubt.

Geraci: To have a chef out front is important.

11-00:04:48

David: There's no doubt that means a lot. Now, this is not to say that restaurants in which the chef is the owner and spends 90 percent of his time in the kitchen can't be successful. Obviously, some of the greatest chefs in the world and some of the greatest restaurants in the world have been run in just that way. But my personality demanded more intimate involvement with the customers. Even in those restaurants that are really, truly chef dominated, even in those, you will see the chef coming out periodically through the evening, whether it's because a special guest has arrived or the chef has a little bit of a lull between tables, and so he can escape from the kitchen for a few minutes. It's nice to have that feeling that that person is really there. Then when you put your name on the door, that adds another thing to it. My place was called Narsai's. People wanted to see me and I wanted to see them.

Geraci: It's strange that you mention by putting your name on the door. I've had numerous people in the wine industry say that that was probably one of the main turning points for wine in California, when people started putting their name on the label.

11-00:06:07

David: Here's a story for you. Joseph Phelps, who of course, has this wonderful, wonderful, great winery, was in the construction business, heavy construction. They were building a bridge, way up in the mountains of Northern California, to replace an old wooden trestle bridge. They had built roads and it was a mass construction thing. Suddenly contracts dried up and he was looking for something to keep his crew together. He had this really great crew that he wanted to keep together. So he decided to bid on building a winery. It was Souverain Winery, in the Napa Valley. It had just been bought by, I think, Pillsbury, one of the big national corporations, and they wanted to build a large winery. He did such a great job that they sat down and negotiated a contract with him to build a second winery, which was the Souverain of Geyserville. By the time he had completed that one, he decided, by golly, he

wanted a winery for himself. So he bought this old cattle breeding ranch—Conway or Conwell or something like that—in the Napa Valley, on Taplin Road, at the Silverado Trail.

Geraci: That's Conn, isn't it? C-O-N-N?

11-00:07:44

David: No. Well, the Conn—Which?

Geraci: There's a Conn Winery, C-O-N-N.

11-00:07:50

David: No, no. No, no. It was an organization that raised cattle.

Geraci: Oh, okay.

11-00:07:58

David: There is a Conn Valley Vineyards, and also a Conn Creek.

Geraci: Well, the Gamble cattle ranch is out along that area, too—as in Proctor and Gamble.

11-00:08:06

David: Yeah. It's right in that area. So came time to start bottling a wine, and he couldn't figure out what to call it. So he hired a very high-falutin' agency in San Francisco to help him choose a name and to design the graphics and so forth. I was invited, as one of eight or ten or so people from various aspects of the community and media, to sit around a conference table and discuss this. They recorded the whole thing. They had one of these conference recorders in the middle of that table that picks up everybody's voice. I asked why he didn't just want to call it Joseph Phelps. He said, well, he'd thought of that, but he couldn't decide. I said, "Well, are you going to actually be there running this winery? Or is this just—" "Oh, no," he said. "This is my commitment." I said, "Well, then, I would urge you to make it Joseph Phelps Winery. Not Phelps Winery or not any other, but Joseph Phelps Winery." Every once in a while, I would see him over the years, and he would remind me that he had just recently been listening to those old tapes. Charles Krug, Louis Martini, Robert Mondavi, Joseph Phelps—that tells you a lot about what you're going to find. That is what the winery is. Now, we also know that in this day and age, wineries get sold and resold, and who could believe what happened to Charles Shaw's name. Here was a guy making some

Geraci: To find yourself in the position of being now known as Two Buck Chuck.

11-00:10:03

David: —very, very serious Napa Valley Wine. When push came to shove and he shut down and sold all the assets off, his winery, name included, was sold off. Suddenly, Charles Shaw's selling for \$2 a bottle at Trader Joe's. As you say,

the nickname immediately became Two Buck Chuck. So there are exceptions, as well.

Geraci: But in another sense, Freddy Franzia, in doing this, created a whole new arm of bulk wine in the modern era, that's highly profitable and successful.

11-00:10:43

David: Oh, boy. Not that bulk wine wasn't always highly profitable. [laughs]

Geraci: But this is a modern version of that bulk wine industry.

11-00:10:53

David: No, he took a wine, which historically, would've been just sold in gallon jugs, and put it in a bottle with a cork in it and gave it a respectable-looking name. Believe me, everybody's doing that. I have no idea how many labels Gallo has or how many labels Freddy Franzia has, with these specialty things that are created specifically to market inexpensive wine. And they are a hell of a good value. There's just no question about it.

Geraci: It allows a lot of people access to wine that normally they may not have that access.

11-00:11:42

David: I have a friend who's a wild duck hunter, a duck hunter. He puts on periodic dinners that I'm invited to, and we always take a lot of different wines. Well, at this last dinner, I took a bottle of Charles Shaw Two Buck Chuck Merlot, that I left wrapped in a bag; I didn't want people to see what it was. Most people said, "Gee, that's kind of a nice wine," and didn't have much more to say about it. A couple thought it was really nice; they really liked the fruit on it. When I took it out of the bag and showed them what it was, it was just this startled, oh, my. Wow. It's a very, very well-made wine, technically, well-made. There are not flaws in it. If you're going to give it any flaws, the flaws would be that it's made from grapes that are not as expensive and not as sexy as the ones that go in to the \$20 and \$40 and \$50 bottles.

Geraci: And it's not going to age. But most people, in their home, don't age wine anyway, so it's one of those, you buy it, you drink it.

11-00:12:52

David: Matt Kramer did an article in the *Wine Spectator* just a week ago, talking about a ten-year wine. People are not buying wine for twenty and thirty years anymore. Sometimes I wonder if I'm a little bit of a dinosaur. I'm still excitedly serving 1974 cabernets to my guests at special dinners. It was a spectacular vintage in the Napa Valley, and the wine has held up really beautifully and I'm excited about it. But it's like a piece out of the ancient history department. People buy wine now and want to take it home and drink it.

Geraci: Right. In many ways, can you blame them? Somewhere along the line—I can't find it right now—I came across an article where you bought some really old Champagnes.

11-00:14:03

David: Well, yeah.

Geraci: Champagnes not something we normally talk about aging.

11-00:14:11

David: Well, let me give you a more recent story that relates to that, and then I'll go back to the original story and the Champagne. At one of the charity dinners that I occasionally am wont to do here at home, I served a bottle of a 1921 Champagne, a French Champagne. It was easily the hit of the evening. Now, in all fairness, when a white wine of any sort, Champagne or otherwise, gets that old, it's going to oxidize and the color becomes more of a straw color than that pale, almost colorless thing, and it develops a lot of complex flavors. It's like comparing sherry to a white wine. Sherry is really essentially an oxidized white wine. Well, this is very, very subtly oxidized; it's not intentionally oxidized. My son, who does a little bit of dealing in old wines—he buys and sells wine cellars—saw the empty bottle and said, “Do you have any more of that?” I said, “Yeah, I think there are a few bottles. Why?” He said, “Well, do me a favor. Give me a couple days to do a little research on this, before you open any more of it.” Long story; to make it short, he took four bottles of them and sent them to auction, and they sold for \$13,000 for the four bottles. I said, “Wow! You're right, I can't afford to drink that wine; let's sell it.” But the way this old champagne got started, I was in Paris with a friend, Vernon Rollins, who had a small wine importing company in San Francisco called MV Wine Company. They specialized in Burgundy, particularly. But we were in Paris and had lunch one day at the Caviar Kaspia, right on the Place de [la] Madeliene. Charming little place that's been there forever. We walked in. Dimly lit, strangely anachronistic kind of place. There are all these—sort of charmingly referred to them as the blue-haired ladies—older ladies, many of them Russian—or Slavic, at least—reliving the glory days of the Kaspia, having their smoked salmon and their caviar and their blintz, or blini, and vodka. Well, we looked at the wine list and we were just absolutely blown away. There were white wines and Champagnes going back thirty, forty, fifty years. Well, we immediately each ordered a bottle of our birth year. It was a '36 and a '45.

Geraci: Oh, my goodness.

11-00:17:23

David: Well, the maître d' came hustling over and said, “Well, now, I want to explain to you that this wine is sold as is. There is no return.” I immediately saw the concern; somebody had seen a wine like this and thought, gee, that'd be fun, found it was oxidized and refused to pay for it. I pulled my wallet out of my pocket and I said, “Here, I'll give you my credit card now. You can ring it up

before you even show us the bottle.” I understood what his concern was. I’m a little distressed to tell you that the two of us drank three bottles of wine, before we got out of that lunch. Well, nobody was driving; we were taking taxis. By the time we left, I had bought two bottles of every Champagne on his list that was more than twenty years old. We filled cases upon cases of these wines, and that was the beginning of my old Champagne list. We still have a few odd bottles left, even from those days. When were those days? That would’ve been sort of the late seventies, give or take.

Geraci: Now, with these Champagnes like that, does especially the lees at the bottom—I expect a white wine, it’s going to amber. You expect that, as part of the oxidizing process. But what about the taste? What about the bubbles? Does it keep the carbonation?

11-00:18:51

David: The bubbles diminish, for sure. You knew Doris Muscatine, who was the co-author of my book. I remember for her sixty-fifth birthday, I did a dinner here. I had one bottle in the cellar, of Pommery & Greno Champagne, of her birth year. Knowing that it wasn’t likely to have much bubble, rather than serve it during the cocktail hour, I thought we’d wait till we get to the table, so everybody would be seated and we could appreciate it when we—In those days, we were able to make caviar, because there was plenty of sturgeon available, or sturgeon roe, from Oregon and Washington. But I pulled the cork at the table and it went *poof*, and everybody applauded at the table. Maybe each person got one bubble in his glass. That one had really flattened.

Geraci: But it still had some.

11-00:19:48

David: But it still had a little bit of schpritzyness on the palette, and it had turned quite amber. But that oxidation or madeirization—Madeira is where we get madeirized wine from—adds a lot to the complexity. The English happen to really love old Champagnes, far more than the French do. The French that fresh, young, fruity quality. But that aged quality adds a complexity that is really very special. I’m just going to have to serve you some, that’s all there is to it.

Geraci: I’m just *totally* fascinated by this, because when I was working in the wine industry, we did a tasting one time for a group of people. We were bringing out Chardonnays that were fifteen, twenty, and twenty-five years old. The beauty of them in the ambering, first of all, I think is just a wonderful nuance that you don’t get in regular wines. But to think of Champagne. Just it’s kind of like, whoa.

11-00:20:49

David: I used to do a lot of work with Jack and Dolores Cakebread, at Cakebread winery. Along about 19—I think we decided it was ’87, they started something called the American Harvest Workshop, in which they invited a

half dozen chefs from around the country to come together, and they took them on tours of, oh, like the Hog Island Oyster Company and goat cheese manufacturers and specialty farms, and they saw the production of foodstuffs that was all new and exciting at that time. Then we would come back to the winery and select from the things that we had seen, and each chef would prepare a different meal. So they just had the twenty-fifth anniversary. I wasn't there for the first one. For the second one, I was one of the guest chefs. Then the following year, I was asked if I would come along as the host, to sort of direct the traffic. Well, it was fun working with all these chefs, but I also felt funny with nothing to do, so I decided to bake some bread. So I became known as the bread baker. I just, every year, for some ten years or so—So they were just doing this twenty-fifth anniversary. I went back to help, and yes, I did bake some bread. But I took along a bottle of a 1977 Cakebread Sauvignon blanc, from my cellar. Now, '73 was their first vintage. I went to a lunch at Jack and Dolores' house, and took this along, totally unexpected. I put it in a bag, so people couldn't see what it was. By coincidence, they were serving a 2007 Sauvignon blanc during the reception hour, before we sat down. I walked around offering people a splash of this. It was startling to see a wine that was, at that point, thirty years older than the one they were featuring. Actually, that made it—what?—thirty-four years old, for the wine itself. But remember, Champagne is made from grapes that are pretty under-ripe. They're rarely over 18 or 19 percent sugar at harvest time. What I learned really definitively about the aging of white wines happened in Australia, just a few years ago. We were in Sydney on the first night, and we were served a Semillon at a dinner that really had a nice complexity. I thought, hm, this is probably four, five years old. This is really neat. Turned out to be seven years old. The next day we were up in the Hunter Valley, where the best Semillon comes from, or Semillon [pronounces it sem-ill-on], as they call it. We were drinking twenty- and thirty-year-old Semillons. The winemaker said that he had done a vertical tasting, going back to his oldest one, which was forty years old, the previous year, invited all the local winemakers, and everybody chose the forty-year-old one as their favorite wine of the evening. I said, "But alcohol." These things were 10½ to 11 percent alcohol. He said, "Yeah, people are misled by that high alcohol." He said, "When you let the grapes get that ripe, you lose an awful lot of the antioxidants and you lose a lot of the acidity. Because as the grape matures, those acids fall down, as the sugar develops." Right?

Geraci: Right.

11-00:24:50

David: Those antioxidants and those acids are what really give you the longevity. So these days, when you're having Chardonnays—We had an absolutely delicious Chardonnay last night. A friend gave me an abalone—first time I've had fresh abalone in years—that he had harvested, and I opened a gift bottle of a Chardonnay that I won't name. It was very good, but it was 14.9 percent alcohol. I had to put an ice cube in it to dilute it a little bit. As delicious as it

was, it was just too alcoholic; it was too unctuous. I thought with this abalone, just being sautéed in butter with a little bit of cognac, it would work with it. Well, once the ice cube diluted a little bit, it did work. Otherwise, there was too much stuff there.

Geraci: See, with that type of meal, though, you want an acid-forward wine, because it's the mixture of the fruit and the fish.

11-00:25:58

David: But I also wanted a richness. I think I made a mistake in reaching for that bottle. I thought, it was a gift bottle; I was going to have to open it one of these days anyway, and I thought with the butter and the abalone and the cognac, it would work. And it sort of did. But you're absolutely right. I would've been much better off with something that was only 12½ percent alcohol.

Geraci: Now, with the Semillon, this is a grape most Americans are not familiar with.

11-00:26:23

David: It's really too bad.

Geraci: My first experience wasn't until, I'd say, the early nineties. There again, working at a winery that a winemaker had bought some Semillon juice, because he wanted to blend his Sauv blanc down a little bit, in the traditional style.

11-00:26:40

David: Right.

Geraci: That's what the French always used it for. But then he actually produced some, just Semillon. It was wonderful. We couldn't sell it, because people didn't know what it was.

11-00:26:49

David: Right. Wente used to make a Semillon that was really quite nice. There are a few small wineries that are making small amounts of it. But these names are an issue. Sauvignon blanc, you mentioned. Yes, Semillon is traditionally used to add a little bit of richness and lushness to Sauvignon blanc, in Bordeaux, and it was used for the same thing here. But I remember when they first started labeling wine as Sauvignon blanc. Remember, that used to be called Sauterne, in California. Concannon, one year, made a wine in a Bordeaux-shaped bottle, that was called Haut Sauterne, H-A-U-T Sauterne, and they put exactly the same wine in a tall, green Moselle-shaped bottle and called it Sauvignon blanc. It was exactly the same wine. They were trying to introduce the name Sauvignon blanc, because in California, nobody had ever heard of Sauvignon blanc. They knew about sauterne or haut sauterne. Slowly, the name Sauvignon blanc started catching on. It took Robert Mondavi to invent the totally new name. He called it fumé blanc, which was taking fumé from

Pouilly fumé, that comes from the Loire Valley, which is made with Sauvignon blanc, and then just cleverly saying fumé blanc. What does fumé blanc mean? White smoke. It doesn't mean anything, but it's a name that caught on.

Geraci: Then at that point, Dry Creek Vineyard picks it up, with their fumé.

11-00:28:29

David: Oh, yeah.

Geraci: That whole little area there, along Dry Creek, starts producing this, and they're all using the fumé blanc.

11-00:28:37

David: Well, now it's used throughout the state. People use it interchangeably with Sauvignon blanc.

Geraci: Right, interchangeably.

11-00:28:41

David: I'm sure that's a name that he could've copyrighted and it would've been exclusive to him. But he didn't copyright it. Maybe people thought that sauvignon blanc was too confusing because it reminded you of cabernet sauvignon, I don't know. Chardonnay used to be called Pinot chardonnay, in California. That was just for the fact that we didn't know any better. It was thought that it was related to Pinot noir and Pinot meunier and Pinot gris and Pinot chardonnay. Well, it turns out that genetically, it's not related to them. The other three are genetically related, Pinot noir, Pinot meunier, and Pinot gris; but Chardonnay is a totally separate thing. So finally, the name Pinot got dropped. Just the day before yesterday, I was playing with some of these ancient things, kicking around in the cellar, and I found a very inexpensive white burgundy, made for us by Andre Ponnelle, in France, under our own label, in 1990. We sold it in our market and at the café at I. Magnin. It's labeled Pinot chardonnay, as recently as 1990, which kind of surprised me. To see that on a French label is particularly surprising. But hell, they were making it for the American market and if there's somebody out there that wants to buy it and will buy a large enough amount to justify making it.

Geraci: You're a businessman; you'll accommodate that.

11-00:30:22

David: Absolutely.

Geraci: Let's move on a little bit here, to some of these other articles. There again, now, this one's back to 1972. I'll let you go ahead. So this is just as you're opening the restaurant.

11-00:30:40

David: Ah. July of '72. Yeah, we opened April of '72. May, June, July, August, four months, not quite four months yet. There's a picture of me with my first chef. I doubt if the camera will pick that up, on this old, fading newsprint. Marius Levollela. He was from the South of France. His father was from Turkey, which is interesting. My father was from Turkey, too.

Geraci: That's interesting, yeah.

11-00:31:12

David: But this swarthy, Provençal kind of cooking, the Mediterranean cooking. It was a lot of fun, a lot of fun working with him. Helen Civelli Brown, the *Examiner* food editor, she starts the article saying, "'Hospitality is a strong tradition among Assyrian people,' said Narsai David. 'When people drop by, even though they may have just finished dinner, an Assyrian family will immediately offer them something to eat. And they must eat it, or offend their hosts.'" [they laugh] My mother always had this large glass bowl filled with walnuts, and another one with raisins. She dried her own black monukka grapes for the raisins, and the walnuts were from our own tree. I'll tell you, that combination is toxic, because the problem is you can't stop eating, because it's not quite sweet enough, so you take a few more raisins; but then it's too sweet on your palette, so you have to have a walnut. So you just keep adjusting.

Geraci: You're always trying to balance.

11-00:32:23

David: You keep balancing, and before you know it, the bowls are empty. You've eaten more than you should have.

Geraci: But black monukka, boy, that's a grape that never really made it big in America, but it's a wonderful table grape.

11-00:32:36

David: Well, you know why it hasn't made it as a table grape, is that it has this nasty habit of falling off the stem, once it's fully mature.

Geraci: Which meant it didn't ship well.

11-00:32:47

David: Right. It shatters too easily. Occasionally, now you will find it, but only prepackaged. They use a poly bag that's perforated with little holes, and each large cluster is put into the bag and sealed, so that you're getting what was originally attached to that cluster. But I love the monukka grapes. A friend picks them up from a—there's a little roadside stand in Ripon. Funny to think that they have the Ripon address, because they're just a couple miles from Escalon. It's on Highway 120, between Manteca and Escalon. So if you're going up to the mother lode, you've just got to stop at Fisher's Farm. He only sells what he grows himself. This time of year, we have some great tomatoes.

Finally, the first tomatoes of the year, we had two weeks ago, that are really, truly vine ripened. He won't pick it until it's ready. He has black monukkas, so we get some black monukka grapes from him. Then a long-time childhood friend from Turlock gets me black monukka raisins in the fall. [We] keep a few traditions going.

Geraci: Keep a few things going. Now I have something from 1973. This was the Berkeley Fellows.

11-00:34:19

David: Ah.

Geraci: We hadn't talked about that yet.

11-00:34:23

David: The University of California Berkeley, sixth annual dinner of the Berkeley Fellows. Well, I've often tried to explain to people what the Berkeley Fellows is, and I should read this; it says right here. "An honorific society of 100 distinguished friends of the Berkeley campus." I was elected—Gosh, I don't know what year I became a member. It says, "Membership was determined by a lottery held on the occasion of the installation dinner, in February of '68. The only exceptions were numbers one and two, which were assigned by acclamation of Robert Gordon and Ida W. Sproul." I used to cater these dinners, in the day. These are some of the dinners that I had catered, when Albert Bowker was the chancellor, in that downstairs reception room at University House. Then I became a member of the fellows maybe four or five years ago; I forget the year.

Geraci: It's kind of a circular pattern there. You used to serve and cater for them, and now you're one.

11-00:35:48

David: Yeah.

Geraci: Another thing we ran across, I find this calendar to be amazing, this Bill Graham calendar.

11-00:35:56

David: Oh, gosh. Bill Graham Presents, 1979.

Geraci: Because we had talked a lot, how you catered for Bill Graham, in all these events.

11-00:36:05

David: Right. It's, as he says, "fourteen years of rock and roll occasions, starting in '65, when he was managing the San Francisco Mime Troupe." You remember Ronnie Davis started that, and he brought Bill in as manager. I never thought of him as the manager; he was like the promoter. Geez, so much started then. To counter all of the talk about drugs, with young people, he did some rock

and roll concerts as a fundraiser for the Mime Troupe, at the old Fillmore Auditorium. He asked me to get him some bushels of apples. He wanted red apples and green apples, in real bushel baskets, not these cardboard boxes that are used these days. We put bushels of them in the lobby, so that when the kids came in, they could help [themselves]. The idea of something that was good for you and healthy for you. Of course, Ronnie Davis would go on to complain that Bill took Ronnie's idea and ran with it, because it wasn't long after, that Bill went off on his own and started promoting rock concerts.

Geraci: This is the day and the age when everybody who's anybody in rock and roll is going to be coming to the Fillmore.

11-00:37:39

David: The Family Dog dances at the Avalon Ballroom. *Sergeant Pepper* and the *Magical Mystery Tour*, Moby Grape, Mother Earth, Steve Miller, the Chambers Brothers, the Electric Flag, the Loading Zone, Janis Joplin. Here's a picture of Janis at the Fillmore. Gosh. I could tell you about some parties we catered at her home, but I don't think we want to put that on the record.

Geraci: Oh, so you actually catered for—

11-00:38:05

David: For Janis. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah. Well, once we became Bill's choice for all of the big concerts, we did the backstage catering, taking care of the performers. Then things like—and I think we talked about this last time—when it was the last performance of The Band, [it] was at Winterland, and he called it The Last Waltz. It was at Thanksgiving time, and we served a complete Thanksgiving dinner. Then for New Year's Day breakfast, we would serve breakfast. The biggest one was one year we served 6,000 kids simultaneously; they were at two different locations, at Winterland and at the Carousel Ballroom. After drinking and dancing all night, at something like six o'clock in the morning, we brought out breakfast. It was real scrambled eggs, made from cracking fresh eggs. Bill was not about to accept anything that came out of a freezer or out of a powder. There were sweet rolls and orange juice and fruit. I don't remember the whole menu. Then the spinoff was that we would do parties at his home and at Janis' home and others. He was quite a character, that guy. He was something.

Geraci: Well, let me just organize myself a little bit here. Anything else in the seventies and eighties? I notice you have some other—Is this the menu from I. Magnin? Yeah, it is.

11-00:40:06

David: I think so, yeah.

Geraci: Well, let's go ahead and we'll talk a little bit about the nineties. Here's a scrapbook of a Narsai roast.

11-00:40:17

David: Oh, the Narsai roast. I was on the founding board of the Berkeley Rep, and served on the board for some eighteen years, before I retired. They asked if they could do a roast of me, as a fundraiser. Well, it sounded like fun. We did it at the Claremont, and I wanted to bring in chefs, a different chef for each course. Paul Prudhomme and Wolfgang Puck flew in. Locally, we had Joyce Goldstein, Jeremiah Tower, and Brad Ogden; and of course, the chef at the hotel, Hans Wiegand.

Geraci: My God, that's an all-star cast.

11-00:41:05

David: It was quite a cast. Actually, you can see; maybe you can get the picture. Is this in good enough focus?

Geraci: Right there. Got it. Perfect. Got it.

11-00:41:26

David: Okay. So it's fascinating to notice the difference in size between the man on the left, Wolfgang Puck—I never thought of Wolf as a heavy man, but wow, he weighs a lot less now than he did in 1993—and Paul Prudhomme, [who] of course, was massive; even then, riding around on his little go-cart.

Geraci: Well, after the death of his wife Kay—That was a tough period for him.

11-00:42:02

David: That was tough. That was really tough. So we did this and we got some fascinating people that spoke. Hugh Downs, I had worked with on *Over Easy*. Here's his comments. And there are pictures with many of the actors. There's Dick Graff, from the wine world; he had Chalone. The thing was really quite a success and we raised a lot of money. Of course, the immediate thought that their development department has is, we've got to keep doing this.

Geraci: We've got to continue this.

11-00:42:47

David: Well, you can't very well do a roast of Narsai every year, so we changed the name to the Narsai Toast to the Arts, and for some seventeen years, we did these dinners. We really outgrew the Claremont that very first year. Someone said that if the fire marshal had seen how crowded it was in that room, he would've probably closed it down. But each year, I would get one big-name chef from outside the area to come in, and then use Bay Area chefs for the others. It bounced to a couple of different locations, but we settled on the Ritz. For oh, more than ten years, it was done at the Ritz. I finally retired from that on, I think it was the seventeenth one. That first one raised \$40,000, which was really a lot of money for us. The last one raised \$500,000. Now, please understand, I'm not taking credit for all that money. I think credit for that belongs to the board, which has grown and evolved so, so far beyond the dreams of the original board. There cannot be a single member of that original

board that could even have imagined the Berkeley Rep becoming what it has become.

Geraci: Well, I find it fascinating, because Berkeley Rep today has a wonderful international reputation.

11-00:44:21

David: Oh, my, yeah. We always knew that it was the world's greatest theater; but to find the kind of recognition that it has gotten has really needed the kind of support that the board has given it. These fundraising events, you cannot make money, serious money at a fundraising event, by selling tickets. To put together a dinner like this, at a fancy place like the Ritz, with all these different chefs and all the different needs, is a very expensive undertaking. Even when you're selling tickets for \$300 or \$500, what really makes the money is that you bring in people on the board who can go out and sell a \$25,000 sponsorship table, or even a \$5,000 or \$10,000 sponsorship, and who can get really, really sexy items for the auction—the use of somebody's villa on the coast of Brava; or a private estate in Tuscany, with a private chef; or a very fancy dinner at somebody's home, prepared by a famous chef. To get things like that donated, in the first place, and then to have an audience that's going to bid the money for those. You could have this fancy dinner and the fancy chef, and only get \$3- or \$4,000 for it; or with the right audience, you can get \$20- or \$30,000 for it. Who was it, that California politician, Jesse Unruh, who said, "Money is the mother's milk of politics." Well, let me tell you, money is the mother's milk of success.

Geraci: Not with just politics, right?

11-00:46:17

David: Yeah. Whether you're running a small neighborhood theater that becomes an important regional theater, that becomes a world-renowned theater that is producing award-winning shows that go to Broadway, and that's winning Emmy Awards and so forth, it takes money to be able to finance all of these exciting projects that you come up with. Boy, I'll tell you, the board gets the credit for that.

Geraci: I think one thing that's interesting here is the role of both food and wine as fundraising vehicles for all sorts of organizations. The Napa Valley wine auctions that go on raise, literally, by the time you're done in any one year, millions of dollars.

11-00:47:07

David: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Geraci: For all sorts of causes. I find it very interesting, also. So you've grown up with the Berkeley Rep. We've talked about this a little bit before, the frustrated actor in you.

11-00:47:24

David: Oh. [they laugh] No.

Geraci:

What was your interest, I guess, in becoming involved in the Berkeley Rep?

11-00:47:29

David:

Well, first of all, the Berkeley Rep started on College Avenue, just three blocks away from here. A woman living next door, who was really—Well, for all intents and purposes, she was the first development director of the Berkeley Rep, long before there was any money being brought in, to be called development. But we were friends. I remember she was always scrambling around, trying to find props for different shows. She needed an old-fashioned soft drink vending machine, the kind they used to have at gas stations, where there was a tub that had refrigerated water in it, or refrigerated brine.

Geraci:

The old Coke ones—

11-00:48:20

David:

Those old Coke things or 7-Up things. I managed to track one down for her, and one thing led to another and we became better friends. Then I got involved in helping with the theater. In those days, I still had my printing business. In fact, I printed the program for the Berkeley Rep the very first show they ever did, *Wozzeck* [?]. I printed the program. It was called, in those days, *The Theater*. It wasn't yet the Berkeley Rep, it was *The Theater*, owned by Michael—How do I draw a blank on Mike's name? That's terrible. Many, many years later, it turned out that they did not have a copy of that first program in their library, in their collection, and I still had all of the files from my print shop days. Fortunately, I went through the file cabinet and found, in the printer's docket, a copy of that program, which I gave them. But Michael Leibert just created this very, very special environment. As I say, it was around the corner. So when Helen Barber stepped in, realizing that this theater was going to be lost if it couldn't be pulled together with some new financing and given a real chance, she came up with the idea of creating a community board. I quickly agreed to join the board with her, and we took over the theater, which Michael Leibert had financed personally and privately, some of it with money from his wife, and some just from his own hard work. He was a graduate student in the drama department at Cal, when he started this thing going, in a little storefront on College Avenue, with ninety-nine seats. Broken down chairs and seats and cushions and such. Once we put together the board and started raising money, we bought that property down on Addison Street, sold the house on College Avenue, which served as the down payment for the piece on Addison, and built a theater and off it went. My goodness, what success it's achieved now. It's amazing.

Geraci:

I guess keeping in mind that we're talking the Bay Area, where we have such wonderful food, wonderful wine, and the important role the arts play in that community, where you find these things all—They coexist and they feed each

other—It's a symbiotic relationship between the arts, food and wine. Maybe because food becomes an art, wine become an art, and it all works together.

11-00:51:32

David:

It is. The degree to which chefs are behaving as artists now is fascinating. Some of it, I'm excited about; but I have to say, some of it is getting a little bit over the top, getting out there so far that I find myself thinking, hey, wait a minute, folks. I do want to eat. Yes, it's wonderful that you're nourishing my soul and it's wonderful that it looks elegant enough to make a permanent painting that you could put on the wall. But at this moment, I'm anxious to get that food into my mouth. When I see, time and again, pictures in the press of a chef using a pair of tweezers to put a couple of leaves of a microgreen in a particular position on a particular portion of—This cook's entire job in the kitchen seems to be to garnish with a tweezer. I worry that maybe we have gone too far.

Geraci:

I hope he didn't go to culinary school to learn how to do that. [they laugh] But I think that ties into, in our last interview and once before, too, in talking about California cuisine, the whole idea of experimentation. The idea of the simplicity and beauty of the food itself. We've seemed to have lost some of that and gone for the glitz of production.

11-00:53:18

David:

Are we running into a time problem on the machine?

Geraci:

We shouldn't be. We've got fifty-three; we still have about six, seven minutes.

11-00:53:27

David:

Oh, all right. I misjudged when it started.

Geraci:

Here's one thing that'll just, I think, finish off this tape, and then we can move to the next one. You've also done a lot of philanthropic work for numerous different organizations. I think here's one good example. This is the City of Hope.

11-00:53:49

David:

The City of Hope. This was—what's the date on this?—in the eighties, I believe. October 1980, in Oakland. They gave me the Spirit of Life Award, as it's called. I'm not sure—I guess you want to see that—how to describe my involvement in nonprofits, but giving has always come easy for me. I like to share, I like to give, and I like to help. There're too many good causes to be able to help them all, so you end up being a little selective. But I had an awfully hard time saying no. Well, in the early days of the restaurant, for instance, we used to give away gift certificates for dinner for two. Any organization that asked, I'd be happy to give it away. It was a way of introducing people to the restaurant, as well as helping them. Then individual organizations, I would get a little more involved with. The City of Hope, I

helped for a number of years, with their fundraisers. Some of them became things that I was intimately involved with. The Berkeley Rep, after eighteen years on the board, I did the dinner for seventeen years. Then the year after I stopped, I went to the dinner as a guest and enjoyed myself and didn't do anything else. Then last year being the second year, I went to the dinner as a guest, but agreed to host a dinner here at home, for ten people. When it sold for \$15,000, I thought, gee whiz, we may as well do another one. So we did two of them. Well, that raised \$30,000 for the theater. It builds on itself. The Taylor Family Foundation started out raising money to provide a summer camp experience for the entire family of children with AIDS. Again, I don't know the exact—It's about twenty-five years ago, a little less than twenty-five.

Geraci: When the epidemic had hit its real peak in the Bay Area.

11-00:56:49

David: When it really hit, and when children with AIDS were going to die. It was just as simple as that. There was no possible help. So to be able to take the entire family for a one-week summer camp experience was really an important contribution. Then they expanded their reach to any child with a life-threatening disease. The event was just this Sunday, and we raised \$1.3 million.

Geraci: That's fantastic.

11-00:57:30

David: In ten days or so, two weeks, is Winesong!, which benefits the Mendocino Hospital Foundation. I've been helping them for more than twenty years. This is one I'll miss. It's only the second time I'm missing. I missed once when a nephew got married; and I'm missing this year because we're taking this vacation with a group of friends, to Maine. Who would imagine the year we decide to go to Maine, there's this earthquake on the East Coast, followed by a hurricane; and now there's another hurricane that's getting ready to head up there?

Geraci: I have many friends on the East Coast that I've been keeping tabs with. I'm, in some ways, kind of reminding them [of] all the times they've said, oh, you Californians; those earthquakes are really bad. I'm sitting there going, well, you just got an earthquake *and* a hurricane.

11-00:58:26

David: And a tornado.

Geraci: And a tornado. I said, "I don't know, just earthquake alone isn't looking too bad right now." [they laugh] Let's stop that tape at this point right here.

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Geraci: Vic Geraci, food and wine historian, UC Berkeley, Regional Oral History Office. Seated with me is Narsai David. Interview is being conducted in Narsai's home in Berkeley, California. This is interview number 6, tape number twelve. When we left off, we were taking a look at some of the philanthropic things that you had done. We talked about the City of Hope. Here's one more. I think this one actually looks kind of fun, because I love the quote, where you were a conductor for a day.

12-00:00:33

David: [laughs] Oh, yeah. "There's just one thing," said Narsai David. "I still don't know exactly how I'm supposed to get on and off the stage." I'll tell you, as we've discussed, I love to be onstage. Hand me a microphone, I'm there.

Geraci: In your glory.

12-00:00:51

David: As a fundraiser for the Berkeley Symphony Orchestra, they got Loni Hancock, who was our mayor at the time; Jeffrey Leiter, who was a former mayor and he's an important board—No, no, no. Jeff was the mayor at that time. Loni Hancock, I guess, was already in the assembly. Sure, that's it. Then Chang-Lin Tien, who was the chancellor at the university, and I, to be guest conductors. I have never been so tensed up at an event. I can tell you, for weeks afterwards, the muscles on the back of my calves ached. They were just so taut and tense. You'd say, well, that's a funny thing to get tense; I wasn't standing on my tiptoes. I wasn't. But it was as if I was, because I just tensed up. I can tell you, it's a real commentary on how good that orchestra is, that in spite of what I was doing—

Geraci: They didn't need you. [they laugh]

12-00:02:14

David: They didn't need me, that's for sure. But I did get a baton. When we had a brief training session with Kent Nagano, who was the conductor, we were given a chopstick to use for our magic wand. But for the real event, we got to use a real one. It's interesting; because just two or three weeks ago, I was brought in as an auctioneer and master of ceremonies for the Bear Valley Music Festival, up in Bear Valley, which is at 7,000 feet, up above the Gold Country. One of the auction items was to be a guest conductor of the Bear Valley Orchestra for next year's event. My goodness! It comes in this *beautiful* cabinet, with a clear, molded plastic cover for it, and it's mounted on a walnut frame. That presentation itself was worth money.

Geraci: It was worth money.

12-00:03:29

David: I don't know, people, I think they spent 12,000 bucks to become the guest conductor for next year.

Geraci: The guest conductor.

12-00:03:38

David: It was exciting.

Geraci: There's numerous other things. I have in 2000, you were the host for a food and wine gala at CCSF's Hotel and Restaurant, at the City College of San Francisco. So you've done a lot of fundraising, also for food education.

12-00:03:58

David: Yeah, I was, for a while, on their advisory board, at City College. I'm really, really impressed with the local community college cooking programs. City College, in San Francisco; Contra Costa College; Diablo Valley College. The one that I absolutely don't know anything about, and I'm embarrassed to say this, is the one at Oakland, at Merritt College. I need to make it a point to go and see what they're doing there and get up to date. But when I see these kids getting the kind of practical education they get in the art of the kitchen, at these community colleges, for a couple hundred dollars a semester, compared to these commercial things, my *God!* \$51,000 for a sixteen-month course at the California Culinary Academy. I've just been doing a little bit of—Well, it's hardly research, but let's just say I've been doing some reading, on how these work. How does somebody come up with \$51,000? Well, the kind of kids that are going to these schools don't have \$51,000. But they are lured into thinking that graduating from that program is going to get them a job as a chef somewhere. Everybody knows that chefs are famous these days and you can "make a lot of money" if you're a chef, quote/unquote. Well, there are many of these kids that sign up, they get this loan, which is basically a loan from the government. So this college has already gotten the \$51,000, essentially, upfront. The kid may wash out after two months, because they just simply can't do it.

Geraci: It doesn't match, yeah.

12-00:06:09

David: It doesn't match. The kid is still on the hook for \$51,000. The college is not on the hook, because they've gotten the advance loan from the government. So the kid owes the government, even though he never got the education. Of those kids that do finish, how many of them are lucky enough to even get a job as a cook in a restaurant, much less as a chef? It is *just astonishing*. This is throughout the country. These schools are opening all over the place. I think getting that basic understanding that you can get in the community colleges, and then getting a job—If you have to get a job as a cook's helper or a vegetable preparation cook or, God forbid, a dishwasher, get into a commercial kitchen, so you can feel the dynamics and the craziness of that kitchen.

Geraci: And start working your way up.

12-00:07:10

David:

Our son Danny, after high school, got a job working for Roger Vergé, at Moulin de Mougins, in the South of France, a three-star restaurant. He would phone home once a week, so unhappy and disillusioned. “I’m not learning anything. This is dumb. All I do is purée vegetables and fruit and wash this and strain the stocks.” Let me tell you, he came home with a sophisticated understanding of sauce making and the nuance of using fruits and vegetables as a little bit of a flavor component, that so far transcends anything that his father ever knew or knows now, just being around these people in the kitchen. By the end of summer, obviously, he was doing more than just straining the sauces, because as they saw his ability, they gave him more responsible things to do. He spent some summers cooking at Ballymaloe, in County Cork, in Ireland. Again, the same kind of thing. The more he did, the more he showed his ability, the more they were expecting of him. That’s the *real* kind of learning experience. To pay \$51,000 to go to one of these schools is something that I don’t get.

Geraci:

So that’s the reason I wanted to bring that up. It seems that it’s been an important cause for you. I have two things that I’d like to get on this tape that we can finish up with. Number one, I would like to talk about the idea of food and public health, and how we as a society have perceived food, over the long career that you’ve had. Because there’s been some major changes on how government policy views it, how we as consumers view it, and how restaurateurs have navigated this back and forth. Then I’d also like to finish with your book, *The Menu*, and talk a little bit about the same type of thing, the changes in restaurants and restaurateuring in the Bay Area. Because I know one of the things that you’ve done, you’ve been actively involved in food policy and food issues, because in 1998, along with Alice Waters, Bob Scowcroft, of the Organic Farming Research Foundation, you were trying to urge the USDA to amend proposed rules to stamp out irradiated, genetically engineered foods with the USDA certified organic label.

12-00:10:08

David:

Well, the power of big business in establishing regulations, I guess, can’t come as any big surprise to anybody who’s awake. But it is nonetheless painful and sometimes frightening, the things that they get away with in these regulations. When this proposal for organic was going to allow the use of municipal sludge as fertilizer in an organic farm, and the by far most invidious part of this proposal of all was that a producer could not claim that his product had been produced to a higher standard—Well, can you imagine if they could’ve slipped in genetically engineered food, if they could’ve slipped in radioactively processed food, food grown on municipal sludge, which, let’s not pussyfoot around; that’s the stuff that comes from the sewage treatment plant, okay? Then to top it all off, you could not claim that your product was raised according to California’s finest standard, which is above that. How much more invidious could a regulation be? To say, not only these are all going to be allowed, and you cannot claim that you did something to a higher

standard. There's a degree of evil here that is frankly hard for me to comprehend.

Geraci: Well, does this show, first of all, the power of agribusiness and its ability to lobby in the halls of congress?

12-00:12:22

David: Oh. Oh, my goodness, does it ever. If it had not been for the outrage that this garnered—it brought together so many people, across such a large cross-section of the country—that that could've become the law. I am not one of these people that say everything needs to be grown within eleven miles of your backyard, or you shouldn't eat it. I understand and I agree, that it takes hundreds and hundreds of thousands of acres of land to grow enough produce to feed the United States of America. Forget about the rest of the world; let's just talk about the US of A. That can't be done by having gardens in everybody's backyard. I lived through World War II. We were in Chicago and had a Victory garden in Lincoln Park. Huge acreages of Lincoln Park were chopped up into little sections, and they provided a hose bib and you owned your own tools. We didn't have a car; we went on a streetcar, regularly, to tend our garden, to grow the vegetables. We moved from Chicago to Turlock, where we had a large lot and grew almost all the produce that we could consume, and we gave away boxes of it to neighbors. So here I'm living in a small city lot in Berkeley and I don't grow a lot of produce here; but we have been eating beans. I've got to be out there and literally, pick them every day, because they're at the point that they're maturing so fast that they get too mature overnight, practically. There's a little bit of squash and some cherry tomatoes. Regular tomatoes will not mature in Berkeley. We don't have enough sun. I have surrendered. I gave up last year, on that score. But cherry tomatoes seem to make it sometimes. There are some bergamot oranges that I use for marmalade, and there's some Chinese quince and some traditional quince and Meyer lemons and kafir limes—things that we really have fun with—some apples and some plums. But when it comes to feeding the population, it's not going to be done that way. If you're going to have lettuce for a salad, you need thousands of acres of lettuce. It takes a lot of room to grow a head of lettuce.

Geraci: There's not that many places, geographically, that have the climate capable of growing lettuce.

12-00:15:19

David: There's a little too much hype that gets established by these people who say—I like the word locavore and I like the word sustainable, but would somebody please give me a definition of what is sustainability? I went to a luncheon the other day, talking about sustainable seafood. The Monterey Bay Aquarium has apparently come up with a definition that allows—They've just recently dubbed a white shrimp in Oregon that's in the wild, that's harvested out of the wild, as sustainable. I was baffled, trying to understand how it could possibly

be sustainable. Well, what they've done is they're using nets that do not drag on the bottom; they're elevated some distance above the bottom. There are traps in these nets that allow fish to escape. Historically, the traditional drag method of harvesting prawns would have as much as 95 percent bycatch. The bycatch is, by and large, dumped dead or dying, back into the ocean. So only 5 percent of what's brought onboard is actually the prawns that you're going to keep. Well, this new method, and specifically in the waters in Oregon, where it's used, apparently has only 5 percent bycatch, so that somebody has figured out a way to harvest prawns without destroying the surrounding environment and without destroying the surrounding fishery. But that's pretty rare. That's the only one.

Geraci: That's the exception to the rule.

12-00:17:24

David: Then swordfish is no longer on the do-not-touch list. I challenged that, only to be told that when the word went out several years ago, about how the swordfish industry was really self-destructing, that chefs throughout the country immediately took swordfish off their menu and made a point of saying they would not serve swordfish. That reduced the demand so dramatically that they have sort of put it—It's not on the green list yet; it's on the yellow list, where it's acceptable. So there is some maneuvering there. But then Whole Foods, I don't know if they still have it, but for a long time, has been selling Chilean sea bass, claiming that theirs comes from a sustainable source. Well, I've talked to marine biologists who say there is no such thing as a sustainable source for Chilean sea bass. For years, we were harvesting fish that were fifty and sixty and seventy years old, and selling them as Chilean sea bass. It doesn't take much of a mathematician to figure out that when you take fish that old, the ability to propagate the species just disappears.

Geraci: It's almost the same environmental argument as old growth redwoods or Douglas fir forest. Once you've cut out much of the old growth, you've got an immediate problem. Takes a long time to rebuild that again.

12-00:19:00

David: Well, and can you ever rebuild it, if it's gone down so far? So the challenge that I threw out to this table full of people was to be careful that this word sustainable does not get coopted, the way organic has become coopted. People want you to think that organic means no pesticide was used. Well, it simply is not true. Go online; you can download the State of California list of pesticides approved for agriculture. It'll be either approved for organic or not approved for organic or conditionally approved for organic, so that in the ear of that storm of locusts, they can conditionally approve the use of it for that year. Well, when you add up all of these things that can legally be used, there's a lot of pesticide out there. Now, I am not going to argue that we should never use pesticide anymore, because we still have to feed the populace. If we've got to use some in order to get the stuff out there, it's got to be used. Do I want to

diminish it? Of course. Would I like to see the removal of all pesticide? Of course. In my little garden here, I don't use any pesticide at all, not even on the flowers, just because I don't like the thought of breathing and consuming that stuff. But we do have to feed the population. If it requires some pesticide to do that, then I say we've got to do it. If it's got to come from more than 100 miles away, I'd say we've got to do it. Now, would I buy a tomato out of season that was grown in Chile? Not on your life, thank you very much. Having nothing to do with anything except that it no longer tastes like a tomato. The thought that it has traveled halfway around the globe, just so I could appreciate a tomato when it's out of season, that kind of stuff, to me, doesn't make any sense. That's sort of the extreme.

Geraci: So obviously, one part of the problem then is how do we, as a government and as a people, get agribusiness to be productive, yet at the same time, maintain certain standards for health? Yet at the same time, we have the same Department of Agriculture coming out with its—it used to be the food pyramid, now recently changed to the food plate—with standards. Standards which, by the way, have changed over the last three decades, numerous times, what is healthy and what we should be eating.

12-00:21:58

David: Well, but a lot of that change is because—Well, two important things. First, new research and new knowledge. We now know more. When we started the television show *Over Easy*, I, as you know, did a cooking segment every week on the show. And the McGovern Report on nutrition had just come out. It was the first time such a thing had been done. It specified the need to cut down on fat and cholesterol and salt and so forth, and every one of my recipes hewed to those guidelines. Well, along the way came the Mediterranean diet, and then came the food pyramid. Each of these was an attempt to convey to people. But nothing has been able to deal with the fact that Americans really like rare red meat and they like it to be juicy and like it to be loaded with fat, and they want to eat it frequently. They want ham and they want pastrami and corned beef. There is plenty of evidence out there now that says all of this stuff is okay, but it must be in moderation. Cut back on it. You can't use too much of it. We don't seem to be able to overpower the advertising that the big producers lay out there, that talk about how juicy and how wonderful it is.

Geraci: But moderation seems to be a key word.

12-00:23:38

David: Oh, boy. Oh, boy. I feel strongly. Everything.

Geraci: That even goes for the alcohol, the wine industry. Moderation is a very important word. But it's either glut-or-famine, almost, type ideology. For over 300 years, we've been grappling with this term moderation, in American health standards.

12-00:24:01

David:

Well, when you look at the rate of obesity and just sheer overweight in our population, I guess it's pretty easy to say that moderation is not working. It's not just that America is so bad, it's throughout the world, as the standard of living goes up. Look at the Chinese need for pork. They can't produce enough pork for that country. It happens to be probably the most preferred meat. That and duck, I guess, would certainly be at the very top of my understanding of Chinese cooking. If you can afford it, you want a little more meat. Yes, you can survive on beans and rice. We know that works. But as soon as you can afford it, you want a little more. Well, a little more leads to a lot more, and pretty soon even the Chinese are gaining weight. So how do you temper that? How do we teach people? Well, teaching them and not dampening the rights of a capitalist society to go out and promote what they want to promote is sort of at loggerheads, isn't it?

Geraci:

Yeah. You don't want to be bucking the Kentucky Colonel and McDonald's.

12-00:25:31

David:

By the way, you mention the Kentucky Colonel, how clever that it's no longer known as Kentucky Fried Chicken. It's KFC. Remember, they added the grilled chicken, so you now have a choice of either fried or grilled. But you never hear the words Kentucky fried chicken. It is now KFC. So that was kind of a clever way to try and make a shift. To their credit, by adding the grilled chicken, they are attempting something.

Geraci:

Well, even McDonald's. Its kids' meals now even have sliced apples in them. You can get sliced apples instead of French fries. I'm just saying what their promotion stresses; I'm not saying I necessarily agree.

12-00:26:15

David:

No, no, I know, I know. I think it was Marion Nestle that did an article recently on that. That's good, that's helpful. It's nice to see them doing it. But I just wish more could be done to show the kids how good that apple is for you, that it's not just available as an option to the French fries. Who on earth wouldn't prefer French fries? I never order anything with French fries; but when we go out to a restaurant, somebody inevitably will order something and I'm sort of reaching over and grabbing some of the fries. Or at one of our favorite San Francisco restaurants, they just do an incredible mussel dish. So I will usually, when we sit down, say, hey, what do you guys think about sharing some of those mussels as an appetizer? Well, guess what? This big cone of French fries comes with it. They're crisp and crunchy, and I absolutely make a pig of myself. But as long as you only do it once in a while.

Geraci:

I think it's back to your philosophy again. Could it be, then, that—as you said, it used to be food pyramid, now it's the food plate; they've changed the image and the wording on is really a way to educate people towards moderation, without saying moderation? Without saying you don't have a choice? It's teaching people to make healthier choices?

12-00:27:54

David:

Well, some of it is that. Some of it, I think, must relate to making some of that food look and taste better. A kid who just can't possibly tolerate the thought of eating broccoli, I think there is a way to teach at home, how to incorporate that stuff, so that from an early—How come some kids like broccoli raw, as a crunchy, as a crudité, and some can't even imagine it? Well, it's exposure to it. It's introducing it at an early enough age. All of this work that Alice has been doing in getting real food into schools, if at an early enough age, they're exposed to it, gosh, suddenly that's not so bad. It's crunchy, it's got a nice texture, it's an intriguing flavor. Why not? Talking about broccoli, I learned from my mother, who of course, is the world's greatest cook anyway, you buy a bunch of broccoli and the stalk is about that long. Well, this much of it, on the stem, has that really tough skin. It seems to me that 90 percent of the people cut that off and throw it away. Well, wait a minute. Cut it off, but peel that skin. That skin is so thick you can't do it with a potato peeler, but using a paring knife, you start at the bottom end, where it's the thickest, and sort of catch it, and it just sort of tears off. Well, the part inside that is the sweetest, most delicate, most delicious part of the broccoli. In fact, if you ever eat kohlrabi, I always say that kohlrabi, to me, is like a peeled broccoli stem. Well, they're in the same family. The difference is that that stem on the kohlrabi has formed into a large bulb, whereas in the broccoli, it's a straight stem. Well, some clever guy came along and is now running those broccoli stems through a shredding device, making them into really thin julienne strips, and selling it in the stores as a slaw.

Geraci:

I buy that all the time.

12-00:30:19

David:

Wonderful stuff. A little bit of vinegar and oil on it and you've got a beautiful, crunchy slaw. God, it doesn't even take much labor; you just open the package, right?

Geraci:

That's one of the convenience foods that I do buy myself, because it's very healthy; as you said, it's easy. But those are the factors that are, I think, coming into it, also—convenience and price. There are comfort foods in this world, and kids will choose the comfort food that tastes better. And fat, I'm sorry, has more taste for kids.

12-00:30:58

David:

Oh, for everybody. Plenty has been written and plenty of scientific studies have now established that salt, sugar and fat, all three of these damned things—We used to talk about how sugar sates the appetite. Well, that's only partially true. Yeah, if you get enough sugar, it does dampen the appetite. But one bite of sugar calls for a second bite of sugar. It also accentuates the desire. Salt does the same thing and fat does the same thing. One of the basic rules that I keep pronouncing to friends is, you've got to avoid the white stuff—salt, sugar, flour, rice. Anything that is all white cannot be all good. Those are mutually exclusive possibilities. So we do have to have less salt. Wow, you're

taking about changes in taste and changes in what the restaurants are doing. It really, really aggravates me to see coarse sea salt. I love that word, sea salt. That makes it different from regular salt.

Geraci: It makes it better.

12-00:32:17

David: Yeah. Well, regular salt also comes from the sea. It may be deposited four-million years earlier, but it was still at the bottom of a sea, whatever the hell you want to say about it. But desserts—caramel candies and chocolate truffles and various fudge things, sprinkled with coarse salt. Good grief! We're looking for ways to reduce salt, and here it's being gratuitously sprinkled with things. Yeah, sure, it accentuates flavor. Sure, it's kind of exciting. But my God, it's certainly not needed. Recipes for cakes and cookies that call for salt? I never put salt in cakes or cookies. I just simply do not. *Why?* It's just dumb. We've got to reduce the amount of salt that we put into our systems, so why throw it in gratuitously?

Geraci: I guess to me, an immediate question comes up. We have all these issues and we have all these things. We have a food pyramid, the food plate now, we're trying to educate, we're trying to talk moderation and teach our kids to eat better. Yet at the same time, we're rewarding agribusiness for producing the very stuff that's bad for us; i.e., let's look at corn, let's look at fructose. We reward them for producing that.

12-00:33:54

David: My good man, you're talking to a died-in-the-wool Democrat. You're talking the ugliness of politics, is what you're talking about. Doesn't have a damned thing to do with people's wellbeing or with food, or with food pyramids or with food plates. It has to do, plain and simple, with capitalism. It's one of the real failures in our system that we can rationalize these things the way we do. I certainly wouldn't have imagined we were going to be talking politics, but that's the simple reality of this.

Geraci: But it's a dual system, where we are asking for us to be moderate, to eat better, to be healthier as a nation; yet we are producing that which is creating the problem. In many ways, [it] seems very simplistic; we need less fructose. Why do we need so much corn syrup in all of our products? Or why do we need so much salt?

12-00:35:06

David: Well, it's a crummy situation, and it is nothing more or less than politics and the power of big business. It wasn't that long ago that they started making margarine out of soybean oil. It was deemed to be, and promoted to be, much better for you than butter, because it was made from a vegetable oil. Now, I don't know at what moment of history the scientists discovered these trans fats and how evil they were, so I'm not going to accuse them of having known that in advance. However, it's fascinating, the degree to which the tropical oils

were just pounded to hell. Things like palm oil, palm kernel oil, coconut oil. Overnight, manufacturers changed their formulas and their packages of packaged cookies and cake mixes and things like that. Said, no tropical oils. They were all using the soybean oil that was hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated. Well, hydrogenation created these trans fats, which the tropical oils didn't have. So in retrospect, yes, they are both saturated and we would be better off if we could use oils that are liquid at room temperature, rather than solid. But push come to shove, suddenly that coconut oil is better for you than the hydrogenated soybean oil. Again, it's the power of business and advertising. They practically destroyed the tropical oil business, but the soybean oil people are famously successful with it.

Geraci: I grew up in a situation where the only oil I ever knew of was olive oil, so it didn't matter.

12-00:37:27

David: Well, see, I grew up in an Assyrian home, where there was very little oil. My mother used peanut oil that she would use for salad dressings and on the occasion that she would make potato chips for us, she would fry potato chips for us. But it was basically animal fat. Butter was her choice of cooking fat. For instance, when she would make a stew, she would trim the fat off the meat that she was going to use, mince it in real fine mince, render that out in a pan, and then brown the meat in that fat, instead of browning it in olive oil or whatever, any other kind of oil. Now, how much of that was just because growing up in this little, tiny village in Northwest Iran, first of all, it was a matter of cost; must've had something to do with it.

Geraci: Waste not, want not.

12-00:38:31

David: Waste not, want not. If you've already got fat there that you could brown the meat in, why bring in other fat that you have to get? They didn't have olives, so olive was not traditional. Olive oil is an adult acquired taste for me, and it took a long time for me to develop a passion for olive oil, because that peppery, pungent, herbaceous, herbal, vegetative, floral—all these different adjectives that apply—was kind of a jarring experience for me. It was something I wasn't accustomed to. Now, of course, I know there are many wonderful things you can do with different aspects of it. But I don't go out buying exclusively this dark green, peppery olive oil. I think that's wonderful if you're going to use it to dress some salads. An eggplant salad, a lentil salad, wow, that stuff adds a wonderful complexity. But I wouldn't use that for my everyday cooking. I think people waste a lot of money using that to cook in, because high heat, first of all, burns off and destroys a lot of those flavors. So I use a very simple—There's an olive oil that comes from Greece, under the name Martinis—it's like the plural of the martini drink, M-A-R-T-I-N-I-S—an extra-virgin olive oil. Sells at Trader Joe's for like \$9 a liter. For an

everyday oil for cooking, I think it's absolutely wonderful. When I want to do something with an exotic flavor and I want to show off some exotic component as a flavor that I want, well, then I've got all these other oils that I use, nut oils and various things. But they're by choice; they're not something that I'm just locked into.

Geraci: There again, in this era of these new food-type things, we have olive oil tasting now. Look at all the different types of sea salts that are out there from all the different regions of the world, different colors, different textures.

12-00:40:48

David: Now, you're going to get me on a hook here. That one drives me nuts. With olive oil, yes, there are different flavors and different components. With salt, I defy you to show me somebody that can tell the difference in the flavor of salt in the finished cooked product.

Geraci: I can't.

12-00:41:11

David: I'll never forget this article in the *New York Times*. Some famous restaurant that was being reviewed had seven different varieties of salt in the kitchen, one of them costing \$70 a pound.

Geraci: My goodness.

12-00:41:27

David: The chef spoke of how he really likes to use the red salt from Maui for his fish dishes, because it adds such a nice earthy flavor. Now, this guy is obviously a rocket scientist. Have you ever been to Maui?

Geraci: I have.

12-00:41:44

David: The soil is red clay. Have you ever seen Maui salt? It's harvested from the evaporating ponds, with some of that red clay. So this brilliant chef gets an earthy flavor by putting earth in his food. Duh. Come on, folks. Yes, different salts from different parts of the world have other salts in them, besides sodium chloride. But we're talking trace quantities and we're talking by the time that is dissolved in the food—Come on. Wait a minute. I used to do those cooking classes at Macy's. I can't remember how many years that lasted, but I launched weekly cooking classes at Macy's on Saturday mornings. There were chefs that insisted on using kosher salt. It got to be kind of funny, Vic, because the regulars in the class realized what was going on. When a chef said that he always used kosher salt, I would immediately say, "Oh, really? Why kosher salt?" There were two answers. One, oh, because it's much sweeter than regular salt; or two, because it's much saltier than regular salt. I kept a sort of casual, not very scientific log, and it was almost evenly divided

between the chef who used kosher salt because it was sweeter and the chef who used the same kosher salt because it was saltier.

Geraci: Those are two very different tastes on the palette.

12-00:43:34

David: They're on the opposite ends of the spectrum. Now, to use kosher salt because it's coarse, that's a different story. In a commercial kitchen, you don't see a chef using a saltshaker to put salt into a sauté pan or into a pot of soup. The salt is in a bowl. By definition, it's going to be the coarse salt, for one simple reason. There's always moisture. You're using fresh vegetables, your hands are in water, your hands are moist. If you were to reach into an open container with fine salt, it sticks to your hand. When it's coarse salt, you can put a pinch of salt into the sauté pan or you can put a tablespoon of salt into the pot that you're going to boil some pasta in or some vegetables in. So the coarse salt has come to be known as kosher salt because it's coarse. But if the choice was coarse salt or fine salt, they would be using the coarse salt. Here are chefs saying the very same salt is either sweeter or is either saltier. So you start talking about the perception. Again, I go back to my basic argument, which is the amount of salt which is dissolved into the food, for somebody to tell me that this dish tastes better with this brand of sea salt than with that brand of sea salt, and they could taste the difference? I want them to show me. I want to see them pick it out. I don't think it can be done.

Geraci: Let's shift gears just for a little bit and let's talk about your book, *The Menu*.

12-00:45:22

David: *The Menu*. I had virtually forgotten about this book until you brought it up in discussion. I did two editions of this, and it was a matter of selecting 200 restaurants in the Bay Area. When you're audacious enough to say the best anything, it's really kind of a dumb concept.

Geraci: Now, this is the project that you'd done with your son.

12-00:45:50

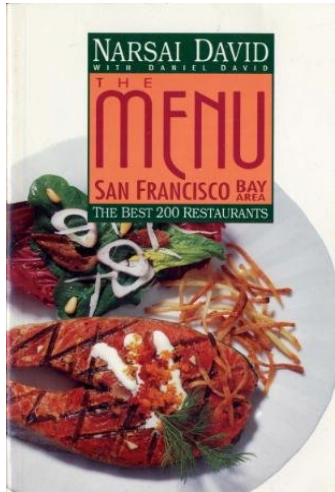
David: Right. It's kind of a dumb thing to think you could say, these are the best 200. How can anything be the best 200? When push comes to shove, by the time you have finished eating at these 200, there are a lot of new restaurants that have opened that you haven't even been to yet.

Geraci: And many of those 200 have already closed.

12-00:46:16

David: Many of those have already closed. Secondly, in order for this to be a useful book for the public to go out and pay money for, it better have a cross-section of cuisines. Okay, so you've got to be sure to include some Chinese and some Japanese and some Thai and some Vietnamese and some—Well, now, wait a minute. If we're doing Chinese, are we including some Hunan or Cantonese?

Is it all going to be Cantonese? Shouldn't there be some Sichuanese? So it gets to be really kind of silly. So to say, here is a cross-section of Bay Area restaurants as a reference point, I think becomes a little bit useful. The Zagat guide these days, I think is a wonderfully useful tool, because it provides ideas, it gives you addresses, you can look up menus. But when something gets more Zagat points than another, to me, that's meaningless, because the huge number of people voting means you've got a number that is a *mélange* that no longer means anything. If a couple of thousand people voted—



(Narsai David's book, *The Menu: San Francisco Bay Area*.)

Geraci: Well, with the Zagat, one of the biggest problems was consistency of their recommendations. They've got thousands of people out there producing all of these. How do you account for that many different tastes?

12-00:47:55
David:

Exactly. It can also be so easily manipulated. A particular restaurant gets a word out to its clientele that they'd like them to get their Zagat votes in. Now, there are restaurant reviewers who I frequently strongly disagree with; but I have a lot more respect for a restaurant review done by a particular critic, because I have learned how my taste compares to his or her taste. I can look at the Sunday restaurant review in the *Chronicle*, and by looking at the picture and the caption on the front page of the food section; it is very, very rare that my guess of the score is off by more than a half star. Sometimes it's a whole star off, but frequently, it's right on. Because I've come to know that individual. Michael Bauer, I've come to know what he's saying. So just that one little phrase and the caption under the picture has already telegraphed the message of what he's going to vote on this thing. So when he says he likes or dislikes a particular thing, I have a pretty fair sense of what he's talking about. That's not to say that I think he's the world's greatest restaurant reviewer, or that anybody else could be the world's greatest restaurant reviewer. It's just

how do you get this to be a guideline for people? So what we were trying to do with *The Menu*, as was the title of the book, was to get a selection of menus so that you could, in one place—this is before you could go online and look up any one of them.

Geraci: They're all online now.

12-00:49:57

David: Right. Here, Pasha; Cho-Cho, Japanese; Kyoya, Japanese; Maykadeh, Persian; Le Castel, classic French approach; La Folie, L'Olivier—look at all the French ones here together. It's because [of] that L-apostrophe. The French Laundry, Fleur de Lys, Ernie's. Boy, names that have such a wonderful memory. Ernie's.

Geraci: Some of those are the old classic San Francisco restaurants.

12-00:50:26

David: Absolutely. Yeah, gone. Café Jacqueline, Bistro Clovis, Tourelle. It's interesting how many of these names are French. This is all in the continental section. Here's the Chinese section. Hunan Village, House of Nanking, Hong Kong Flower Lounge, Hong Kong East Ocean Seafood. Gee, I have a recipe that I've adapted from Hong Kong East Ocean, for black cod, in which we marinate it with soy sauce and sugar and white wine and some onion. Then I steam it on a bed of sliced onions. Absolutely phenomenal stuff.

Geraci: Oh, that sounds great.

12-00:51:14

David: Just wonderful. When I first had it, it was made of Chilean sea bass. Boy, were we excited about Chilean sea bass, until we discovered how amazing a fishery it was and how amazingly we were destroying it. So that led to my immediate discovery of black cod, which is known as sable, by the way, on the East Coast. If you go into a fancy deli and they'll have smoked sable, it's just a white version of smoked salmon, if it's cold smoked. Well, they happen to call it sable; we call it black cod, on the West Coast. When you get the little ones, they filet them out and sell them in the stores as filet of butterfish. So butterfish, black cod, sable—all the same fish.

Geraci: It's all the same fish.

12-00:52:06

David: It is a *wonderful* fish. That's easily my favorite, next to salmon, of the available, sustainable, usable fish on the market.

Geraci: Now, another thing I would find very difficult. When I think of the great cosmopolitan cities of the world, they're filled with restaurants. Another thing that's really, in looking at the book, amazed me is the amount of ethnic food

available to us in the Bay Area. There isn't a place in the world that you can't find something from that table or that cuisine.

12-00:52:43

David: Well, and more and more. Even more rapidly. There's a restaurant here in Berkeley called Zatar. Zatar is the Arabic word for thyme, the herb thyme. But it's also used as a word for a mixture of herbs and spices. I can never remember which is which, but in Syria and in Lebanon, they're slightly different. Both of them have thyme and sesame seed in them. One of them has sumac, one of them has paprika, so one of them is red. In any event, this little restaurant is named Zatar, that's doing really interesting Middle Eastern food.

Geraci: Particular cuisine, yeah. A little piece.

12-00:53:45

David: A piece of a cuisine.

Geraci: So in your lifetime within this industry, have there been any really noticeable changes or trends in restaurants within the Bay Area?

12-00:54:03

David: Well, yeah. Sure. Some of the real obvious and major changes are that the really very fancy, white tablecloth, tuxedo-clad waiters restaurants of the old days have, in large measure, disappeared. La Bourgogne no longer exists, Le Trianon is gone. L'etoile is—these are just such wonderful memories. Ernie's, which was sort of Italian, but sort of American. D'Oros, D-apostrophe-O-R-O, Italian, very classy, very fancy. Then La Folie still exists as a pretty fancy, formal French restaurant. Hubert Keller, at his Fleur De Lys. But there are fewer and fewer of those. Dining has become more casual in restaurants. The use of a communal table seems to be absolutely necessary. Every new restaurant that's coming online has a large communal table. What's really funny is that a lot of these communal tables are being built at the height of a bar, and seating is at a stool. So that it's not just communal dining, but it's communal dining at a bar, sort of. But you can face people across from you, as well as having people next to you.

Geraci: It gives a different proximity to everybody around you, doesn't it?

12-00:56:02

David: Whole different ambience. The part of it that's troubling to me is the noise. My *God!* You can't hear yourself think, these restaurants are so noisy. Then they turn up music loud. What we learned a long time ago was that the louder the music is, the louder people are going to talk. Music at Narsai's Restaurant, you could hear in the beginning of the evening, so that when there were only a few tables in there, there was this gentle classical background music. But as the conversation picked up, the music was dimmed down, because I didn't want it to become a shouting match to hear each other.

Geraci: Well, in reviews now, the little bells are decibels—

12-00:56:45

David: The little bells, right.

Geraci: —to show you the noise factor. But isn't that for young people, in particular? You almost think of that as the New York alive, vivacious restaurant.

12-00:56:56

David: Well, some of it is that. I frankly find myself wondering if some of it might not be related to the degree to which the eardrums were destroyed in these amazingly loud rock and roll concerts they went to. They wear these headsets, so that their ears are totally covered, except they're turned up to this loud blast. Maybe they can't hear any better; they've got to yell anymore. I don't know what it is. [they laugh] But dining has definitely become more casual. The formality has given way.

Geraci: One thing I find is an interesting function. I agree with you; dining has become much more casual, which I personally like. But it also seems, in another sense, it's become more expensive, at the same time.

12-00:57:46

David: Well, but the way it's become more expensive is really kind of intriguing. I was talking to a restaurateur who reduced his prices. The most expensive items on the menu came down quite substantially, and he added a lot of small plates. By the end of the day, the check average had not gone down and his profits had gone up, because people saw these small plates and thought that was a little more fun. So they would buy more small plates and end up actually spending more money for a comparable amount of food, but they got this added variety and it became a different kind of eating. People are looking for values. More and more restaurants are offering a price fix meal that changes each night, where there's a three-course meal. We were just at a restaurant out in Lafayette recently, where there was a three-course meal for \$34, which was a really, really good value. Then they had specials. In fact, this was a real irritating point. The specials were announced at the table, but the prices weren't mentioned, and the most expensive regular à la carte item on the menu was \$30. Well, it turned out that the specials that we ordered were a lot more than the most expensive item on the regular menu. I thought that was sort of—Well, at the very least, it was misleading. I think if you're going to have specials—

Geraci: It's also, to me, counterintuitive. When you think specials, it rings in your mind, oh, this is going to be something that is going to be a little less. Maybe they're trying to—you have something of this left over or got a special buy or—

12-01:00:02

David:

No. So I think when they're going to have a special, they should announce, and we have wild king salmon, line-caught from California, and it's \$32. Tell the people, my goodness. You're looking at a menu with prices on it. I heard an interesting thing the other day about pricing of wine on wine lists, learning a lot about the psychology of how people choose things. People are on a budget, but nobody wants to buy the cheapest wine on the list, because they don't want to be thinking people will see them as being cheap. But the second cheapest wine on the list, restaurants are making a larger margin on. How do you like that for clever?

Geraci:

Marketing a little ploy.

12-01:00:51

David:

Huh? It's the second cheapest one, but their profit margin on it is better, because studying the psychology of it, they've learned that people will buy that, but not the cheapest one.

Geraci:

But wine prices have, to me, gone totally out of hand.

12-01:01:14

David:

Stark raving nuts. Corkage? Even worse. I keep arguing that corkage should never be one cent greater than the smallest profit you're able to make on a bottle of wine. So if you have a wine on your list for \$25, that wine surely must've cost you \$10. Let's say it cost you \$8. You're making \$17 on it. Why is your corkage \$20? And corkage now of \$25 and \$50? There's one that gets \$100. Come on, folks.

Geraci:

That's totally telling you, don't bother to bring your wine.

12-01:02:02

David:

Yeah. You're just penalizing somebody for wanting to drink their own wine. When you think about that wine that they're only making the \$15 on, if it's a white wine, you've had to pay to refrigerate it. In any event, you've had your money tied up on it because it's been on the inventory. A bottle falls and breaks occasionally, you have inventory shortage. The boss opens a bottle to drink once in a while, you have shortage. It has cost you money.

Interview 7: September 27, 2011

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Geraci: I am Vic Geraci, food and wine historian from the University of California Berkeley, Regional Oral History Office. Today's date is September 27, 2011, and seated with me is Narsai David. This is interview number seven, tape number thirteen. This interview is being conducted in Narsai's home in Berkeley, California. Welcome back again, Narsai.

13-00:00:26

David: Vic, my goodness, welcome to you. It's nice to have you back. We had a great trip. Maine is marvelous and wow, the lobster is just as good as ever. We could argue all day long about whether the hard shell or the soft shell is better, but by golly, if you're there at a time of year when there's no longer any hard shell available because it's all soft shell, then soft shell is the best damned lobster you ever had, I can tell you. [they laugh]

Geraci: I never thought of it that way. That makes all the difference right there, doesn't it?

13-00:00:55

David: When it's fresh out of the water, there's no arguing.

Geraci: The first time I was in Maine, having it fresh out of the water was the amazing thing. It's sweeter. I don't know how to describe it.

13-00:01:09

David: Oh, no, it's definitely sweeter. It's fresh. My goodness. They don't ship it across country in a tank, it's shipped dry. They put it in a large refrigerated container, those insulated containers, and it's shipped by air freight. But it's how many hours from the time it's packed until it gets to the airport, until it gets across the country, until it gets unloaded, until the truck gets to the guy that has the tank. So it's, I would suspect, a minimum of twelve to sixteen hours that it's out of the water. So obviously, there's going to be a difference. Even if when you buy it, you're buying it out of a tank, it went through a little bit of stress.

Geraci: Stress always affects the taste of meat.

13-00:01:57

David: Sure.

Geraci: You ask any hunter. That's the reason for a clean kill, is because the animal doesn't go through the hormonal changes caused through the stress process.

13-00:02:07

David: Right.

Geraci: Well, as we were talking, one of the topics I would like to start with today is art, and the art that you had at Narsai's and the art that you've collected here in your home. I know later on, we're actually going to go through and we'll take some photographs and have you describe these pieces even more. But let's talk about some of the artists and some of the art that you have.

13-00:02:32

David: Sure. Well, when we decided to build the restaurant—We're talking 1970. I had been at the Potluck from 1959 to 1970. I set out, knowing that I was going to have to have my own restaurant. The partnership thing had not worked out at the Potluck and I was the little partner and he was the big partner.

Geraci: You described that earlier. Partnerships always, there has to be a stress point somewhere along the line.

13-00:03:07

David: I guess. I guess. Well, the stress point was reached and it was ended. So I knew I didn't want a partner, and I certainly did not want a landlord. Now, I am not a very sophisticated investor. I hardly own any stocks. I've always invested in real estate. I know it's a little corny to say there's only so many acres and we're not growing any more land, but it is true. It maybe goes through cycles, just like all other investments; but somehow, it feels like it's more protected. Right. So we found this place out on the Colusa Circle, that had been a grocery store. It was bought by a man, a doctor in Berkeley, as an investment. The grocer had gone broke some six months before; it had sat vacant. The same man had also bought some apartments in Berkeley for investment. It was just at the beginning of the Berkeley rent strikes, and wow, he knew that he wanted to get out of real estate as quick as he could. So he was more than happy to negotiate and take a small down payment and carry back a second, and so I was able to buy this old grocery store. Well, we didn't have an architect design it. I had a friend who worked with me, whose father had been a contractor, so he had some construction experience. It was one of these, well, gee, let's see; if we put the wall here, we could move this over there. I remember when we laid out the bar, it was going to be sixteen feet long. But then I found these two walnut slabs from a tree that was cut down in Danville, that were twenty-one feet long. The widest one was about thirty-two inches wide, two and a half inches thick, and twenty-one feet long. Well, I was not about to cut that down to sixteen feet.

Geraci: That's beautiful wood.

13-00:05:15

David: It's such an unusual piece of wood. And no, I didn't put a flip-flop on one side for the bartender to get in; the bartender had to duck under, to get into the bar—probably in violation of all codes these days. Well, I don't know about fire codes, but handicap rules would probably have prohibited that. One of the things I wanted was to incorporate some art. Well, God knows there wasn't much money; we had a very, very limited budget. But there were a couple of

artists I was particularly interested in working with. One was Martin Metal. That's spelled M-E-T-A-L, but pronounced Meh-tell. He and Harold Paris and—Now my mind goes blank, the most famous one of the three. Started the Berkeley Art Foundry. Peter Voukos. We had dismantled this huge, 200,000-gallon redwood tank up in the Oakland Hills. It was part of the East Bay Water District reservoir, and was replaced by a two-million-gallon underground concrete vault. The steel rods which held it together—there were these three-quarter-inch-thick steel rods—I decided I'd like to make a sculpture out of them. So we stood there discussing where it would fit and trying to come up with a concept of an idea, to commission Martin to make a sculpture. Somebody sort of half-jokingly said, well, how about a nude over the bar? We all laughed and said ha-ha. A few minutes went by and I turned to Martin; I said, "Hey, what about that? What about doing a nude?" He said, "Yeah, sure, that's no problem." Well, by golly, he did a nude, some twenty-foot long—maybe it's nineteen feet long—out of this three-quarter-inch steel rod. His wife modeled for him and there she was, up above the bar all those years. The nude over the bar.

Geraci: In all her glory, right?

13-00:07:27

David: Absolutely. She's now here in the backyard, so I can show that to you. Then Harold Paris, who was one of the partners in that foundry, was going to do a suite of three posters for us. He sadly died, after having done only one of the posters. We ultimately did four different posters, and each one was to commemorate some particular event at the restaurant. We would print a thousand of them and give them away. On the night of the celebration, the artist would be there and would sign one for anybody that showed up and we continued giving them away. In fact, I'm sure that if I dig into the attic, I'll find you copies of each of those.

Geraci: Yeah, absolutely.

13-00:08:22

David: Then Miles Karpalow, who was a wood carver, cabinet maker, furniture maker—extraordinaire is the only word I can use to describe Miles—he carved the maître d' stand, which I'll show you in the other room, out of solid walnut. I can tell you, in those early days of the restaurant, I remember fondly that on those horrible, horrible nights when hardly anybody came in the door, I'd stand there sort of polishing [they laugh] this maître d' stand.

Geraci: It's kind of like the statues you see in Europe, where the bronze is rubbed shiny.



(Narsai David at his Miles Karpilow carved maître d' stand while holding his wine list.)

13-00:09:05

David:

Exactly. He carved the walnut bar. The edge that was on the bartender's side, we cut straight because I didn't want the bartender putting up his martini bowl and pouring liquor on it, only to have it fall over the edge. So he had to have a straight edge to work with, but the outside edge was gently sculpted, following the natural contours of the wood grain, but eased gently. It was just beautiful. I say was, it still is. It's still there. Then he made—well, this coffee table that we're sitting at, he made. He did a tasting bar for the market. He made these little carts that we wheeled out to the table when somebody ordered a whole duck or a roast, stuffed filet mignon for two, and we would carve it at tableside. Martin Metal also made my first table lamps, using those massive cast iron cleats that held the steel rods together, which held the redwood tank together. He welded three of those together, so that they held one of those glass candles. That lasted for a number of years, until—The next iteration was working with yet another artist, a local glass blower named Randy Strong, [who] blew a glass globe about—it must be seven or eight inches in diameter. Miles carved a base out of walnut. I insisted that he carve it out of walnut, rather than some soft modeling wood, because he just had such a feel working with something firm like walnut, and I wanted to capture the same sense, the same curvature and the same feel that he had on the maître d' stand. Then we had that cast in bronze, and those became our ultimate table lamps.

Geraci: As a piece of art, I'm just visualizing—and just looking at this table, the bar, these lamps, the bases that you're talking about there—with the curvature and the grains that are going through, it's almost erotic.

13-00:11:39

David: Well, there's no doubt that good sculpture is erotic, even if it's the most simple, avant-garde, futuristic kind of stuff that's not even really human.

Geraci: Because there's curves, there's a naturalness to it.

13-00:11:59

David: A sensuousness?

Geraci: Yeah, a sensuousness, yeah.

13-00:12:01

David: Yeah, Miles understood that. That—what do you call it?—the mantelpiece up there is an example of his work. Then when we opened the market, he made a tasting bar. You'll see that in the other room, as well. So those were the art pieces that we started with. The other posters I referred to, two were done by Raymond Saunders. You may have run into him; he teaches at California College of the Arts. Tom Holland, who's quite a notable artist, does painting, usually on aluminum or on fiberglass panels—[coughs] Sorry about that.

Geraci: What were the themes of these posters?

13-00:13:05

David: I just gave them carte blanche. One of them, Tom Holland's, we did for the fifth anniversary of the market. It spells out fifth anniversary in it. You'll see that one; the original's hanging in the kitchen. But they could do whatever they wanted. In fact, a friend had a relationship or a friendship with Wayne Thiebaud, who said she would do a poster for us, and I got really excited. He does lots of things with food.

Geraci: Okay, we were talking about the different pieces of art.

13-00:14:07

David: So that was the artwork, as it related to the restaurant. But then there was some artwork outside the restaurant. When we built the new Berkeley Rep Theater, on Addison, in 1980, the large section of gates across the front of the courtyard were made by Martin Metal from some of that same three-quarter-inch steel, rusted rod.

Geraci: Oh, interesting.

13-00:14:35

David: So that was our gift to the theater. Then I had an unusual encounter with a young Assyrian artist, a guy named Fred Parhad, P-A-R-H-A-D. One day, sitting in my office, this guy walks in, introduces himself. He's an Assyrian

and an artist, and has been working on a monument of Ashurbanipal. Ashurbanipal had been the first king in history to have created a library, and he wanted to do this monument-size bronze of Ashurbanipal and give it to the City of San Francisco. Well, the way he came upon me was kind of interesting. He had been visiting a friend who had a studio right close to the Colusa Circle, wandered into the market one day to pick up some stuff for lunch, and noticed in the case, Assyrian lamb sausage. Boy, that perked up his interest. You don't often see the word Assyrian in a store. He questioned it and they said, well, yeah, the owner is an Assyrian and that's his mother's recipe. Well, he had to meet this Assyrian who's got a store. Well, we really hit it off and I agreed to help him, and we created the Assyrian Foundation for the Arts, AFA, and basically raised money by selling maquettes of the ultimate piece. I think we were getting \$5,000 for the maquette. Indeed, we got the City of San Francisco to accept it, at the side entrance of the main library downtown. He stands there clasping a lion cub under his right arm and holding forth a clay tablet, which has, inscribed in cuneiform, that this is a gift from the Assyrian people to the City of San Francisco. A particular big charge I got out of it is that he let me incise the clay with the cuneiform character. I do not read cuneiform, but we have a woman in Turlock who's an Assyriologist and who's Assyrian, and she scripted it in proper cuneiform. I took a little piece of plaster, that I filed down to create a kind of a triangular wedge-shaped end, and after practicing for a while, I found that you could sort of put in one end, one point, and sort of impress it like this and make the indentations.



(Fred Parhad sculpture of King Ashurbanipal and Queen Shamiran with Narsai David's clay tablet.)

Geraci: Just by kind of rocking it.

13-00:17:44

David: Just sort of rocking it in. In fact, I have a casting of the clay tablet here, on the back deck, cast in bronze. Then he subsequently did a full-size monument of Queen Shamiram, who in the West, is known as Semiramis, which is a Greek name. She is thought to be the first woman to rule an empire in her own right, as opposed to just being married to the king. We're hoping to place that soon, in a public location, but we're just working on that now.

Geraci: Now, you still have this Assyrian Art Foundation, then, that you're working with?

13-00:18:35

David: We did it for that one thing, and it sort of drifted away and this is now a new project. Oh, and this little statuette Fred Parhad did, kind of a little bit of a knockoff of the Oscar across his chest, holding a big wine goblet, but standing in a stockpot. Wearing a tall toque. For all of these charity dinners I do, where I would get different chefs to participate, we would give one to each of them as a gift.

Geraci: They're beautiful statues.

13-00:19:21

David: It's a charming little statuette, yeah.

Geraci: Yeah. Question for you on the toque. Hats usually are designed for a specific purpose.

13-00:19:33

David: [laughs] No. I don't have a clue.

Geraci: I've always wondered. But when you think about it and you look at different hats from different cultures for different jobs, occupations within the culture, the hat has a purpose and it serves some function. I've always looked at the toque and kind of gone, what?

13-00:19:52

David: No, it was a real dress-up—it was like why wear a tuxedo? What's a tuxedo? This, to me, is the equivalent of a tuxedo, this starched, tall toque, worn only by *the* chef. You'll notice these days, anybody that works in a kitchen is called a chef. There's a head chef. That's the one that really drives me nuts.

Geraci: Or the executive chef.

13-00:20:17

David: Well, executive chef, I can see a difference between the executive chef and the line chef. But head chef—my goodness. Head chef. Chef means chief. It's just a French word for chief. It doesn't mean chief cook and bottle washer, it

means chief. Now every cook in American restaurants is a chief. So to me, that was just indicative of, here's the ultimate authority. He doesn't have a spot on his clothes because he's the executive, who walks around overseeing what's happening, and his toque stands taller than anybody else's and so forth. But it's a fun little caricature.

Geraci: Now, at Narsai's itself, did you have any other art, like on the walls?

13-00:21:08

David:

Yes, indeed. These two paintings, done by a Mexican artist, Rafael Cauduro, they were in the dining room. We had a number of engravings by Louis Icart, I-C-A-R-T, a French Art Deco engraver. Women were the subject 99 percent of the time, in varying poses, with sometimes, these bouffant hairstyles and flowing dresses, and other times, tall and slinky caricatures. Then we had a set of Muchas, Alphonse Mucha, M-U-C-H-A, titled *The Four Times of Day*. Those are lithographs. His *Four Seasons* is perhaps the most famous thing he's done. I frankly have been partial to *The Four Times of Day*. The pieces are a little smaller, and there's just a more subtle and gentle gradation of tone. Then we would periodically have other pieces of art that would change.



(Alphonse Mucha painting, *The Four Times a Day*, and Rafael Cauduro's painting, both from Narsai's restaurant)

Geraci: Oh, so you did have some.

13-00:22:33

David:

Right.

Geraci: Did you have local artists, then?

13-00:22:36

David: In the market, we did. In the market, we had local artists. In fact, it was interesting. This woman came in, showing us her artwork, which was really intriguing stuff. In the middle of it was a drawing of our chocolate decadence cake, which was our creation. It's held aloft by these two centaur-like critters. It's just an unusual piece of artistry. It was one of those things were I said, "I'll buy it. I want it. How much is it?" As opposed to, how much do you want for it? I just couldn't imagine anybody else having it. It's my chocolate decadence, by golly. I've got to have it. So local artists showed their work in the market.

Geraci: Anything else dealing with art, within the store, the market?

13-00:23:50

David: I guess nothing specific comes to mind. The three sculptures that were done by Martin Metal, the table lamps, and the Miles Karpalow carvings.

Geraci: What kind of tone did that set for the restaurant?

13-00:24:39

David: The art was certainly reserved and quiet, but at once, cheerful. In the early days, we had a constantly-changing show in the dining room, as well. Those were artists that were just putting them on display. But as I acquired pieces that I really liked, it became a permanent collection.

Geraci: That's very different than the style of restaurants today.

13-00:25:25

David: Well, restaurants today are heading off in so many different directions. The one thing, when you talk about art, I think also about sound. It seems like the more successful the restaurant it is, the louder it is. You can't hear yourself think. This appears to be true all over the country. On the way back from the trip to Maine, I spent five days in Washington, D.C., doing work for the Assyrian Aid Society, talking to members of Congress and the State Department and so forth, to see what kind of help we could get in reconstruction in Iraq. I checked into this very attractive hotel and there was some nice buzz coming from the bar area, so after I checked in and unpacked my bag, I thought I'd go down and maybe get a drink before going to bed. It was a late arrival. Wow! I walked in there, and it was so loud I just—I couldn't even bear the thought of sitting there to have a drink. You read about young people having hearing problems; it's not a surprise. So I don't know what art and music and sound do in restaurants these days, but it's something totally different. We had a definitely more-serious restaurant.

Geraci: Well, the art sets a tone. There's a seriousness there.

13-00:27:09

David: Yeah. There's no doubt. No doubt.

Geraci:

Also it would seem, maybe, to draw a different clientele, too.

13-00:27:19

David: Well, yeah, I would have to say we definitely had a sophisticated clientele. There was no question, no question of that. The fact that you were signing up for a five-course dinner already made a statement. We were serving a complete five-course meal. I think that's about as far, with the art.

Geraci:

That's about it? Okay. While we're talking a little bit, we'll finish up on those days. One of the things that you had going for you, also—well, this is actually between '86 and '88—you were writing a fortnightly column for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, called "California Cuisine." I'll hand you this. That's quite a collection of columns that you wrote there.

13-00:28:15

David: Well, it's funny. As I mentioned earlier, if you would ask me, am I a writer, I would certainly say no, because I just think of myself as a talker, not a writer. Yet I've been flipping through some of these and the writing isn't all that bad.

Geraci:

[laughs] Darn, I'm good.

13-00:28:33

David: Well, I don't know if I'm going to go that far, but—"New Cuisines and Old Traditions." This is May of '86. "Remember nouvelle cuisine? Was it green peppercorns that started it all? Followed by pink peppercorns, sherry vinegar, raspberry vinegar? When even Taillevent, the temple of haute cuisine in Paris, was splashing raspberry vinegar on foie gras and serving it with shucked yellow corn, I knew that food had indeed become fashion." Well, that's not a bad opening line. I had a lot of fun with it. I was just able to talk.

Geraci:

I would say. You were just able to pick your own topics?

13-00:29:17

David: Oh, yeah. Yeah. It was the richness—

Geraci:

Whatever was catching your interest at that moment.

13-00:29:21

David: Right. Here's something on caviar, describing all the different varieties of caviar. "Far East gets a taste of California's bounty." Oh, that was California wines being shipped overseas. "Of all the crabs I've known, Dungeness is the true king." And it really is, let me tell you. I've eaten the hairy crab of the Orient and that giant Japanese crab and the king crab and the queen crab. By the way, if you're ever able to eat them freshly cooked, they really are good. But 99.44 percent of the time, when you see king crab, it's been cooked and

frozen and shipped, and that's when you're eating it. You may as well eat surimi, because it just is no longer crab.

Geraci: It's not the same, yeah.

13-00:30:19

David: Then once in a while, I included some recipes. Here's a Christmastime column that includes a recipe for Cumberland rum butter and hot mulled wine and eggnog. Using marinades to treat meats. Hawaii, we spent some time in Hawaii with various food events. Here's a column talking about the Hawaiian blue prawns that were being cultivated. "Chocolate's Allure Spans the Centuries." I guess it's pretty clear I like to talk. [Geraci laughs] This gave me an ability to talk on a piece of paper. But the radio and television I've always done relates to my talking.

Geraci: In your opinion, what kind of response did you get from these? Were people contacting you about these columns?

13-00:31:16

David: Oh, gosh. Oh, yeah. Oh, I got lots of good response, yeah. Yeah, there's no doubt. I'm going to have to look these up, Vic, how many years, but it was quite a long number of years that we did the "California Cuisine" column.

Geraci: That in itself is quite an accomplishment. You have the TV going, you have the radio going, you have the newspaper going now. That's one busy man.

13-00:31:42

David: Well, I'll tell you, if you're neurotic enough to be in the restaurant and catering business, then it was the classic story of when you're working with the nonprofits, as I have so many times, to get something really done, assign it to one of the busiest people on your board. Because they enjoy being busy and they work it into their schedules and make it happen.

Geraci: Isn't it always the case, in everything?

13-00:32:15

David: Yeah.

Geraci: Assign something to the busiest person and it seems to get done. Well, staying in the same vein, talking about TV, here's a couple of clips you had with Mary Martin.

13-00:32:27

David: Well, *Over Easy* was this show that was done on PBS. It was hosted by Hugh Downs. Actually, Jules Power, who was the producer of the show, who launched it, managed to talk Hugh Downs into coming out of retirement, because Hugh had retired. Jules had been with one of the major networks in New York for many years and won every award that could be won, and he had pretty much retired and moved out to the West Coast. Doing this was sort of

like his contribution to the industry, to do this thing for PBS. Well, Hugh Downs got such a kick out of being back in the limelight that after three years of *Over Easy*, ABC started their—What was that news show? I forget the name of the show, but they dragged him back to New York and for that first year that he was there, he was actually commuting back and forth between New York and San Francisco, doing both shows. Then Mary Martin took over the hosting of the show. Here’s a newspaper clip and it shows her tasting something that I cooked. I cooked something each week, that was always designed to be easy to cook for one or two people. The McGovern Report on nutrition had just come out—it was the first time the government had ever done such a thing—and we observed all of the nutrition guidelines in the McGovern Report, holding down on fats and sugars and saturated fats and so forth. This one is a real kick because Mary’s son, Larry Hagman, was a guest that day. So there she was. Mother and son. Jim Blair [sic; Frank Blair or Jim Hartz], who was her co-host—

Geraci: In talking about staying really busy, I love this. This is *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 21, 1987. It says, “Pots and Pens” Bay Area cooks, and the best of this year’s cookbooks.” There’s a picture of Narsai.

13-00:35:07

David: I’ll tell you, churning through—

Geraci: Some more writing.

13-00:35:11

David: Churning through the attic, my wife Veni, it’s magical how she finds these things. The caption of the picture is “The Bay Area’s jolly cookbook crew, each with a favorite cooking instrument.” Susan Costner; Jim Dodge—Jim was at the Stanford Court; Ken Hom—now, there’s a guy who’s done just a phenomenal success in television cooking in England. Chinese cooking, predominately. He’s from Berkeley. Brilliant chef, creative guy, just incredible. But he could never get launched here. He went to England and he’s just a smash success, and he’s never come back. He became a permanent resident of England. Carlo Middione; Marion Cunningham, who did that rewrite of the old *Fanny Farmer Cookbook*; and Deborah Madison, from Greens. We had each done a cookbook and they lumped us together.

Geraci: These are mainstays of cookbooks and I guess, food lore, food history, almost.

13-00:36:30

David: Well, food history, for sure. If you want to call it lore, I guess that’s okay.

Geraci: Although a little bit earlier, we had talked about this at one point, I think, actually, but here’s the old PG&E—this is 1973 — PG&E insert flier.

13-00:36:55

David:

Well, we can complain an awful lot about PG&E; but when you got this kind of exposure, that every home in Northern California got this with their monthly mailer. And there was another article we got in the triple A magazine that went out to all triple A members, and that used to have a feature on restaurants, periodically. Here it is, with my cousin Sam and myself in front of the restaurant, titled “Narsai’s, New in Berkeley,” and a recipe of the month. So it was pretty exciting to get exposure like that.

Geraci:

You don’t get better advertising than that.

13-00:37:36

David:

No, no. Well, I remember when I did that first segment on the morning show on Channel 5, with Kathy Crosby. After the third appearance, I had to join the union, and then they started paying me. The union scale was \$29 for one of those features. I think I’ve mentioned this to you before. I would’ve happily paid them \$129 for the exposure it gave me. There were times before I was off the air, the phone at the restaurant was ringing, with people making reservations.

Geraci:

The restaurant would go, oh, Narsai’s on the air again.

13-00:38:12

David:

It’s just amazing.

Geraci:

I think at this point, I’d like to shift in another, little bit different direction and talk a lot about the community service and community things that you have done over your career, because it’s a sizeable amount of things that you have done for, not only Berkeley, but the Bay Area, San Francisco, I think food in general. In the larger context, I think we’ll end it with talking about—I want to talk a lot more about your work with the Assyrian Aid Society, because that has become a very important part of your life. One of the things I know that you pulled out, that I thought was just really interesting, I’ll let you talk about this.

13-00:38:56

David:

Well, this was a fundraiser for Suicide Prevention. Jacque McDonald, a brilliant young photographer, did this series of photographs that they auctioned off as part of a fundraiser. Will the camera show it? Can it pick up something this small?

Geraci:

Oh, yeah. We’re going to—

13-00:39:20

David:

Or you can add it later?

Geraci:

Yeah. We’ll add it later.

13-00:39:24

David: Well, there's one in here of me.

Geraci:

Describe the picture of you. It's you, with a toque.

13-00:39:26

David:

I'm wearing one of those tall toques we've just been talking about. You know the picture you see of the guy with an arrow shot through his head, wearing a cowboy hat? Well, I'm wearing a toque with a great big wooden spoon shot through my head. Alice Waters is in here, as well. Jock found one of those huge oven mitts that had the picture of a fish head on the end of it. This one is kind of dark; it may not show. But it looks like the mitre that the pope might be wearing. Her hands folded like this. Just very, very creative. You have Cecil Williams with [what] looks like the devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other shoulder; and Melvin Belli, the great criminal defense attorney, is shown wrapped in a white sheet, like a Roman toga, and he's holding the balance, the two scales, the scales of justice.

Geraci:

The scales, yeah.

13-00:40:32

David:

Very, very cleverly done.

Geraci:

I like the one they had in here of Willie Brown.

13-00:40:36

David:

Oh, my, the puppet master manipulating the strings.

Geraci:

Oh, and Pelosi.

13-00:40:44

David:

Barbara Boxer, Nancy Pelosi.

Geraci:

Yes.

13-00:40:46

David:

What would you call them? The soda-fountain singers or something like that?

Geraci:

Yeah, the 1940s.

13-00:40:55

David:

They're calling the shots. And they still are. Now, what was the date on this thing? This was a while ago. 1988. What's that? Twenty-three years ago.

Geraci:

Right. So this was a fundraiser, then, for suicide prevention?

13-00:41:13

David:

Right. I didn't have to do much more than sit for the photograph and then be at the event. But it goes back to my youth, for sure. I was one of the early members of the Arts and Crafts Co-op in Berkeley. In fact, it was while I was

the president of the organization that we moved from a small second-floor space in the original Berkeley grocery co-op on Shattuck Avenue. We had a little space on the second floor, sort of mezzanine area. We bought that building at the corner of Shattuck and—Oh, my. Is it—

Geraci: Geography lesson.

13-00:42:04

David: —Virginia? No. They're still there today, ACCI, it's known as, Arts and Crafts Co-op, Incorporated. Representing local artists who produce the work and sell it cooperatively. I lived in a student co-op at Cal, as I think I've mentioned before. Somehow, being involved with my community has just always been a given. It just kind of happens. In 1976, when Helen Barber decided that we should get together and create a community board to support the Berkeley Rep—In fact, it wasn't even called the Berkeley Rep at that point. Michael Leibert had started it in a storefront on College Avenue, just a few blocks from here, the block south of Ashby, on the west side of the street—I'm sorry, the second block south of Ashby—in an old house, and called it The Theater. A woman living next door here was sort of helping, as his development director, helping him raise money, helping him get sets put together. I remember one time they needed to get one of those old-fashioned Coke machines, the kind where you put the bottles in—they were in a chilled brine solution—and I tracked one down for her to use for a prop. So when the idea came up of creating the community board, I was there, 1976, with the founding board. I served on the board for, I think it was seventeen years, before I retired. At my retirement, they did a roast of me at the Claremont Hotel, as a fundraiser. I brought in a group of chefs, so that each course was prepared by a different chef. Paul Prudhomme and Wolfgang Puck flew in, and locally, there was Brad Ogden and Joyce Goldstein, and then the chef at the Claremont, Hans Wiegand. We had quite a very successful event.

Geraci: I should say. That's kind of an all-star cast.

13-00:44:50

David: It was quite a team. Of course, the immediate desire was, we need to keep doing this. But you can't very well do a roast of Narsai every year, so we changed the name to the Narsai Toast to the Arts. Ultimately, it got abbreviated to the Narsai Toast. That continued for—Again, the years kind of get fuzzy. It's either sixteen or seventeen years, I think. The last one we did was in '09, and we raised a half-million dollars that night, for the theater.

Geraci: I'm just going to go through and throw some of these out that I found. You were a founding member of the Hunger Awareness Project in San Francisco.

13-00:45:41

David: That was an interesting project. Mary Risley, who does Food Runners in San Francisco—You know about them.

Geraci: Right.

13-00:45:51

David:

A group of us got together—Faith Wheeler, who’s a publicist that does a lot of work with the restaurant industry; and Michael Bauer, the food editor at the *Chronicle*; and I—and we created this thing called planned overage. We went around to restaurants asking them if they could plan to give, once a week, a standard hotel pan—that’s a pan that measures twelve by eighteen inches and two and a half inches deep; kind of a standard size in the industry—of food that was basically excess food, but if they could plan it. Here was my sales pitch to restaurants. Look, if you have chicken on your menu, the odds are the chicken wings are getting thrown in the stockpot. If instead, you laid those chicken wings in a pan, poured a couple quarts of last night’s leftover sauce or leftover soup on them and toss them in the oven for an hour, you’ve got a perfectly find meal for thirty people. You could do the same thing with filet. If there’s filet mignon on the menu, that chain that runs down the side invariably gets thrown in the stockpot. Well, there again, it’s got a tough piece of gristle that runs along it; but if it’s slowly braised for an hour and a half in the oven, it’s as tender as a piece of Jell-O, very nutritious, a very good piece of meat. Oh, and then Food Runners would, by prearrangement, pick this pan up at a given time every single week and take it to a specific location. Once we were visiting one of the houses that was getting this help. They had a four-inch-deep hotel pan. This was from La Folie restaurant. You could sort of see how his menu evolved through the week.

Geraci: It’s kind of like an archeological dig.

13-00:48:06

David:

Exactly. Exactly right, Vic. There’d be the tips of haricot verts, the French string bean. I guess Roland [Passot] must’ve decided that he likes his string beans always cut to the same length or something, because there’d be a big handful of those. Right next to that would be a handful of some other vegetable, and then there would be—It might be beef, it might be veal, it might be chicken, it might be pork or whatever. I would’ve guessed that the recipient would just dump this all in a pot and cook it together, because he hadn’t processed it any further. Well, instead, they couldn’t use it all for a single meal, so they would lift off a portion of it at a time. So they got two or three entirely separate meals out of it, based on what was the next thing that came out of—It was really a kick. So that was a really satisfying thing. Vic, there were so many of these events. When the American Heart Association started doing this annual fundraiser, they got a guy named Bruce Kaiser, who was an auctioneer at Butterfield, to be an auctioneer for their wine—The event was a wine and food event. They had a couple dozen restaurants and wineries. Restaurants produced one or two food items and the wineries were pouring the wine and you walked around. It was one of these walkabouts. Then the auction was just wine. Well, Gavin Newsom—this is long before he became mayor—and I were on the stage, doing this sort of background chatter about

the auction items. So we would talk about a wine that was coming up for auction, and then Bruce would auction it off. Well, one year, he had a terrible accident the night before the auction, and I got a call asking if I would be the auctioneer.

Geraci: Fill in.

13-00:50:15

David: Well, I'd been around an auction, I had never been the auctioneer, but I became the auctioneer. So I did that for several years. It's grown into a huge event since then. I have not been involved with it in recent years. For a while, I helped on the advisory board at the San Francisco City College and helped with a number of their fundraisers. The Aurora Theater, likewise, had their annual event; I would be an emcee-auctioneer for a number of years. There's a really small theater group called Central Works that I've been helping for many years, and I continue. I'm not active on their board, but for their annual event.

Geraci: At least helping them raise their funds, their monies.

13-00:51:03

David: Right. That, I do.

Geraci: I notice you've also been like Alameda County Meals on Wheels.

13-00:51:11

David: Well, Meals on Wheels is one I'm not only—I'm proud of all of these, but it's one that I really can't let go of, because I think what they do is just so incredibly important. Ellen Tussman had the Dakota restaurant [Dakota Grill] in the Shattuck Hotel, in Berkeley. We got to talking about Meals on Wheels and decided to do a fundraiser. So we rounded up a bunch of chefs, each to do a different course, and we served this dinner at the banquet room at the Shattuck Hotel. Well, it was very limited in size; I think it accommodated barely 100, so we quickly outgrew that. We moved it to the Lakeview Club, at the top of the Kaiser Building in downtown Oakland, right on Lake Merritt. Then the Lakeview Club disbanded and we were invited to the Greek Orthodox church, that huge church way up on the hill, by the Mormon Temple. They have a massive space that's actually used as a basketball court for some of their student intramural teams. The bleachers sort of fold up into the walls, and we drape the top with some kind of ribbons and bring in tables with colorful napery and make it into a really attractive dining room. We have either sixteen or seventeen chefs this year, all Alameda County restaurants. A number of them will do hors d'oeuvres and a number of them will do desserts, and then dinner is a four-course meal at the table, and each course is the responsibility of a different chef. The Eukel Teacher Trust—that's E-U-K-E-L—out in Contra Costa County was named in honor of Warren Eukel, who had been the head of the school board for many years. It's designed to give cash grants to teachers in Contra Costa County. They could be from public or

private school; any of them would qualify. It's now a \$10,000 cash grant, with no strings attached; they could take the money and go on a vacation. But most teachers have much more important things to do with that money, like buy more computers for the class or art supplies or what, as the case may be. So I certainly continue with that. The Assyrian Aid Society, you mentioned. I created a dinner patterned on that Berkeley Rep dinner. On that Berkeley Rep dinner, by the way, after that first one, I would bring in a famous chef from outside the area each year, and then local chefs to fill it out. We really got a wonderful response to that. Well, I did the same thing for the Assyrian Aid. In fact, the very first one, we did at the Ritz. All of the chefs were actually born in the Middle East. Not just of Middle East ancestry.

Geraci: Oh, that's amazing. Not even of ancestry, but born there.

13-00:54:37

David: Right. Michael Mina, who was born in Egypt. Haig Krikorian, who has Lalime and Paisan and T-Rex and all these restaurants in Berkeley now, was born in Lebanon; he's Armenian. From Los Angeles, from Valentino Restaurant, we had a man who was born in Greece. He did the dessert. A man flew in from Tel Aviv to do an appetizer course, an Israeli chef. It was really quite an exciting thing. There again, each year subsequently, I would get a famous chef from outside the area to come in, and then use local chefs. We did that for eight or nine years, for Assyrian Aid.

Geraci: Now, when you say Assyrian Aid, what's the foundation's goal?

13-00:55:42

David: The Assyrian Aid Society was created in 1991, at the time of the first Gulf War, when the no-fly zone was created in the north of Iraq. The Assyrians found relatively safe refuge in that area, but they were really cut off from the rest of the country. As people found safety there, more people left the restaurant of the country and moved up into the north, and they needed help. I was not the founding president; I became the president the second year. But I remained the president until just this year, so for almost twenty years, I was the president of the organization. We started out by helping—Well, first, we managed to get a \$600,000 grant from the US Aid to International Development, USAID, with which we built six villages. We built thirteen kilometers of roads, we built two pharmacies and nurses' quarters. They were really pharmacy-slash-clinics, with nurses' quarters. This was a direct grant from the government. They were so pleased with the work that they approved another \$500,000. But between the time the \$500,000 was mailed from Washington and it could get to us, Saddam [Hussein] attacked one of the Kurdish factions in the north and AID packed up its office and fled to Turkey and cancelled all existing projects. So we were never able to do that. Then subsequently, any money for reconstruction became a real political football. It went through machinations and layers and convolutions that—

Geraci: And it still is.

13-00:57:43

David: And it still is. It's too bizarre. I can tell you about those five days I spent in Washington, in the meetings. Yes, we're getting some help; but no, it is in no way commensurate with the damage that's been done to the Assyrian community in Iraq. There were 1.4 million Assyrians in Iraq twenty years ago. The highest estimate we can find now is 600,000, and two-thirds of those or more are in northern Iraq and in the Nineveh Plain, because it's just become impossible for them to live elsewhere in the country. The Assyrians are a Christian minority. That surprises people. I'm surprised to discover that we still have members of congress who are not fully aware that there are such things as Christians living in Iraq. So while the two branches of Islam are fighting each other, The Christians are just sort of falling through the cracks, really. We had an Assyrian who was the head of the department of antiquities and the Iraqi National Museum, a man named Donny George. One day in his mail, there was an envelope that had a picture of his teenage son and a bullet. That next day, that night, they packed up and ran off to Syria, where they stayed for a number of months, until he could get a visa to come to the United States. He got an appointment to teach at Stony Brook, in New York. Sadly, he just died this last spring, at a very young age. But the Assyrians were targeted.

Begin Audiofile 14 09-27-2011.mp3

Geraci: Vic Geraci, University of California Berkeley, Regional Oral History Office. Today's date, September 27, 2011. Seated with me is Narsai David. This is interview number seven, tape number fourteen. Narsai, when we left off, we were talking about the Assyrian Aid Society. Let's continue the discussion at that point.

14-00:00:24

David: So we started out by focusing our mission on emergency shelter needs for the—they're known as IDPs, internally displaced persons, coming from other parts of Iraq, and building schools and medical facilities for them. We translated the entire curriculum from Arabic into Assyrian. So for the first time in modern history, we have students learning the entire curriculum in Assyrian. Believe me, they are not learning this as an isolated language; they also learn Kurdish and Arabic and English. So they are learning four languages simultaneously, and I'll tell you, it's amazing. Gosh, I don't remember what year it was, but it's been probably eight or nine years now—well, it was before the Bush war started, so it has to be nine years, at least. If you would ask people about this guy Narsai David, when he came to visit, they'd probably say, oh, yeah, he's the guy that was crying all the time. I swear, sitting there in an eighth grade classroom, watching these kids studying chemistry or geometry, and the entire discussion is in Assyrian—it was just a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It was something just amazing.

Geraci: Because it was a language that's being targeted for disappearance.

14-00:02:11

David: Absolutely. Assyrian is an Aramaic derivative, Aramaic being the root language of Assyrian, Arabic, and Hebrew, all three monotheistic religions, which all date back to Abraham. It's so emotionally painful to think that there is such a common root among these three groups, and yet they're killing each other, in the name of the same god. Monotheistic, with only one god, and they believe that there was—all three of them come out of the very same basic root. Yet over the misunderstanding or chosen difference between one interpretation and another, it's—well, sad.

Geraci: It's power and politics. Now, when you say that you've gone to Washington D.C., then, to work with members of congress, who have you met with? What type of programs have you been able to put together?

14-00:03:30

David: Well, Anna Eshoo, the congresswoman from the Silicon Valley area, is an Assyrian and she's been a really strong supporter. Jan Schakowsky, from Chicago, has a large Assyrian constituency and she's been a great help. Then there are people like Congressmen [Frank R.] Wolf, and Senator [Mark] Kirk, who, partly because of their large Assyrian constituencies, but partly because of the fact that the Assyrians are Christians and are really getting clobbered—the American actions were to take out Saddam. First of all, there were many, many Assyrians working in high positions in the government. They were highly educated people, highly competent; in many cases, were hired by the incoming US troops. Well, they were immediately targeted, then, by the Muslims, as being in cahoots with the Americans. Our brilliant president, on more than one occasion, used words like—now my mind is going black. What was it?

Geraci: You block them out.

14-00:04:55

David: Right. When we went over to the Middle East to convert the heathen Muslims, how many centuries ago, the Crusades. It was, and still is, in many areas, perceived to be that; that it's a Christian crusade against Islam. So the anger is against America, because it's over there killing all of these Muslims. And Assyrians are Christians, like the Americans, and so they really get the brunt of it, too.

Geraci: Guilt by association. They're taking the brunt.

14-00:05:41

David: Exactly. Exactly. So more and more, they've been pushed into the Nineveh Plain. Nineveh was the capital of ancient Assyria, so that really is the heartland of the Assyrians. Now the Kurds are pushing really hard to get control of the Nineveh Plain and control of Kirkuk, where the oil is. The

federal government insists that Kirkuk and the Nineveh Plain will remain part of the federal government. There seems to be kind of an unwritten recognition that that north is going to become at least a province called Kurdistan, if not a breakaway country. I can tell you that nine years ago or so, when I was there, we crossed the river from Syria into Iraq, way up in the north, and greeting us was a huge billboard that said, in both Kurdish and English, “Welcome to Iraqi Kurdistan.” So already back then, they were calling it Kurdistan. If the Assyrians lose control of the Nineveh province, where there are villages that have 90 and 95 percent Assyrian—this is the ancestral homeland. If they lose that, then you may as well really and truly say, there is no longer any such thing as an Assyrian.

Geraci: I guess the big worry would be that they will be pushed out.

14-00:07:26

David: Exactly.

Geraci: Obviously, the term genocide comes to mind, also. There’s different ways of pushing them out of this territory.

14-00:07:36

David: My parents came as refugees, during the First World War. We speak of what happened in that area, my father from southeast Turkey and my mother from northwest Iran, right in that same little—we talk about the fertile crescent. Well, it’s referred to as the Armenian genocide or the Armenian—there’s another word, too. Not genocide. Call it the genocide for the moment. When you hear Armenian genocide, think Armenian and Assyrian and Greek. But there were three times as many Armenians as Assyrians.

Even though there were far fewer Assyrians killed than Armenians, the truth is the Assyrians lost a far greater percentage of their people than the Armenians did. We don’t have a country, we don’t have a province, we don’t have anything. Armenia does exist as a country. Mind you, I’m not belittling what happened to them; we were in it together. I’m just saying the damage to the Assyrians was even greater, and yet people just don’t think of anybody other than the—Then the Greeks, too. There were far fewer Greeks in that particular region. Well, to use your words, it’s what’s happening now, ethnic cleansing. They’re already talking about areas in the north, where they have Kurdish Christians, as opposed to Assyrians.

Geraci: Kurdish Christians. So trying to wipe their ethnic identity away from them. I guess the question for me [is], how then can an organization like yours help these people plan for a future, given all these uncertainties?

14-00:10:06

David: There is no way we can address the future very much. Our needs are so immediate. The president of Assyrian Aid Society Iraq has been here in the country for several weeks, going around to our various chapters and making

appearances. He was with me in Washington; we attended all these meetings together. Eighteen meetings in three days, between congressional offices and State Department and International Medical Corps, and then private dinner meetings after those meetings. We have between 2500 and 3,000 families that have recently arrived, IDPs, that we need to find housing for. Just finding a place for them to sleep and provide some food for them. We have our basic school needs. Fundraising here has become harder than ever. I have to tell you, it breaks my heart. This dinner that I was talking about, that we did in San Francisco for eight or nine years, we were producing \$150,000 a year income from that. Last year, we took in \$35,000. We netted \$35,000. It's like people have sort of gotten tired of it or they figure, oh, well, things have calmed down over there. Well, yeah, things have calmed down on the overall scale; but on the individual level, they're not. Yes, the government is paying for schooling now, that's true; but they don't pay for Assyrian teachers and they don't pay for Assyrian textbooks and they don't build schools where the Assyrians are. We had three buses taking students to college in Basra, and the buses were attacked with roadside bombs and rifle fire. After all of the damage that was done, it's too frightening to let the students go there. So we have some, how many thousands, of tertiary-level students who are not getting an education. They don't have access to an education. We've put them through high school, got them this far, and suddenly they've come to a dead halt. When people tell me, well, it's really been tough and we didn't make much money last year—yeah, but we have people there that are still dying. We have people there that don't have a place to sleep or any food to eat.

Geraci: As we pull out of that situation more and more and more, this will become more tenuous.

14-00:13:00

David: It's getting much, much tougher. It's like people get tired of bad news and they just don't want to hear anymore. That's my own little personal theory. Because I would think that particularly the Assyrians who have come from the Middle East, who have this strong and personal and bitter taste in their mouth, of what happened to them and what is continuing to happen, you'd think they'd be jumping at the chance to help us raise money. Then when money is granted by Congress, it gets over there and it has to be filtered through so many levels of bureaucracy. When we say, but the money never made it to the Assyrians because when the Kurdish government distributed it in the north, here are some of the problems—For instance, they went out and built some little villages, where the homes are literally not occupy-able. They're just built so poorly that they don't function. They also put a church in each one of these little villages. When we talk about dirt poor, I mean quite literally, dirt poor. They couldn't afford to take a tithe to a church, they couldn't afford to have a priest or a deacon in that church. What are they going to do with a church? That doesn't satisfy their needs.

Geraci: They can't support themselves, let alone a church.

14-00:14:40

David:

We needed to build a school in the village of Alqush in the Nineveh Plain. It turned out that some guy who was running for the new national parliament was in the local Kurdish government, and he found that he would get a lot more votes if he could arrange for the school to be built in a different city—where it was built and where this guy did get his votes and get elected off to parliament. Well, that money is shown as having been spent for the ethnic and religious minorities, but it never made it to the ethnic-religious minorities.

Geraci:

Pork-barrel politics is pork-barrel politics.

14-00:15:19

David:

There was a half-million dollars that was spent on—get this—teaching Kurdish to Assyrians that had come in, the IDPs, because they couldn't get jobs without being able to speak the Kurdish language. Those people aren't going to be able to get the jobs anyway. We needed that money for the schools where we're teaching the young people, who have a life in front of them. These people, when suddenly the area is inundated with these tens of thousands, and now hundreds of thousands of refugees, teaching a handful of them Assyrian, in the city of Erbil, in the north—come on, folks. That's not dealing with the issues. So when you talk about government boondoggle, just yesterday, I heard on NPR—I really need to get a copy of this book. I believe the guy's name is Peter Van Buren—I have to follow it up—who had been with the State Department for many years and served in Iraq. He does a book exposing the kind of waste of money and throwing away of money and what a comical farce this whole thing is. He said he always had at least \$100,000 in cash in his filing cabinet. He would go off to a meeting with \$50,000 in a shopping bag, to pay for some project or other. So the need is very real, and we're really having a hard time conveying this to our supporters. But it's slowly happening.

Geraci:

Now, how large is your society? You were talking about different chapters.

14-00:17:34

David:

We have seven or eight chapters around the country. It's nebulous because we're trying to figure out how successful does an area have to be to call it a chapter, really? The community is growing. There are little offshoots developing. In Michigan, there are an awful lot of the Chaldean Assyrians. They're the ones that have followed the Chaldean order of the Roman Catholic Church. They have been very, very involved in finding funding to help the resettlement of Assyrians who are coming here. [coughs] Vic, I don't know—[coughs] I think—

Geraci:

We're about done.

Interview 8: October 4, 2011

Begin Audiofile 15 10-04-2011.mp3

Geraci: I'm Vic Geraci, food and wine historian from the University of California Berkeley, Regional Oral History Office. Today's date is October 4, 2011, and seated with me is Narsai David. This interview is number eight, tape number fifteen, and the interview is being conducted in Narsai's home in Berkeley, California. First, thank you for coming back again. This is eight visits; I'm becoming a regular here.

15-00:00:27

David: Vic, I love it. Please, don't stop coming.

Geraci: [laughs] Last interview, you were having some cough problems, so we had to kind of cut it short. I think we left off just a few things that we kind of need to clean up a little bit first, and then we'll move on to some other areas. We had just gone through a whole series of articles and things that you'd just brought out. I'm just going to bring some of these up and we'll start talking a little bit about them. One of the first ones I wanted to start with is at Narsai's Market, what were the items you were carrying? I know you had told me earlier you were actually making almost everything that was in there.

15-00:01:11

David: Oh, yeah. We never did make any cheese, but we made all of our sausages, pates, terrines, prepared entrees, things that you could take home and just pop in the oven.

Geraci: Now, when you say prepared entrees, what type of—

15-00:01:27

David: It could be a complete dinner. Some kind of a chicken sauté dish that just needed to be heated through.

Geraci: Now, was that kind of new or different at that time? Today, you go to Andronico's, you go to Whole Foods, and they have those types of things ready.

15-00:01:43

David: It's commonplace now, yeah. In those days, the kinds of things that you could regularly, easily pick up, a lot of Italian delis would have things like lasagna. They'd make those big hotel pans and they'd cut little squares out and you'd take it home and heat it up in the oven; but there wasn't much done in the way of actual prepared entrées. We started sometimes offering things from the regular menu or other things. Lamb was the dominant meat on the restaurant menu, which meant there was a lot of lamb trimmings, because the filet and the loin and the rack were the items that were on the dinner menu. Well, those trimmings were perfectly wonderful for making, oh, eggplant and lamb casseroles, eggplant a la Turk was the main one. We'd take a large globe

eggplant, cut it in half, then scoop out the flesh and sauté that flesh with the meat, pack it back in, and then we baked it in an eggplant-shaped mold that we found, these little molds. So when you'd turn it out, it had this incredible shiny, black skin of the eggplant on top, with all of the goodies down inside it. So there were things like that that were fun. I thought we might use up some of our lamb trimming in the sausages or pâtés, but we couldn't get more than about 10 percent lamb into any kind of a meat mixture, before it dominated the flavor, so that didn't work. Finally, one day I said, "Well, why don't we just make a lamb sausage? Let's quit pussyfooting around. Let's just make a lamb sausage." We did that, and we also made something that we called mock venison pâté, in which it was lamb, very lean lamb, with some fatty pork, because I didn't want the fat flavor to come from the lamb, but I needed fat. If you're going to have a terrine or a sausage, unfortunately, you've got to have fat in it.

Geraci: It's not the same without it.

15-00:04:05

David: Right. Before long, these things were such a success that I was buying boneless lamb shoulder and lamb neck meat to keep up with the demand for the sausages. We had the Assyrian lamb sausage, which was flavored with pomegranate juice, garlic, basil, onions, much like the Assyrian lamb marinade. Then we made a Moroccan sausage and a merguez and the variations on it. Well, people had never seen lamb sausages, to speak of, and they became kind of a hit. We baked all of our own breads. There was a basic baguette. I can't claim that we invented the Epi because the French have been doing it for centuries, probably; but we were the first around here to make an Epi. That's the one that has—the baguette dough is snipped and pulled off to the side, so it looks like little branches of wheat on a blade of grass. Then the heavier breads, the sourdoughs, the pain levain.

Geraci: The breads that you were starting to serve in the restaurant.

15-00:05:35

David: Oh, that's where it all started. All of this started with breads that we were making in the restaurant. The market was really an outgrowth of the restaurant. One day we said, well, gee, let's have the stuff out here, where people could just buy it and take it home. There are times that I think, if you were to ask Veni, my wife, she would probably tell you that she missed the market more than the restaurant, because she used to cruise through that market once a week and load up the refrigerator. [they laugh] It made it very, very handy.

Geraci: But this also fits into your whole philosophy you talked about, with your mother, waste not, want not.

15-00:06:14

David: Oh, let me tell you. Let me tell you. There was no waste. I think I've probably told you the story about when I got back from vacation one time. In the

garbage can in the kitchen, one of the waiters, who's also a scene designer, a set designer for the Berkeley Rep, had painted this really beautiful round welcome home poster, "welcome home, boss," and put it in the garbage can. Because everybody knew that I couldn't walk through the kitchen without looking in the garbage can. Something better not be put in the garbage can if it's usable. Waste not, want not was at the very core of it.

Geraci: I know you have all the sausages, the terrines, but the idea of these prepared meals—There weren't that many places you could go to get these types of things and yet today it's very common.

15-00:07:19

David: No, that's true. This was in the beginning of that. We would take special orders. We would make things, either from our regular menu or from our various Monday night menus. If somebody was planning a dinner party and needed twelve portions of something, we could get it all ready to go, so that it just needed to be popped in the oven to be finished or whatever. We did custom work for people.

Geraci: So it's kind of an extension of the catering part of the business.

15-00:07:52

David: Exactly. Exactly. Yeah, catering. Catering to take home and serve yourself.

Geraci: You're doing all the prep work and the preparation.

15-00:08:02

David: Right.

Geraci: You're getting everything ready.

15-00:08:04

David: And pastries. We made all of our own breads, pastries, desserts, croissants. Let me tell you, I was very, very proud of those croissants. There was the Virginia Bakery in Berkeley, that every once in a while, we felt their croissant was just about as good as ours. But at our weekly staff management meeting, we always did a pastry cutting with a baguette and a croissant. Other things, we would put in from time to time, but those two had to be in every week. I wanted to taste the best that was available in the Bay Area, and if we ever heard of someplace making a great croissant, we went out and bought it that day, to cut it against ours. One time ours just did not make it. Something dreadful had happened; it just didn't—I refused to believe it was our croissant. We had gotten a new baker and he decided that he was going to save me money. He walked across the street to that little Colusa Market and bought some margarine and he was using 50 percent margarine and 50 percent butter, to save me money. There was nothing in it for him. It's not as if he was skimming something off the top. I was so blown away. Here's a guy who, in his own mind, was doing me a favor.

Geraci: He was helping the boss, man.

15-00:09:40

David: Right. Yet how can I convey to him that, under no conditions, do you help me in that way? I want my recipe and only my recipe to be produced here. So all kinds of desserts and pastries. We did periodic tastings. We would have a tasting of olive oils. No, we didn't make any olive oil. There were mainly, in those days, imported olive oils. There were not that many California olive oils.

Geraci: It's not until almost a decade ago that they start coming in.

15-00:10:14

David: Well, the California olive oils that were here were just sort of that traditional basic olive oil that has been around. It was just sort of the basic stuff and nobody thought anything exotic about it. A little company named Sciabica, in Modesto, spelled S-C-I-A-B-I-C-A, Sciabica, had been making olive oil since 1936, my birth year. It was an easy one to remember. It was a true extra virgin olive oil. They made a green extra virgin oil and a golden extra virgin olive oil. To this day, it intrigues me that people don't understand that those could both be extra virgin olive oil. To be extra virgin, it only means that it has to have less than 1 percent acidity of the natural acid, and be cold processed; it cannot be heat processed or pressure treated in any way. Well, if you let the olives hang on the tree long enough to get really black and ripe, you don't have much of that green, peppery quality. Instead, you have a rich, buttery quality. Now, for a guy that grew up in an Assyrian home, where we hardly ever had olive oil, for me, green olive oil is an adult acquired taste, and it took me a long time to come around to like it. For me, the one made from the ripe olives, the golden one, which really had that more buttery flavor, is the one that I really preferred. Now, you can also make an extra virgin olive oil with a green olive, and that's where you get that peppery, spicy, herbal, vegetative, herbaceousness. An entirely different character, obviously. But there wasn't much of that being done in California at that time. So we would do olive oil tastings, mustard tastings, chocolate tastings. The chocolate tastings were always a big hit. We worked primarily with Guittard chocolate. It's fascinating to put out a dozen different things, ranging from a white chocolate made with non-cocoa butter, but other fats like palm kernel oil or date nut oil, these other tropical oils; then into the real cocoa butter; and then into the milk chocolates of varying degrees; and finally into the dark chocolates, with the lighter roast, and finally the heavier roasts. Long before this craze had evolved for identifying which part of which country and which region it came from.

Geraci: Pre-the Scharffen Berger explosion, in this area, at least.

15-00:13:13

David: Oh, God. I admire John Scharffenberger for what he did and for bringing chocolate to the attention to the world, in much the same way that I admire Alfred Peet for teaching us how to respect the quality in coffee beans and in

the level of roast. I've always said that Alfred Peet taught us how to appreciate high-quality coffee and high-roast coffee. In a way, John Scharffenberger did a lot of that. But let's not take away from people like Guittard, who, since long before John ever came around, were doing all of these chocolates. John really gets credit for having developed the market and interest in these individual things. The old standbys like Guittard were already importing those very chocolates, but they were incorporating them into their blends. There wasn't yet the demand nor the willingness to pay the prices.

Geraci: Yeah, the price differences.

15-00:14:18

David: When you isolate a very, very small component, when it's being blended in with the mass, it's contributing its complexity to the whole thing. But if you want that to be isolated and by itself, it's going to be expensive. So it works hand in glove. I think he did a great turn for the chocolate industry.

Geraci: Well, also—and this goes to the pre-World War II American food consumer—in the post-World War II years, we're willing to experiment. Americans were used to Hershey's, Mars. This is milk chocolate. It is not a European-based chocolate. It's a very different taste. I love one thing you call it, adult taste, when you were talking about the olive oils. Americans hadn't acquired a taste for many of these things.

15-00:15:19

David: Okay, but in all fairness, it's not as if the Europeans were just eating dark chocolate. What's that Italian—Perugina? Is it Perugina that makes the chocolate that shaped like the nipple of a breast?

Geraci: Oh, yes. Yeah.

15-00:15:43

David: I think it's Perugina. It's been more than a century, probably, that they hooked onto that idea. Well, breast milk is not bitter, like dark chocolate; it has lots of sugar and lots of milk in it. Hence, milk chocolate. So the regular eating chocolate in Europe also was a milk chocolate. The little wafer of a dark chocolate was just a very occasional after-dinner, little, special thing. But I don't think you walked around seeing people snacking on those extra dark chocolates. That's something that I think has pretty much evolved in the last—oh, what—twenty-five or thirty years.

Geraci: Well, the idea that when the Europeans got chocolate from the Aztecs and the Incas, they were actually putting chili in their chocolate, too.

15-00:16:39

David: Right. Gee, that reminds me of a conference once, just the title. Sorry to digress here for a moment. From Chilies to Chocolates: Foods the Americas

Gave the World was a fascinating thing. Chilies, indeed, chocolate, tomatoes, corn—lots of things that are native to the Americas.

Geraci: And the Europeans sure loved them. We're talking about the market itself. Okay, we have the olive oils, the chocolates.

15-00:17:17

David: Wine, of course.

Geraci: Yeah. Were other people doing tastings, both of wine and chocolate, or olive oil? Or was this something that you were—

15-00:17:25

David: Certainly, I can't say I'm the only guy that ever tasted olive oils in the market; but we had a regular pattern. My market manager, Maggie Mah, M-A-H, was just really ahead of the landscape on this one. She just constantly had tastings of one sort or another going on, whether it was twelve different chocolates lined up and you could go down the line and taste a little bit of each one, or half a dozen different mustards with pretzel sticks—no-salt pretzel sticks—that you could dip into them and taste, or cheeses. Remember, this was also in the early days of Americans making cheese. Actually, in those days, it wasn't Americans making cheese, it was Californians making cheese. Because the established American cheese businesses, like the cheddars from Wisconsin and the Swiss cheese as well, were pretty solidly established. But Laura Chenel, making goat cheese right here in the Napa Valley, in Calistoga, and evolving that business, she ended up being sort of the great advisor to a whole generation of kids. She, in turn, got a lot of help and advice from—and now I'm going to block his name; at the Sonoma Cheese Company—Ig Vella, who just, sadly, died this last year or so, who was just so more than helpful and friendly. Anybody that came along and wanted to make cheese, he was more than willing to take whatever time it took to help them and answer questions and guide them. She, following in his footsteps, has done pretty much the same. So there were cheese tastings and wine tastings. We had a really unusual thing, because since we had a restaurant with an on-sale general license, which enabled us to sell wine and spirits by the glass, as well as an off-sale license, which allowed us to sell this by the bottle, we would conduct tastings occasionally, over in the restaurant portion, in the banquet room of the restaurant. We would have tastings of, oh, half a dozen different single-malt whiskeys or some unusual rums or cognacs. Wine, of course, was a more commonplace tasting. So all of those were things that evolved out of the market.

Geraci: That's amazing. Did you ever sleep?

15-00:20:26

David: [laughs] Well, I've often said that that building was all but my bedroom. I spent many hours there.

Geraci: Absolutely. Now, did you know of other places—California, across the United States—that were also doing these types of things, with the tastings?

15-00:20:55

David: Oh, yeah, places started showing up. Delis. I would go to meetings put on by the—Well, first, there was an organization called the Travel Program for Foreign Diplomats, that would take foreign diplomats from the United Nations and from the Washington embassies, on tours of the United States. Whenever they got to Northern California, they wanted to visit wineries and cheese producers, and we would put on banquets and events for them. But then there was another group called the—So many names here. Damn, Vic, my mind is going blank.

Geraci: Oh, we'll think about it later.

15-00:21:55

David: That did a lot of work in developing the Mediterranean diet pyramid, and would take chefs and writers and winemakers on tours around the world, to attend different conferences. That would bring people together. I met Ari [Weinzweig], from Zingerman's Deli in Michigan, who was doing a lot of the same kinds of things we were doing.

Geraci: But this is at the very start of all these things. As you said, there are places you can pick off, throughout the nation. It's not just one place, but it's just starting.

15-00:22:46

David: Yeah. I'm not making any claims of having invented this stuff. I think anybody who is really committed to being creative with food and opens a deli is going to start doing this kind of thing. The first Semifreddi's Bakery that opened up was across the street from Narsai's Market. Or across from the restaurant, on Colusa. When Acme Bread built a new plant, Steve Sullivan, as it's recorded in Jeremiah Tower's memoirs, he started hiring away bakers from Narsai's, to work at Acme, to get started. Well, there were a whole bunch of bakeries getting underway in short order. Who was the promoter that used to say, "Find a need and fill it"? Cement. Henry Kaiser had these big cement trucks—gosh, the colors were amazing; they were purple and sort of a mauve-pink sort of color—slowly revolving, and it would say, find a need—and then as it revolves around—and fill it. Well, we were doing the same thing with food. More women were working at regular jobs, and therefore, leaving them less time to be the food preparer at home. There was a greater demand for prepared things that you could take home and just pop in the oven. We had a generation of young people growing up saying, hey, wait a minute; if they can make cheese out of goats milk in France and Italy, why can't we do it here? And who says we can't use sheep's milk? And what's the matter with buffalo milk? Little by little, these things started evolving. There was a market for it, there was interest in it.

- Geraci: Americans for the first time, at least for me, began to play with food. They began to experiment. It's a playfulness.
- David: It's very true. Very true for my generation, because coming out of the war years, food was not anything to play with. You were thankful for having it.
- Geraci: For having any, yeah. And whatever you had, you made best use of.
- 15-00:25:18
David: Absolutely. But you're right. We got fat and sassy. We had time on our hands and we had options and we had things we could do just for fun.
- Geraci: And we had disposable income.
- 15-00:25:29
David: Our parents never dreamt of that.
- Geraci: So those post-war years, it was kind of the perfect storm; it all kind of came together for food.
- 15-00:25:37
David: Yeah, yeah, that's a good observation.
- Geraci: It's one of those. Anything else about the market?
- 15-00:25:49
David: Anything else about the market?
- Geraci: I notice you've continued some of the labels you started creating, a few of the items.
- 15-00:25:57
David: Well, yeah. The very first packaged foods we had—I mean shelf-stable packaged foods—were preserves that were made for us by a woman up in Mendocino named Marilyn Douglas. She was making preserves in these sixteen-ounce jars, and she agreed to make some for us. She made twelve jars at a time, in a pot. This was really basic—
- Geraci: This is a home cottage industry.
- 15-00:26:24
David: The classic home cottage way of making preserves, and they were just the world's best preserves. We soon outgrew her, and then we—I think I've told you the story of how I discovered they were making mustard, Dijon mustard in France.
- Geraci: Right, we talked about the Dijon mustard.



(Narsai David in an advertisement with his preserved foods.)

15-00:26:43

David:

So we started making the Dijon mustard here, the chocolate decadence, the Assyrian marinade, the nectarine chutney. So the label, the Narsai's product label, got established in its own right. Some ten years ago or so, I turned that business over to my niece, my brother Ken's daughter, Soreya, so the label continues. It's a tough row for her because she's not strongly enough capitalized to be able to go out there and get mass distribution. The problem is, when you're dealing with a product that has such expensive ingredients—Well, look at the chocolate decadence. Chocolate, butter, cream, sugar, vanilla. That's the five ingredients. If you were to go into the kitchen right now and make a ganache, those are the five ingredients you'd use. There is no way to shave that down. You can't use palm kernel oil in lieu of some of the cocoa butter; you can't use margarine instead of the butter. If you're going to make the real thing, it's got to be made with those ingredients. Mustard. People don't realize that 80 percent of the weight of prepared mustard comes from the liquid ingredients, not the mustard. Now, read the ingredient list on the label. Inevitably, the first item listed is water, and then vinegar. Ours is made with vinegar and white wine. It's a little more expensive than water and distilled vinegar. So to be able to sell in the supermarket scene, you have to be large enough that you can order a large enough batch of it to get the production cost low enough to provide for a broker, who's this in-between person. Safeway is not going to buy mustard from a producer like Narsai's, because are going to need more than one or two cases at each store, each week. They go to a company that represents maybe several-thousand different items—mustards and ketchups and sauces and hot sauces and so forth. These days, with the scanners that read the back label of the jar, the sales company comes in, scans the items that are on the shelf, and prepares the order for the grocer. So it might have two cases of A-1 Sauce and one case of HP Sauce and two cases of Dijon Poupon and three cases of Dijon Poupon in the larger

size, et cetera. There can be a couple-thousand different items coming from that one vendor, because Safeway certainly can't cut a check for one company that's sold them three cases of mustard. So she's just never evolved it into that big a company.

Geraci: This has been an ongoing battle within the wine industry, also, the small vineyards not being able to produce enough case production, cannot get the larger brokers or wholesalers to handle their accounts; thus meaning they have to either sell on-site or within the State of California. Now with all the restrictions countrywide, in shipping and direct delivery, it's problematic. The small person enters that fine point, where you have to have capital to move to the next step.

15-00:30:44

David: Oh, boy. Of course, the common joke in the wine industry is, you know how to make a small fortune in the wine industry?

Geraci: Start with a large fortune.

15-00:30:51

David: Start with a large fortune.

Geraci: I always heard, if you want to make a million in the wine industry, start with a million. It's the same type of thing. Keeping with the food type of ideas, I have one article here that's kind of interesting. I was looking for the date. Oh, January, 1984. It's right when—I'll give this to you—you had the restaurant. It's from the *Chronicle*, and it's, "Where Do The Restaurateurs Eat?" Then and now, what have been some of your favorite food places in the Bay Area?

15-00:31:35

David: Gee whiz. Most of these guys have disappeared. Paul Johnson, from Omnivore; John Solomon, from Café Venezia, Mark Miller, Fourth Street Grill, Narsai David, Narsai's, Alice Waters, Chez Panisse, and Michael Wild, BayWolf. Well, there are a few of us that are still here. Actually, the last three on that page are still here. Where do you eat? Well, that's an interesting question. It's a tough question. Certainly, the classics exist. Chez Panisse just celebrated it's fortieth anniversary, and I applaud Alice for what she's done. She's just really, really made a mark on the American—and let's face it, on the international—food scene, with the creativity at Chez Panisse. The café upstairs, I just have always found a lot more fun than the downstairs, because of the variety of things. It's not only the variety that you get to choose different things, but of different styles. You could have a pizza out of the wood-burning oven, or you could have just a simple piece of grilled something.

Geraci: Isn't that almost somewhat of a trademark of all the different chefs that have gone through Chez Panisse? [They] have left something. Paul Bartolli left the Italian, Jeremiah Tower left the French.

15-00:33:00

David: Yeah. I hadn't thought of it in those terms.

Geraci: Each of them left a little something there.

15-00:33:04

David: Yeah. Whereas when you eat in the downstairs—Well, let's face it; the downstairs is something entirely different than anything Alice had ever envisioned. If you were to go back to the way she started the place, that's the last thing she ever imagined the place would become. There is a formality to it that is—if you have a long-term memory, it's kind of a surprise to see that it has evolved into something quite so formal. There's a fixed menu, which it's had from practically the beginning, which is troubling to some people; that when you're eating at an expensive meal, you ought to be able to get some options. But they have a different menu every day and that's the way it works. And by golly, it's been phenomenally successful and I applaud that. There's a tiny Chinese restaurant on Kittredge called the Great China, that is easily our favorite Chinese restaurant. It's small; they don't take reservations. So I tell people, if you can't get there by six-thirty, don't bother, because you're going to be standing on the sidewalk, waiting for a table. But very creative presentations, things that I've never seen in other Chinese restaurants.

Geraci: Regional, or is it a mix of different regions?

15-00:34:33

David: It's a mix. Primarily Cantonese, but there are little touches that just show their personal preferences. Michael Yu, Y-U, is the owner, and he's sort of in the process of turning it over to his son James, who is managing it now and there most of the time. James had added his own little touch. He's put in a *huge* wine list. Gosh, he has fancy and expensive wines. He has things like Roederer Cristal. The Korean ambassador is known to come to the Bay Area a couple times a year, and drive up with two or three limos full of people that do a pretty good job on that wine list. Then there's Marica, M-A-R-I-K-A[sic], on College Avenue in Oakland, owned by Christopher Cheung. He, again, has a son who's coming into the business, who has come into the business, and is pretty much running the restaurant at the front end, and Chris is in the kitchen himself. It got the name Marica, it's a Greek name of a sea nymph, and it started out being a seafood restaurant, but it's evolved, the menu into a more general menu. Tiny little restaurant in the industrial area called Riva, R-I-V-A. It's an Italian word for where the land meets the water. It's owned by an Italian man, who's the chef. He's married to a young American woman, who works the dining room. Very simple, very creative food. Haig Krikorian, who was a chef of mine, has become sort of the king restaurateur of the East Bay. His Lalime's, which was his first restaurant, is just a phenomenal success. But he has several other restaurants, as well. Paisan, P-A-I-S-A-N, on San Pablo Avenue, and right next door to it, Sea Salt—those are both his. [coughs]

Geraci: Want to stop for a second?

15-00:37:20

David: Yeah. [audiofile stops & restarts]

Geraci:

Okay, restarting. We had to stop for a second there. We were talking about restaurants that were favorites of yours.

15-00:37:34

David:

Right. Well, both Sea Salt and Paisan, just tremendous values. Sea Salt has a family-style dinner, in which they bring out a platter for two people, and it's a special. I think it's every Wednesday. It started out being something like \$17 for three courses—it included a glass of wine—and now it's up to \$22. But is just a really, really good value. Next door at Sea Salt, it's a little more structured and a little fancier presentation. T-Rex is justly noted for its barbecue. He has the latest barbecue equipment, that enables him to control both the temperature and the amount of smoke. In fact, here's a little sidebar for you. St. George Spirits, which started out making the most unusual spirits, with fresh fruit, like their raspberry liqueurs and framboise this or thats, has gotten into making distilled spirits. They have a whiskey, a malt whiskey; they have a gin; and they make a tequila-style product. They tried to import raw maguey from Mexico, in order to roast it here and make the tequila, but the government wouldn't let them bring the raw maguey in, so they have to bring it in already roasted. Some of it, they send down to T-Rex, and they smoke it over a particular kind of wood, in this special oven of theirs, so that that's fermented and distilled separately, and they are able to control the degree of smokiness they want. Now, if you were to get tequila and compare it to mescal, for instance, mescal being essentially a primitive form of tequila—All tequila is, in fact, mescal; but to be called tequila, it must be from Tequila. And they don't bother digging a deep pit and filling it with fire and hot rocks to roast the maguey plant; they just run it through an oven. Well, in that roasting, in the classic way, you really get a lot more of that smoky character. So what St. George Spirits does, in having some of their maguey smoked, they can control exactly how much of that smoky character they want in there. It's just a fascinating little sidebar.

Geraci:

It's a new spin, to get back to the old taste.

15-00:40:47

David:

Exactly. So you asked what restaurants. For a recent birthday, we went to La Folie, in San Francisco, Roland Passot's restaurant. We were the sudden recipients of a pair of tickets to an ACT production a couple weeks ago. A friend, who suddenly was unable to go, gave us their tickets. When I called to make reservation—Oh, when we go to the theater, we like to eat at Scala's, in San Francisco. It's convenient to ACT and the service is good, the food is always delicious, straightforward, no nonsense. We really enjoy that. You can get in and get out easily. Well, by the time I called, they were already fully booked. We were going to be doing some shopping at Macy's and Veni said, "Hey, why don't we go up to the Burger Bar?" Well, Hubert Keller, seeing his name there, of course, reminded me how one of the all-time great French

chefs in America could end up owning a string of places called Burger Bar is just remarkable. But by golly, I had a hamburger. What's really funny is Veni, who really loves hamburgers, I thought for sure was going to have a hamburger; instead, she had the—it was called a salmon steak. It turned out to be a boneless salmon steak that was rolled into a disk, so that it was presented on a bun, so you could've eaten it like a hamburger; she ate it with a knife and a fork. But I had a hamburger, black angus beef. I've got to give him a lot of credit. I think of a patty as being something big enough to cover the whole bun. Well, it wasn't big enough to cover the whole bun, but it was more than three-quarters of an inch thick. So when I asked for it medium rare, it came out medium rare. You bit into it, it was juicy and just absolutely wonderful. So I'm willing to recommend going to the Burger Bar, if you even halfway remotely feel about a hamburger. The guy puts together a hell of a hamburger. He also has one on the menu with foie gras and kobe beef. I can't remember what the price was. [they laugh] So anyway, those are some of the names that quickly pop to mind.

Geraci: There's no shortage, it seems, in the Bay Area, of places to eat, and there's always a changing list.

15-00:43:46

David: Oh, man!

Geraci: Restaurants have a tendency to come and go a lot.

15-00:43:52

David: Well, there really seems to be a lifespan. The number of restaurants that make it past three years is pretty small. But if you look at the restaurants that have lasted a long time, ten or fifteen years is pretty much—Well, let's see. I left the Potluck in 1970 and started catering; but the restaurant didn't open until '72. The restaurant closed in '85; the catering continued for another year. So from beginning to end of catering, was sixteen years, from 1970 to '86.

Geraci: That's a long time.

15-00:44:40

David: The restaurant itself was actually open only thirteen years. In retrospect, that's not a bad run. There are times that I've wondered, what if I had stuck it out? But it doesn't take me thirty seconds to say—

Geraci: It was a good decision.

15-00:45:06

David: —you done the right thing.

Geraci: Is there a reason why restaurants, the longevity isn't as long as many other businesses?

15-00:45:17

David:

I think that the novelty from all of these new places provides enough of a draw to pull people away. People always want to try the newest thing. I'm fascinated, as I looked back on when we closed. We announced that we were going to close on June 1 of 1985, and this was back in, gosh, I don't know, February or March. It was early on; we just structured everything. Herb Caen picked up on this and mentioned it in his column. Well, I've got to tell you, those last few months, it was like a land office. You couldn't get a reservation in the joint. Pretty soon, people were saying, boy, this guy is a shrewd son of a gun. He's not going to close; this was just a promotional gimmick. But isn't it fascinating that when the word got out that we were going to close, people wanted to come for one last time. But these are the same people who were so busy trying all the other restaurants that—You have to keep up with what else is going on, what else is happening. So I don't know. I wouldn't say that it's that people get tired of a restaurant. Instead, I think they get seduced by the novelty of the newest thing on the block.

Geraci:

But isn't that also at the level of the restaurant? When a restaurant's a little bit higher end, you have a consumer who's looking for the new novelty. Same thing with the wine industry. Looking for the new, the different; doesn't necessarily have loyalty to just one place. Now, at the lower levels, a little neighborhood restaurant, they're more satisfied with that one.

15-00:47:13

David:

I suppose you make a good point. What is the level of the restaurant? If the difference between a casual, drop-in place—Narsai's Restaurant started out with a complete five-course meal. There was a choice of two different soups, a cream soup and a broth soup; a choice of three different appetizers, some hot, some cold. The main course always had starch and a vegetable on it. There was a very simple romaine salad, after the main course, and then a choice of several different desserts. So it was a special event place. It's funny, as I look back on the menus. The opening menu in 1970, the range of price was from \$4.75 to \$7.50, for the complete five courses. That's everything, five courses. But the mere fact that it was structured that way made it a more formal presentation. The wait staff, the men wore tuxedos; the women wore a floor-length black skirt and a white blouse. So there was, again, a feeling of formality. There were white tablecloths and candles on the tables. So even for the people that lived nearby, it was not quite the place you just, let's drop by and have a bite to eat.

Geraci:

It's not the little neighborhood place. Ah, I don't feel like cooking tonight; let's just go get something quick to eat.

15-00:49:01

David:

Right. No, no, it was other than that. So you might want to ask the question, what does it take? Looking through this whole list of restaurants, there are six chefs here. There are only two of those restaurants that are still going. It happens to be the last two on the list—Alice Waters, Chez Panisse and

Michael Wild, BayWolf. What exactly has made those last as long as they have? One thing you can say about the Bay Wolf is that early on, they sort of became known as a place to go for duck. Their menu has always had lots of duck dishes on it, many, many things made with duck. That remains a real constant there.

Geraci: They've branded something on their menu.

15-00:49:57

David: Right. Now, I can't think of any specific thing that would've branded the Chez Panisse menu, but somehow the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Once Chez Panisse really got established and got underway in its own right, it was *the* place, *the* establishment.

Geraci: Now, whether Alice Waters intentionally or unintentionally—Chez Panisse has also been recreated itself a few times in its menu and in its approach. That's almost like a new restaurant, but it just has the same name.

15-00:50:35

David: No, that's very, very true. That's very true. Lots of changes have occurred. Lots of changes have occurred.

Geraci: And that turned out to be for the good.

15-00:50:57

David: Oh, there's no doubt. That fire, which almost destroyed the place, was just a phenomenal rebirth for the restaurant, because it gave them the wherewithal to remodel and renovate and tweak their direction. It's just a phenomenal success story.

Geraci: Just finishing up a couple of things here, this is 1989. "Chefs' Holidays at Yosemite is a truly gourmet delight." It's you and your son.

15-00:51:24

David: Oh! 1989. I was doing *The KCBS Saturday Kitchen*. Well, Monday through Friday, I had *Narsai and Company*; and then Saturday mornings, from ten until noon, *The KCBS Saturday Kitchen*; [they] were call-in talk shows. So for the Yosemite Chefs' Holidays, where they would have a series of guest chefs each week, who would prepare a specific menu for the grand dining hall at the Ahwahnee, and on Saturday afternoon, do a cooking demonstration, as well—For a number of years, I did that, and my son used to go down to help me. It was really a kick.

Geraci: But the Ahwahnee, it's amazing to me. Every winery, at one time or another, has gone there for wine tastings.

15-00:52:43

David: This article is clipped, along with a letter from someone thanking me for answering her questions on my preferred shortening for pie crust. [they laugh]

Geraci: What *was* your preferred shortening?

15-00:52:58

David: It's always been butter.

Geraci: The last one, before we change direction here. I love this one. This is from California Public Markets, Incorporated. I can't see what the date—Oh, here we go. The date is 1987. On this one, it has, "baby veggies, a passing fancy."

15-00:53:23

David: Oh, my!

Geraci: We were talking about that earlier.

15-00:53:27

David: My column was titled "Baby Veggies, a Passing Fancy?," question mark. California Public Markets, Inc., at the Old Mill, in Mountain View. Gee, it's funny. When you first said California Public Markets, I flashed on the thing that was in Emeryville, that Joe Carcione was involved in starting. I see here, my memories of the best pickles I have ever eaten. Are you ready for this, Vic? Crenshaw, honeydew and casaba. Pickles. Well, comes the end of the season—No, let me digress one step away, actually, and talk about green tomatoes. Green tomatoes have suddenly become some kind of a big deal, these last few years. Green tomatoes, long before they discovered a particular variety that can be green even when it's ripe, green tomatoes are what you pick at the end of the season, when there was no longer enough life left in that plant to mature and ripen the tomatoes that were on it.

Geraci: Where you were trying to predict the first deep frost that's going to come and strip the plant.

15-00:54:46

David: Right. You wanted to get it off, so they're not destroyed. So you had fried green tomatoes, which were a vegetable, not a fruit, obviously. You would make pickled green tomatoes. You could make classic sourdough pickles, which could be just as crunchy as a cucumber salad pickle. Well, then there were the little baby, undeveloped melons. Honeydew, Crenshaw, casaba, cantaloupe, Persian melon—you name it. Little tiny things. If those aren't the world's most delicious substitute for a cucumber—Let's face it, they're all in the same family.

Geraci: Interesting.

15-00:55:29

David: But those fruits, by definition, when allowed to ripen, are going to develop sugar. The regular cucumber that we're talking about, long before it develops any sugar, it rots. Well, these things have just that hint of sweetness, even when they're really, really tiny. Man, are they ever wonderful! They're so delicious.

Geraci: Do you pickle them the same way as you—

15-00:55:52

David: Oh, sure! Just toss them in—I call them my bread and butter pickles. I always have a jar in the refrigerator. It starts out with the Jerusalem artichokes that we always pickle. My idea of a lunch is a big handful of raw, pickled veggies and maybe a carrot—also raw, obviously. It gives me lots of bulk, lots of crunch, lots of stuff to chew on, but hardly any calories, so it's kind of neat. Yeah, yeah, just toss them in the pickle jar. Now, am I nuts, or is that thing about to run out of clock?

Geraci: We've got about four minutes, so this would be a good time to change.

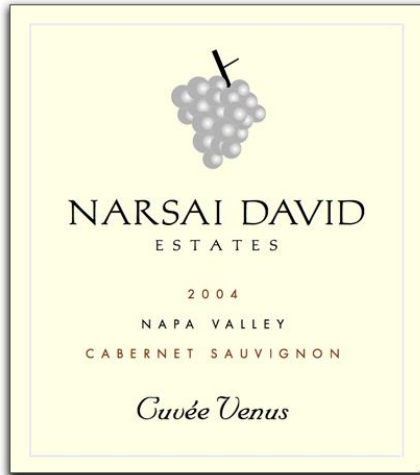
Begin Audiofile 16; 10-04-2011.mp3

Geraci: Vic Geraci, University of California, ROHO. This is interview number eight, tape number sixteen, with Narsai David. We're in his home. Narsai, when we left off, we were talking about pickled melons. I'm just fascinated with that. I'd like to do a little bit of a shift, I think, now and move back to alcohol for a little bit. I know we need to talk a little bit about your vineyards. Then, also I have an article here about beer, let's talk a little bit about. So we'll talk about alcohol next.

16-00:00:38

David: All right. Alcohol. Well, we bought a vineyard in 1971, on the Oakville Cross Road, in Oakville, right in the very center of the valley floor. It's right next door to Silver Oak, if you know where they're located, on the south side of the Oakville Cross Road. It's a seventeen-acre parcel, all planted to Merlot. To the best of our research, it's probably the first commercial Merlot vineyard planted in the Napa Valley, and therefore, in California, I guess. There were some test plantings of Merlot. I know that both Inglenook and Christian Brothers had fairly substantial test plantings, where there would be a half dozen vines, or maybe even a whole row, that they were just constantly evaluating. They would end up being blended into something or other, but only occasionally, would something lead to a planting of it. It had been planted by a Dr. Bernard Rhodes and his wife, Iva Belle Rhodes. They were also involved in the first planting of Martha's Vineyard, which they sold to Tom and Martha May. Then they planted this Merlot vineyard in 1968. Then another piece of land showed up on the Rutherford Bench, which is this sort of revered, hallowed ground for California's best Cabernet. It's roughly described as the area of Rutherford west of the main highway and going up into the western foothills. Barney wanted to take one more stab at the Rutherford Bench, and so he sold us the Merlot vineyard and he bought the piece on Manly Lane and Bella Oaks. In fact, they named it Bella Oaks Vineyard, and the grapes all go to Heitz Cellars. So Heitz has the exclusive on the Martha's Vineyard, as well as on the Bella Oaks Vineyard. We never

imagined making wine. I've rarely ever invested in stocks. I've had a couple of times when I tried, and I lost money.



(Label for Narsai David's Cabernet sauvignon.)

Geraci: Didn't work to your benefit.

16-00:03:43

David: But I've appreciated investing in real estate. Somehow, to be able to own a vineyard and sell grapes to the wineries just somehow made sense. So we sold grapes. Lou Martini got the bulk of the Merlot in the early years, but then it went to various producers. Then in probably about 1981 or so, we bought a piece in St. Helena. Well, actually, it comes down to Conn Valley Road. Conn Valley roughly parallels the Silverado Trail. If you were to go north until you get to Meadowood, which is on Howell Mountain Road, turn right on Howell Mountain Road, go sort of up that hill, about three-quarters of a mile; Howell Mountain Road veers off to the left, to go up onto Howell Mountain. On the right is the beginning of Conn Valley Road, which runs back south, roughly paralleling the Silverado Trail. It quite literally ends at Lake Hennessey. It's one of these funny sites, because you're driving along and you see the road just disappears into the water.

Geraci: Oops. [chuckles]

16-00:05:14

David: So when they built Conn Dam and created Lake Hennessey, that was the end of it. We actually bought two parcels of land. The first one was a seventy-acre piece that, although it has an address on Conn Valley Road, went up a fairly steep hill on the west side of the road and then dropped down into this beautiful little valley called Spring Valley, because of all the springs out there. Not to be confused with Spring Mountain, which is on the west side of the

Napa Valley. We planted ten acres of Cabernet up there in—I've got the dates screwy here. It must've been a little later than '81. But we planted ten acres of cabernet. Then we cleared off another little parcel that was a little more than two acres, two and a half acres, and we planted that. We didn't want any grapes the second year; we wanted to just establish the roots. So the way we pruned it, we weren't expecting to get any crop at all. Well, lo and behold, there was some crop out there. I knew it wasn't going to get ripe enough to really make great wine out of, but yet I also couldn't visualize just dropping it on the ground.

Geraci: Waste not, want not.

16-00:06:55

David: Waste not, want not. Vic, you've got my number. So we harvested a few tons of this baby Cabernet, brought it down to St. George Spirits in Alameda, and fermented it and distilled it and made a grappa. We bottled half of it as grappa. Technically, had it been in Italy, we could've called it *aqua vitae*, or in France—Wait, what would it be in French? *Eau-de-vie*. Yeah. Water of life. Because it was made from the whole grape. You see, we fermented the grape and then put the entirety of the ferment into the still. Whereas to be called grappa, you can take the leavings, after you've made red wine—or made any kind of wine, red or white. You take the leaves, and there's just enough sugar, residual sugar—if not sugar, at least a little bit of residual flavor there—and you add sugar and add water and get a new fermentation going. So you're able to extract a little more flavor out of those skins and seeds. But the alcohol is really a function of all that sugar.

Geraci: All the sugar, right.

16-00:08:35

David: Whereas when you're actually distilling the wine, you have something that's more substantial. Anyway, half of it, we bottled as grappa, and the other half, we put into a couple of used Limousin oak barrels. I tasted it recently. It is now fully twenty years old, with this coming harvest, and we're trying to decide whether to bottle it as California brandy or what to call it? What do you call something like that?

Geraci: What *do* you call it?

16-00:09:00

David: Cabernet sauvignon brandy? California XO Brandy? It's a pretty exciting product. Anyway, I'm digressing here.

Geraci: What's the color?

16-00:09:16

David: Oh, well, it's taken on a beautiful amber color.

Geraci: Because after these many years, it was red, it should've ambered a lot.

16-00:09:23

David: Oh, yeah, yeah, it's picked up all that color from the oak.

Geraci: So it is almost like a brandy-type appearance.

16-00:09:27

David: Oh, yeah. Oh, in appearance, it's—Don't tell nobody, but I wouldn't mind slipping it into a sniffer at the end of dinner and telling you that it was a cognac and defy you to say, wait a minute, that's not a cognac; that's made out of Cabernet sauvignon. There's no coloring added to it, there's no caramel coloring or flavor. This is just whatever color it picked up from the oak. [phone rings; audiofile stops & restarts]

Geraci: Okay, restarting after a phone call. We were talking about the vineyard. The vineyards, excuse me.

16-00:10:09

David: So then the same people, Howard and Virginia McLaughlin, owned a piece across Conn Valley Road, on the east side of Conn Valley Road, some fifty-four acres, which is where their home was. There was a large meadow area that had just been a pasture, and they sold us that and we gave them a life estate in it, which means they could live in that house as long as either of them was alive. We planted fifteen acres of Cabernet there, as well. Well, then the fit hit the shan, when it turned out that AXR1, which was the rootstock that we had used for everything, was susceptible to phylloxera. It's a—I don't know if the right word is a grudge, an irritation, a frustration, an anger—

Geraci: You wouldn't be the only one to be angry at UC for that.

16-00:11:30

David: Well, damn it, nobody knew definitively; but by God, there was enough evidence to show that there was a problem with AXR1. I think the only proper thing to do, scientifically-wise, morally-wise, otherwise-wise, was to say, hey, guys, be careful if you're going to use this stuff; there are some troubling stories. Then when it turns out that one of the biggest producers of AXR1 rootstock is a close relative of the researcher at Davis who's doing the work on AXR1—Come on, folks.

Geraci: A conflict of interest?

16-00:12:22

David: Something's wrong here. Well, long story; to make it short, something had to give. We had, at that point, something like—what's that?—forty-two or forty-three acres of grapes that we just owned as investments. Well, they never did make money. It paid their own way, once the vineyards got established. But all of a sudden, we were faced with having to rip out these vineyards, start from scratch. All of them at once. It wasn't a matter of just adding a couple

more acres here or there. So it was a very, very painful decision. We decided to sell the piece up on the hill. It was, still is, one of the most beautiful vineyard spots in the world. It's just amazing.

Geraci: I imagine the view, looking down into the valley—

16-00:13:33

David:

Oh! Well, it looked down into Heitz. We had a common boundary at the west edge; it met Heitz. Then just north of Heitz, there's a Phelps parcel there, as well. We sold it to one of the owners of Merryvale, who uses it as one of his prized vineyards. But that kept us in enough cash flow to be able to replant the other two vineyards. Then finally, somewhere along the way, we bought a piece of land in Pope Valley. A friend who was living in New York was getting to retire, and wanted to have a small place out in the country, removed and isolated, and she found this piece of land. It was a little over a hundred acres, on Pope Valley Road. A long, narrow wedge, between Pope Valley Road and Pope Creek. In order to keep the price as low as possible for her, we agreed to buy it together and subdivide it, in such a way that the plantable land would be maximized in one parcel that I would take, and minimize the plantable land on the parcel that had the house on it, which is what she wanted. So it served both of our needs. That was in 1990, we did that, and we subdivided it. I applied to the state water commissioner to impound a hundred acre-feet of water. In Pope Valley, if you don't have a pond, you cannot grow grapes because the summer gets so dry and so hot that the grapes will burn up, without water. The creek runs dry in the summer months. In the year 2000, I have a letter in the folder from the state water commissioner, releasing 500 acre-feet to the Putah Creek watershed, of which Pope Valley is part. The name Narsai David is at the top of the list. So 500 acre-feet are released; we want 100 acre-feet and our name's at the top of the list. Well, I was so ecstatic. I'm on the phone to my vineyard manager, telling him to order the rootstock, get the bulldozer cranked up; it's time to dig the reservoir. Well, here it is 2011; I still don't have that damn permit. It is the most outrageous, unbelievable amount of bullshit I have ever seen.

Geraci: What held the permit?

16-00:16:47

David:

Do you know, to this day, I can't give you an answer to that question because every time I talk to the state, I just get more doubletalk. A friend knew somebody who had been on the state water commission, and they looked into it for me, because we have a neighbor who has something like 2- or 300 acre-feet of pond that he has installed, since I made my application, and yet nobody can explain to me where he got the right to do that. The closest they can come is to say, well, he must've had the right from before. Well, that doesn't have anything to do with anything, because if the right had been granted based on some previous things, then in 2000, I have a letter that says 500 *new* 500 acre-feet are being released to that watershed and I get a hundred of them. So with

the little added pressure this put on the water commission, since I was finally asking questions in places that rattled some chains, then they send back my application and say that I didn't give enough consideration to the upstream effect on trout breeding or something like that. And this just keeps going on. If I told you the tens of thousands of dollars I've paid to this vineyard engineering firm in the Napa Valley, because every time the state sends me one of these things, we have to address these same questions that have been done twenty times over, in the last twenty years. But each year, there's a new regulation, so they're asking me to satisfy these new terms. When we bought the property, in order to get the subdivision, we had to have a biological survey done, as well as an archeological survey done. I'll never forget the archeological survey. This archeologist came up and found something called a bedrock mortar. Do you know what a bedrock mortar is? You know what a mortar is, that the Indians would grind things with. Well, this was in a bedrock formation, down at the side of Pope Creek. This woman was just—I didn't know whether she was having an orgasm or dying. She was just beside herself, because she had found a bedrock mortar, and this was proof that Native Americans had actually lived there for an extended period. They weren't just passing through.

Geraci: Passing through, right.

16-00:19:50

David: So nothing could be done to touch certain things there. Then when we applied for the pond, they said that the archeological survey that had been and the biological survey that had been done, they met a standard for subdivision, but they did not meet a subdivision for planting a vineyard. I mean for planting a reservoir. Therefore, we had to do them all over again. Well, somebody found evidence of a red-legged frog having come across some portion of that field. It's sort of a long, skinny slice like this, between Pope Creek and Pope Valley Road. Out here, pretty much in the middle, they claim there was evidence of this red-legged frog. Now, in order for there to have been standing water out here in the middle, it had to have been a really extended, flooded, wet winter, because as soon as spring comes along and the water starts to recede, there is no water out here in the middle.

Geraci: Based on the very fact, first of all, that you even have to have a pond to get water because it's so dry.

16-00:21:30

David: Exactly. But they said, there is evidence there, so you cannot plant. So we have to fence off a one-acre portion here, that cannot have any grapes planted on it. Okay. Then back to the Native American artifacts. The soil out in the middle of the meadow, in a particular area, is so black that it indicates charcoal fires had been burned there over such a long period that this was a very important village site. There are a couple more acres here, in which we

cannot plant any grapes. So we'll put a little fence around that. We keep going through; they keep coming up with more and more unbelievable bullshit.

Geraci: Well, and the fact that each time you accomplish one thing, they've passed new laws.

16-00:22:29

David: Exactly.

Geraci: So you're always behind the eight ball.

16-00:22:31

David: Constantly. Constantly. Now, if you had asked me six months ago, I would've said, well, it looks like we're finally about to get the permit, because they just had a couple of last things that our engineers provided and they were detailing it. Well, six months have gone by, and if you were to ask me today, I'd say, two weeks ago, we once again sent what we thought was the final answer to the final questions. But 2011 is almost going to end and I still don't have that damn permit.

Geraci: And you can't get the vineyard in until you do.

16-00:23:12

David: There is no way you're going to plant a vineyard if you don't have the water. That's simple and straightforward.

Geraci: And real estate-wise you've subdivided this property solely for planting of grapes.

16-00:23:29

David: Oh, that's the whole purpose of it, yeah .

Geraci: So who's going to want to buy it, if they know they can't get a permit for it? That is definitely a catch twenty-two.

16-00:23:40

David: Anyway, so that's the last of the vineyard properties. Now, to bring everything full circle, we did decide to sell the vineyard on Conn Valley Road, just almost a year ago. What happened was that a guy bought a piece of land—Ours is fifty-four acres and the one next door to it was about fifty acres, give or take. They bought the piece next door to us, which had been a little B&B, and they had their broker contact us to see if we would consider selling them the fifteen acres that we had planted. I laughed at him and said, "I don't sell real estate, I buy real estate." I said, "How about you selling me the fifteen acres in front of that property?" Which is suitable for vineyard, that the previous owner had threatened to sell to me, but never did; had threatened to plant herself, but never did. It just sits there vacant.

Geraci: It just sits there.

16-00:24:53

David:

Well, before I knew it, I had an unsolicited offer to purchase our piece for what sounded like a fair bit of money. But when I asked him for a breakdown of how he arrived at these numbers—Because he said this was substantially more than market value, in order to serve as an inducement to me to sell. There was a pretty well-established figure for how much an acre producing vineyard in the Napa Valley brought, how much an acre a plantable vineyard area brought, how much an acre for just open land, how much for a home site, how much for reservoir. There are various specific things you can add up. I said, “Well, gee, just plugging those numbers in means that the figure you’re offering you is actually lower than market, not above market.” He said, “Well, look, Narsai, I’m just starting a detailed survey of land sales in the last year, for somebody who’s interested in buying a winery property, and as soon as I complete that, I’ll give you a copy of the study.” So some months went by, the study is completed, he sends it to me. I added it up and I said, “Well, the numbers come out just the same as what you had before.” A long story; to make it short, they did not offer me enough money for me to accept the deal. So three years go by. We hit this enormous collapse in the economy. Land prices in the Napa Valley flatten out, as they have everywhere else in the world. By this time, the guy has started work on the property next door. He turns out to be a young man who’s inherited a huge wealth when his father died, apparently, and he’s torn out the B&B that had been there and replaced it with a guest home and a swimming pool, built an enormous barn-like structure for his car collection. This guy has money. Once again, he’s knocking on the door and asking if I’d consider selling. Well, now, here’s the situation he had. When we bought the property—this is our fifty acres, this is the other fifty acres—up on the hillside, we spotted a location that would be ideal for a retirement home, if we decided to retire there. Because from up on that hill, you got a sweep all the way through Conn Valley, right down to Lake Hennessey. You could see the lake at the end of the valley.

Geraci:

How beautiful.

16-00:27:56

David:

It was just a really pretty site. You’re surrounded by redwoods and pine trees and oak. Guess where this guy is going to be planting his house. Right across the line, because he’s got a comparable view down there, right? So would you rather have your home at the edge of a fifty-acre piece or in the middle of a 100-acre piece. You’ve got all this money that you don’t know what to do with. So the guy starts throwing money at me. Again, for a guy that doesn’t like to sell real estate—Our son is not interested in owning a vineyard or winery. I figure it’s going to be at least three or four years, if not more, before Napa land prices get back to where they had been. This guy finally hit the magic number. With the help of a very creative realtor, who coincidentally, had as his first job, while he was a student in high school, working as a busboy for me—By the time the restaurant closed, he had worked his way up to wine manager, so he was responsible for the entire cellar. He had remained

a good friend, is a realtor, a very successful commercial realtor. He found a piece of property for us to buy on one of these 1031 exchanges, so we were able to roll over the equity from the sale into another piece of property. Rather than taking cash out, we just traded.

Geraci: And then pay the capital gains?

16-00:29:52

David: Well, no. Since I'm not—

Geraci: Yeah, since you're doing this, you don't have to.

16-00:29:58

David: Right. You don't pay any capital gain; you're just rolling the equity over, you're not taking cash out.

Geraci: Right.

16-00:30:07

David: The other piece has a first-class tenant, who has a true triple net lease that makes the rent payments by the—The 25th of the month, I think, is the latest rent we've ever gotten for the next month. It's always a week before the first of the month. I, who thought I could never sell a piece of real estate, sold it. It not only was not painful, but it's really marvelous because this piece of land, which, frankly, was not generating any income—It was sort of paying its own way. But we are now getting a nice income, on a monthly basis, from this. If the family is not going to continue wanting to grow grapes, then I can't fight any longer.

Geraci: Is there any potential for vineyards on this new property?

16-00:31:19

David: No, no, no. It's just out of state. It's roughly—

Geraci: Oh, it's out of state.

16-00:31:23

David: No, it's developed real estate. It's commercial real estate.

Geraci: Well, see, it's not as if you sold real estate; you just swapped.

16-00:31:33

David: Right, right.

Geraci: Yeah, so you still haven't sold. There's still this virginal area that you haven't sold, you've only swapped out here.

16-00:31:44

David: But now, you can see that with this being the case, then when, if—what’s the right preposition here?—we ever get that damn water permit, there’s going to be a real temptation to sell Pope Valley.

Geraci: Because that will increase the value of the property.

16-00:32:09

David: Well, it makes it plantable. At the moment, there are thirty acres of just *beautiful*, level land. It’s this open meadow that is rich, delicious topsoil. With the water, it would be just an ideal location for a vineyard. Just absolutely ideal. But again, if there’s nobody in the family that wants to work in that direction—That piece on Conn Valley Road, which is the only parcel that actually had a home on it, we never spent one single night in that home because when push came to shove, it was just a little too isolated for us. These people that bought it have, I think, two kids already and the woman is pregnant now with a third. It’s absolutely ideal for them *because* of its isolation. They’re off in the back country, in their own private little world. For us, gee, it’s a good fifteen-minute drive to get into St. Helena from there. So that means a quart of milk is going to cost you forty minutes, to run into town and pick up the quart of milk you forgot.

Geraci: I think as we get older, we appreciate urban areas a little bit more.

16-00:33:42

David: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. There are those isolationists, who prefer the isolation more.

Geraci: Now, as far as the vineyard, what you do have, how many tons a year are you producing, or how many cases of wine are you producing?

16-00:33:59

David: Well, seventeen acres of Merlot and four acres of it, we budded over to Cabernet, about four years ago. All told, we produce about sixty tons a year. But they’re all sold. What’s a really funny twist here is that the Cabernet on the valley floor just takes a long time to ripen, because the water level, the moisture level is high, so it’s not going to produce grapes that I want for my wine. So this is really hilarious. I’m out contracting to buy grapes from somewhere else, to make my wine this year.

Geraci: But you’re right. On the floor like that, that’s always been a problem. There’s just too much liquid available for the vine to be taking up, and you have delayed ripening.

16-00:35:13

David: It’s ideal for Merlot and Sauvignon blanc. Merlot and Sauvignon blanc just do phenomenally well on the Oakville Cross. I think I was trying to convince myself that if we were very careful with the clonal selection and the rootstock

selection, that we could produce—After all, Oakville is a pretty sexy appellation these days.

Geraci: Oh, absolutely. Mondavi and Opus One made that sexy.

16-00:35:52

David: Yeah, they sure did.

Geraci: Now, on your Pope Valley, have you considered what kind of varietals, if you ever get to plant?

16-00:36:00

David: I think Sauvignon blanc would be just such a natural out there. Such a natural.

Geraci: It's got the dry, it's got the heat.

16-00:36:07

David: It's just got the ideal conditions. It ripens early enough in the year, you don't have to worry about these late winter storms, you don't have to worry about running out of water in your reservoir. So it would be a good place for Sauvignon blanc. We've had two bad years, in terms of crop in the north coast. In fact, what's really hilarious—it's not hilarious funny, it's hilarious sad—that the price—Well, Merlot, ever since that damn movie *Sideways* came out, the market for Merlot collapsed. We were getting \$2800 a ton. It was the Napa Valley weighted average for Merlot. In one year, it dropped to \$1800 a ton; the next year, it dropped to \$1,000 a ton. So last spring, we signed a contract for ten tons of our Merlot, at \$1800. It was finally starting to make a comeback. Two months ago, we were approached by a winery that offered us \$2800 a ton, for all the remainder that we hadn't yet sold, and \$4,000 a ton for the Cabernet that had not yet been sold. So prices, just overnight, tightened up. Simply the old story of supply and demand, because we've had two years in a row where there was a long, long, late, late, cold, cold spring that delayed ripening, and therefore, reduced volume and reduced quality pretty dramatically.

Geraci: The weather pattern, with the delayed summers, and now with a fall that's going to be wet, it just—

16-00:38:15

David: We're facing the same problem again this year.

Geraci: Right. So you contract all these grapes out, but you make your own wine, then, also.

16-00:38:30

David: Well, but as I say, we started making our own wine for the first time in 2000. Actually, our name appeared on the label back in the seventies. I know by 1978—I don't know if it could've been any earlier, but by 1978, I know Travis Fretter—who by the way, his father, Bill Fretter was a vice president in

the university; he was a physicist at Berkeley—he had a small winery here in Berkeley called Fretter Wine Cellars. Did some *really* wonderful work. I used to chide him because the label had, in larger type, Narsai David Vineyard; and down at the very bottom, in much smaller type, it said, Fretter Cellars. I said, “Travis, it’s unfair to you. You’re the guy—” “No, Narsai, it’s the vineyard that makes the wine.” Well, it is true that you can’t make a great wine from mediocre grapes. But it wasn’t until 2000 that we decided to make our own wine. And 2000 turned out to be a strange year to be doing that, because it just was not a very good year in the Napa Valley. But the die was cast; we were set to do it and we went ahead and did it. What really saved the vintage for us—we only made 500 cases of Cabernet—we got two barrels of Petit verdot that were made by Christian Moueix, at Dominus. When those were blended in, it *really*, really made a profound difference.

Geraci: Gave it a different character.

16-00:40:33

David: Oh, yeah. Yeah. It didn’t make it into a great wine, but it made it into a very serviceable, very decent wine. So our last year, we did not make any wine because the grapes on Conn Valley Road, I just couldn’t get them to do what I wanted. They made decent wine; we sold it off as bulk wine. If the vineyard that we’ve found can produce the grapes, we’ll be able to make a little wine this year.

Geraci: Now, who do you have making your wine, as far as winemaker?

16-00:41:14

David: Gary Brookman is our winemaker. He’s the winemaker at Miner Family Vineyards.

Geraci: Oh, okay. Keep that within the Assyrian Community.

16-00:41:24

David: Keep it in the Assyrian community, yeah. Yeah, I would like to continue making a few hundred cases a year, if we could make a really good Cabernet. I think Gary—Well, you’ve tasted the wine.

Geraci: I’ve tasted the wine.

16-00:41:39

David: I hope you’ve enjoyed it.

Geraci: Yeah. So anything else about the vineyards and the wine, then?

16-00:42:49

David: I guess that sort of covers it.

Geraci: I think we’ve got a good covering on that. I think in many ways, it all kind of comes together in the fact that the people that are involved in wine are always

involved in food; and the people involved in food are always involved in wine. Well, wine is food.

16-00:42:13

David: Oh, yeah.

Geraci:

You were talking about the learning experience for Americans, that we've had in these post-World War II years. I think wine has been one of the great learning experiences. As we've gone through, we've talked about a lot of different people. There's a couple I'd kind of like to go back and talk about. One is Jeremiah Tower. A legend in his own mind, I think [Narsai laughs] is the way I like to put it; but he did have a big impact

16-00:42:58

David: Well, that's how the cynics would say it. I think Jeremiah contributed an awful lot. There are some funny little quirks that I've chided him for. I remember one [that] comes to mind. I was a member of the Berkeley Wine and Food Society, and the dinner chair for an event that we planned at Chez Panisse. I had very carefully worked out the menu with Jeremiah. The appetizer course was a salmon cannelle; I can't remember what the sauce was. But he came out into the dining room and announced that when he saw how fantastic the salmon looked, he just didn't have the heart to cut it up and purée it, and so he was just going to poach it. I was *furious*! Just absolutely furious. As far as I'm concerned, the lazy bum got in too early, because he'd had too long a night the night before and didn't want to bother making a cannelle out of the salmon. What? Is he suggesting that he had planned to use a stale salmon and when he found one that was fresh.

Geraci:

See, that was my question.

16-00:44:26

David: Then he decided, well, it's good enough to use by [itself]? Come on, now. Some things are set in stone. In this case, black on white, we used to say. I think Jeremiah did an awful lot. I know there's this terrible conflict between him and Alice, and the Jeremiah supporters and the Alice supporters.

Geraci:

Right. They've done mortal combat with each other.

16-00:44:51

David: They have. And I have dear friends on both sides of that chart. It's really kind of sad. Jeremiah did an awful lot for Alice. She can't take that away from him.

Geraci:

Oh, he made the restaurant, in many ways, with his cuisine.

16-00:45:08

David: There is no question. There is no question. He didn't have a clue what he was getting in, she didn't have a clue what she was getting into, and both of them ended up making an enormous and serious and meaningful contribution, which served well for the success of the restaurant. So to argue that he doesn't

deserve any credit, that's absurd. He did an awful lot for the restaurant. It has nothing to do with taking sides.

Geraci: Well, as I mentioned earlier, as I look at the restaurant and I see its evolution, it's the chefs that are going through there, who have—and as you mentioned, the fire served the same purpose—kind of gave it a rebirth every so often. There is the Jeremiah Tower years, there's the Paul Bartolli years. Even Christopher Lee had a time at doing this. But it's not really Alice doing the cooking, it's these chefs that are retooling this restaurant every so often.

16-00:46:12

David: There is no doubt that Alice had a lot of good support and good luck in the early years. There were seven partners that created that restaurant, and as each one of the original partners drifted away, she would buy their share, and little by little, she gained control of the whole thing. She did, indeed, hold it together. She had the vision to keep the entire thing together. But it gained, every single step of the way, from these people who came through there and contributed to making it. I think you summarize it better than anybody I've heard, that it was a different restaurant through each of these periods. We can talk about how the fire gave it a new lease on life. We can talk about how that wood-burning grill did a double whammy. It gave you a new direction to cook in, but it enabled the insurance buying you a redo of the building, as well.

Geraci: Right.

16-00:47:28

David: So those were some fortuitous things that happened, that worked out well to its advantage.

Geraci: I know we've talked about Jacques Pépin. Seems to be a friend of yours.

16-00:47:43

David: Oh, he's a good friend. He's a real sweetheart. He cuts through the bullshit. That's what he does. In a funny way, my mind flashes on Julia. I don't mean for a moment to suggest that there's a comparison between his cooking ability and hers. He's truly, truly a phenomenal chef. I don't believe Julia, in her wildest dreams, could ever have been a chef in a restaurant, but she was a brilliant teacher. Jacques could be, and was, a chef in very important positions, in very important job.

Geraci: He came up through the old traditional manner.

16-00:48:50

David: Came up through the motions and is just a great teacher. To this day, I tell people that the cookbook to start with would be those first two that he did, the *La Methode* and *La Technique*. It was, to my memory, the first cookbook that used pictures to describe every step of the way. You could, without ever having been in a classroom, without ever having seen one of these cuts of

meat in real life, you could follow it step by step, through just looking at those pictures, to go into the kitchen and make a galantine or a ballotine, or bone a squab and stuff it. The guy is just a born teacher. He's *really*, really wonderful.

Geraci: But it's interesting that the food movement has pushed—It is, in some ways, a revolution. I think it may be more an evolution, over a fifty-year period. But there are those who become the great chefs; there are those who become the educators. I would include both Alice and Julia Child in the educator part. Alice does it different than Julia has done it. Alice has done it through, now is doing it, I think, through her foundations and her speaking and in her involvement in schools. But it takes all these. It's kind of like it takes a village to raise a child. It took all of these people.

16-00:50:38

David: So what you're saying is that up until now, she's done it through the chefs who have worked for her, and now it's the schools.

Geraci: Yeah. Is that a fair—

16-00:50:46

David: Yeah, well, it's a very astute observation. That's a very astute observation. I've never heard it verbalized so simply. I think you're absolutely right. Yeah. Makes good sense.

Geraci: It's not trying to put her place down, it's just saying that everybody has a skill base that pushes this whole movement forward. I see she has a definite role in pushing the movement forward.

16-00:51:02

David: No, no, no, it's an observation of the reality. Absolutely! Absolutely. Then focusing on the business of teaching and getting the schools involved and getting children's food involved, I think is without a doubt, the most important part of her legacy. The rest of the legacy has to do with just making people feel good and feel happy. But wow, this goes so much further than that.

Geraci: See, I agree with you totally, and I think that's been the beauty of what she has and is doing. But there again, I put her and Julia in this framework of the educators, pushing what all the great chefs coming up during this time were doing. There's people out here cooking amazing things.

16-00:52:04

David: But isn't it interesting, though, how differently it ends up being, when you compare? This is a fascinating conversation, thinking of Julia, Jacques and Alice all together. Julia, who couldn't cook her way out of a frying pan, is a great instructor because she becomes the average klutz fussing around in the kitchen. You walk away saying, well, I could do that.

Geraci: If she can do that.

16-00:52:40

David: I could do that. I fell in love with her when I saw her make a charlotte, apple charlotte. She turned it out of the mold—By then, I had been doing a little bit of television, so I was already knowledgeable in the ways of these things. She lifted the mold off and it collapsed on one side and I gasped to myself and I thought, wow; they're surely going to drop this frame. Well, they kept on going. With that squeaky, high voice, she starts turning the platter and she says, [impersonating Child's voice] "Well, sometimes that happens, and you just turn it so the guest sees the other side." It was like she was patting a little baby on the rump. I thought, wow! She's absolutely right. Yeah, man, it happens. It's not the end of the world. What are you going to do, go in the back room and cry because the charlotte doesn't look perfect? It's time to serve it; it's too late to make a new one. I can see Julia standing in front of an audience, teaching. I can see Jacques standing in front of an audience, teaching. I *can't* see Alice standing in front of an audience and giving a cooking lesson. But being able to hire a chef and to bring him along, or her along, and push them and instigate them and initiate ideas and help push them along—My God, which is more important? They're both critically important, but they're very different.

Geraci: Let me throw another layer on this. I've had limited success; I've been able to do a few. But I think one of the great oral history stories that needs to be told, and actually, histories that should come out of this, is Alice Waters the mentor. Take a look at the Bay Area and the United States today.

16-00:54:40

David: Well, that's exactly what you're talking about.

Geraci: The amount of people that have been at Chez Panisse and used that as a springboard for these *amazing* careers in this food.

16-00:54:51

David: In fact, some of it, let's face it, gets carried out far beyond what's important.

Geraci: Beyond what it should be.

16-00:55:00

David: In other words, now people say, oh, well, I worked at Chez Panisse. They may have done a stay that lasted two months, but they were able to say on their résumé that they were at the temple.

Geraci: They worshipped in front of the lord.

16-00:55:13

David: —worshipped in front of the lord. Sure. Absolutely. But what the hell? For years, we've been saying that about people that do a stage at Les au Verger or Paul Bocuse. Our son Danny did a stage at Vergé, at Moulin de Mougins, in

the South of France, one summer back in high school days. It was fascinating. He'd call home once a week, constantly complaining and grumbling and griping. "I'm not learning anything. This is the dumbest thing I ever did. All I'm doing all day is straining stocks and trimming vegetables. This is dumb, this is dumb, this is dumb." Let me tell you, he came home with a far, far more sophisticated sense and feel for sauces and the blending of flavors, in both savory and dessert sauces, than his father could ever have given him, or than his father has to this day. It was just being in that environment, being around that scene. By the end of the summer, they did let him do more than just peel the vegetables and strain the sauces. But just being able to be surrounded by this environment, the amount of learning you can get out of it is profound. So yeah, I don't belittle somebody who says, well, they did a stage at someplace. The mere fact that they were there for six months means they *have* to have picked up something. Absolutely.

Geraci: Something has to rub off, yes. Something has to rub off.

16-00:56:58

David: Absolutely.

Geraci: I've had this idea. This is, I think, a way that I've periodized it or staged it within my own mind, as to how this movement has come about. There's a lot of different roles that people need to play, to make something like this come off. I think everything from education through the growth of the farmers markets. Another thing that I think Alice at least was at the beginning of, whether she started it completely or not, was contract farming. These are little things that come about. The people that are involved in that today, the idea that we have foragers today—So there's this whole world out there, but it's not just her. Now, I guess to flip a little bit, did you ever know M.F.K. Fisher? Ever get to meet her?

16-00:57:58

David: Yeah, not really well, but I met Mary Frances on a couple occasions. One of the most memorable events was at Heitz Cellars, when Joe Heitz bought the piece out at the end of Taplin Road and moved his winery there. I commissioned Martin Metal, who did the sculpture of the nude that we've talked about, I commissioned him to do a weather vane. He made it out of copper and it shows this figure holding a glass up to the sun, and he has a piece of garnet stone in it that picks up the light rays and reflects them. I gave him that, and I barbecued a whole lamb on a spit and did a party, welcoming him into his new winery. Mary Frances was one of my guests at that event. I never saw her enough, but I saw her a few times. She was a real charmer. She was a real charmer.

Geraci: She becomes the epitome of that food and wine is life philosophy, and you can't separate them. They're all intertwined. She was that. We've talked about, I think, most of the other people I had on my list. Are there any other

people that come to your mind that were, either then or now or through the years, that possibly we haven't mentioned, over the series of interviews? Good members of pushing the food revolution.

16-00:59:55

David: Bob Balzer comes to mind. He was the food and wine editor of the *L.A. Times* for a long, long while, and did a lot of writing that I thought was—He and Craig Claiborne, who was at the *New York Times*; Frank Priol, at the *New York Times*. I was always impressed by them.

Geraci: Today, Eric Asimov.

16-01:00:26

David: Right. Mark Bittman, I think has made a wonderful contribution. I'm a little confused about what he's doing right now. I haven't quite figured out the degree to which he has become an editorializer on the food scene. *Sunset Magazine*, in the early days, with Jerry DiVecchio at the helm. Long before the words California cuisine came about, *Sunset Magazine* really was talking about what's really California cuisine, using fresh produce and fresh fruits and vegetables and doing things in season.

Geraci: To me, they were one of the first definers of what this new cuisine or this California cuisine—

16-01:01:35

David: Oh, sure. Sure.

Geraci: —or however you're going to talk about it, what it is, what it involves.

16-01:01:40

David: Caroline Bates, at *Gourmet Magazine*, said that—

Geraci: We're just finishing right now, so we'll have to kind of cut it for today—

16-01:01:48

David: Oh, damn!

Geraci: —at this perfect place.

Interview 9: October 18, 2011

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Geraci: Today's date is October 18, 2011. This is interview number nine, tape number seventeen, with Narsai David. Narsai, we're back at your house again, so let's get started.

17-00:00:21

David: Welcome. I can't imagine what it's going to be like if this thing comes to an end. [Geraci laughs] We've gotten so accustomed to these visits.

Geraci: To our morning visits.

17-00:00:31

David: Right, right.

Geraci: This morning—and we'll talk about it later in the interview—I have gone around and taken photographs, at least my amateur photographs, of some of the pieces of art and items that you actually had in both the market and the restaurant, that you've incorporated into your home. We'll talk about those individually, so we can insert those photographs into the transcript itself. But one of the things I'd like to start with today, that you had shown me, is the bible that you called your wine list.

17-00:01:03

David: Bible is right. 1500 wines on this list. I think I mentioned to you that this Saturday in New York, Marvin Shanken, the owner of the *Wine Spectator*, is doing a thirtieth anniversary of their having given the wine awards to restaurant wine lists. We got an award in the very first year, which was 1981.

Geraci: Now, those were their Awards of Excellence.

17-00:01:36

David: Well, there were two. There was the regular award and then there was the Grand Award. Marvin Shanken, when he called to say that we had been chosen for a Grand Award, I said, "Wow. That's great news. How many will be getting the Grand Award?" And he said, "Well, frankly, Narsai, we haven't decided yet whether to cut it off at three or at thirteen." So that was the same as telling me that I was one of the top three.

Geraci: This is nationally.

17-00:02:09

David: In the country.

Geraci: Yeah, this is huge.

17-00:02:11

David:

Right. Then subsequently, Frank Prial did an article in the Sunday *New York Times Magazine*, in which he described the list as one of the ten finest in the world. So we were pretty serious about it. It's broken down into sections, starting with Bordeaux and going into Burgundy. Everything is listed within a region, and then by variety. Here's California Cabernets. We had some in-depth, in terms of vintages. Well, I'll just flip to Charles Krug. 1956, '58, '60, '61, '62, '63, '64, '65, '66, '67, '68, '69, '70, jumps to '74. '71, '2, '3, were not that exciting for Napa Cabernets, and '74, of course, was wow, what a big moment. By my judgment, the great vintages of Cabernet of the twentieth century, probably in this order, for my palate, were '36, '51, for sure, were one and two; and then '58 and '74, I would flip-flop which one was third and which one was fourth.

Geraci:

You bring up an interesting thing there, is that many, for years, considered that it was generational. Every generation would have that one amazing vintage.

17-00:03:55

David:

Well, think about it. Yeah, '36, '51. But there were two in the fifties, '51 and '58. Then jumps to '74. That's interesting, yeah. The restaurant closed in '85. Truth be told, those next fifteen years, I wasn't nearly as on top of each vintage as it came out. So if you were to ask me, what's the best vintage after '74, I probably would hem and haw and say, well, gee, Vic, let me think about that one. [they laugh] Well, there's a difference between being immersed in doing, actually, the wine and food thing on a daily basis.

Geraci:

Now, in breaking up your wine list, did you have it by country, by region, or by varietal or—?

17-00:04:49

David:

Well, we started with the red Bordeaux, from Bordeaux, and red Burgundies. We've got the California wines by varietal; there's Cabernet and Pinot noir and Zinfandel. And the whites are listed separately. Here, this is, I think, important to show you. Here are a couple of items that have a line drawn through them. I don't know if that shows very clearly on there. But we had two copies of this bound volume. When the barman went back into the cellar to get a bottle from this rare list—and there was another little tidbit I'll mention—the bottle number was printed on a tiny, tiny little sticker that we had on the top of a bottle. If a wine needed to be decanted, we flashed it with a red-ink marker. So that the bartender knew, before pulling it out of the tube, that it had to be put into a cradle and handled carefully, to be decanted. If he saw that he was taking the last bottle, then as soon as he got back to the bar, he grabbed both of these books, took a ruler and a pen and ran a line through that item, because we were out of it. Now, it might be possible that we had more in our backup cellar, and the following week it would be replenished. But there was nothing so frustrating to me as going into a restaurant that had a supposedly great wine list and ordering something, to have the waiter come back and say they didn't have it. Then second choice, the same; third choice,

the same. Pretty soon you sit there staring at the waiter saying, well, now, which ones *do* you have? How much of this is just for show and how much is because you're selling these wines? Well, damn it, we were selling these wines. I will say this was also the beginning of our work with computers. We maintained this list on an IBM electric memory typewriter. This was before they had their first personal computer. Well, you remember what IBM cards looked like?

Geraci: Right.

17-00:07:22

David: Well, the follow-up to the IBM card was a strip of plastic that was magnetic tape, essentially, the same size as an IBM card, except they called it a mag card. Each one of those mag cards would accommodate a legal-size page. You could go back in and make changes and corrections; but it wouldn't move things up or down. It was recorded line for line. So if you wanted to make a change on wine thirteen, you could go down there and bleep it out. But that wouldn't automatically move it up because the line was eliminated; you'd have to retype the rest of the page. Anyway, we had one card for each page. So then the cellar master, each week, would go through this. If there was something that could be replenished, it would be replenished; and if not, a new sheet would be printed up, so that that number had disappeared. We had a lot of fun with wines.

Geraci: We take it, I guess, for granted nowadays, with computers, that it's so much easier to do that. Now, when you were selected by the *Wine Spectator*, what type of process does the *Wine Spectator* use to select the restaurants?

17-00:08:37

David: I have never, never seen a formal presentation.

Geraci: Neither have I, and that's the reason I'm asking.

17-00:08:44

David: But that's a good question. I'm going to make it a point to find out. I'll be there this weekend. They now have three categories. There's the initial category; then there's a sort of special, elevated category; and then the award of excellence. The award of excellence, or the Grand Award, is still somewhat limited. But they've introduced a third area.

Geraci: Do you submit your name and your restaurant? Or do they have tasters?

17-00:09:10

David: You have to submit it. Well, I don't know that it's so much tasters as it is people who evaluate what's on the list. You don't need to go in and taste the wine. You weren't thinking that maybe somebody is serving wine that's over the hill? Who knows?

Geraci: Who knows? I had no idea what the process was.

17-00:09:33

David: That's a good question. Geez, here I've opened to the Port and Madeira page. Here is an unknown Madeira, but it's older than 1837. This is wine that we'd gotten from Christie's Auction. Here's a Blandy from 1846; a Blandy, 1856; a Blandy verdelho, 1862. We get up into Abudarham Bual, 1914. It was so exciting to play with these things. How about an 1875 California Angelica, from Cucamonga Vineyards? This was privately produced for Isaias Hellman, who was the founder of Wells Fargo Bank. *Beautiful*, beautiful wine in hand-blown liter bottles. Who the heck could ever imagine a hundred-year-old wine.

Geraci: At that time, angelica *was* the wine.

17-00:10:48

David: Oh, man oh, man! Well, there was a cute little story that—The way Angelica was made was the grapes were picked very, very ripe, very sweet, and immediately, alcohol was added to bring it to 20 percent alcohol, so that it could not ferment. So what you had really was preserved grape juice. But somewhere along the way, the Federales came along and said, wait a minute; it can't be wine if there's never been a fermentation. So you can just visualize the consummate wine maker. Everybody's standing there, they put in like three grains of yeast, and they're waiting and waiting. Ah-ha, there's a bubble! There's fermentation! Stop the fermentation. So just as alcohol is added to port to stop the fermentation and preserve some of the sugar, here alcohol was used to preserve totality of the sugar. So they're very lush and rich and sweet.

Geraci: Now, through modern science, we can control fermentation with temperature.

17-00:12:04

David: Sure. Sure.

Geraci: You can drop the temperature on some of the stainless steel tanks low enough to stop fermentation.

17-00:12:10

David: Or to run it so slowly that you don't develop those same components that come with the heat. Then there was a really special section, with Cognacs. We mentioned Darrell Corti before. He found a négociant or a merchant of some sort in Bristol, England, who had discovered that the house of Harveys was going to dispose of a lot of barrels of Cognac. These are what the British call early-landed Cognac. When the Cognac was either one year old or two years old, the barrels were shipped from Cognac directly to Bristol, and stored in a government-bonded warehouse, until the time they were ready to be bottled. Well, when Harry Waugh was a director of Harveys, he imposed on them to buy some of these very, very sexy, vintage-dated, old cognacs, and wanted to

sell single-barrel lots. The man was way ahead of his time, because nowadays they're doing things like this and getting \$3-, \$4-, \$500 a bottle for spirits of this nature. But Harveys very quickly discovered that it wasn't worth their trouble. They had a Harveys Bristol Cream Sherry and they had a Harveys Grande Champagne Cognac and a petit champagne Cognac. They didn't need to go any further with it. Well, long story; to make it short, they were selling this off and Darrell and I agreed to meet in Bristol to taste some of these. We went through the inventory and made a list of—I think there were thirteen or fourteen that we wanted to taste. Well, at the last minute, he had to cancel and couldn't make it; but Veni, my wife, and our son Danny and I were there. I guess it must've been 1977 or '78, because I remember Danny was just twelve years old. We got there just as the bondsman was about to leave for lunch, so he was a little unhappy that he had to show us this stuff before he headed for lunch. So we sort of raced through. I contacted John Avery, of the house of Avery, also in Bristol—his father, Ronald Avery, ran Avery at that time—and he was shocked to discover that just across town, Harveys was selling off all this cognac that he didn't even know about. So he came with us to taste. I said, "But the deal is, I get to choose first." So we raced through, tasting them. I wanted Danny to taste everything, as well, and so he tasted it on a fingertip, just got that much on his tongue. Because I think the idea of diluting alcohol with water for a youngster to taste, for me, that's an excuse for teaching a kid how to get drunk. You're not teaching them anything about flavor.

Geraci: It also isn't really the taste. You've diluted it down. You're not teaching them taste, yeah.

17-00:15:35

David: I say, you're not teaching them anything about the flavor. So we chose nine that we really liked. There were two I wasn't really, really 100 percent sold on, but I asked for formal bond samples to be withdrawn, of those nine. They have a little—I think it was like a forty milliliter bottle, ounce and a half or so. We brought those back and Darrell tasted them and we agreed on seven, and we bought those seven barrels and had them bottled for us. Some of them weren't yet ready for bottling. In fact, the last barrel, we didn't bottle until—it was either 1990 or 1994, long after the restaurant had already closed. So here's an example of what we had on the list in 1985. There was a Denis-Mounié petite Champagne, was distilled in '64, landed in '65, when it was just a year old. Then we bottled it in '77, so it was thirteen-year-old cognac. Single barrel, no color added, no caramel added, no sweetness added. This was just what it got out of the barrel. There's an Exshaw petite Champagne that's thirteen-year-old, an Exshaw grande Champagne, fifteen-year-old; a fifteen-year-old Harvey grande Champagne, and an eighteen-year-old Harvey grande champagne; a seventeen-year-old Frapin grande Champagne, which for the longest time, was my favorite of the whole group; then a sixteen-year-old Hine grande Champagne and an eighteen-year-old Hine grande Champagne.

Geraci: Now, when you bottled these, what label did you use on them, or bottling?

17-00:17:34

David: Well, it was Denis-Mounié petite Champagne—

Geraci:

Oh, okay.

17-00:17:37

David: No, well, it was under the Avery label. Avery did the bottling for us. We moved them over to Avery and they filtered them, added distilled water, to bring them all down to eighty proof; but then each bottle showed this information.

Geraci:

So you held it in their bond.

17-00:17:58

David: No. No, we bought it a when we got it, with the exception—Any barrel that was ready to be bottled, we extracted out of bond. First we bought the seven barrels. So Harvey got paid for those seven barrels. The ones that we were ready to bottle, we immediately took out of the bond, sent them to Avery. They, as I said, filtered them, added distilled water to bring it to proof. [coughs; audiofile stop & restart]

Geraci:

There we go.

17-00:18:48

David: The story wraps up with that last one that we bottled. Once again, I think it was 1990, which was a Hennessy Cognac. By that time, other people had started taking advantage of getting these special things, and Hennessy, hearing that we were going to bottle a Hennessy Cognac, threatened to sue us if we put the Hennessy name on the label. We said, “Well, you’re certainly welcome to sue us, if you’d like, but we have a government bond document that shows that this barrel was landed from Hennessy into the government bond. It’s being shipped across town, where Avery—arguably the oldest house in the world—is going to bottle it for us. So what exactly is your lawsuit all about?” “Well, would it be all right if we provide you with engraved Hennessy labels for your product?” [Geraci laughs] In other words, they were just worried that someone was trying to rip off the Hennessy name, and once they saw that it was legit, they gave us the labels free of charge, the classic engraved Hennessy label. It identifies it as being specifically this Hennessy cognac from a particular vintage, and imported. By that time, the restaurant had closed, so it was imported for Corti Brothers.

Geraci:

Oh, so Darrell then, at that point, is selling it.

17-00:20:15

David: Right. I, of course, got my share.

Geraci:

Got your share. [they laugh] Well, this is a business venture; I would expect no less.

17-00:20:22

David:

Absolutely. So we had a lot of fun with this list. There were Armagnacs, and Marc, some Calvados, a couple of Spanish brandies, Pedro Domecq's Fundador and Carlos Primero, and the Gonzales Byass Le Panto. There was an Asbach Uralt from Germany; a couple of Greek Metaxas, a Seven Star and a Grande Fine; a Domecq President, from Mexico; and then from California, several brandies, which sadly, were not very distinguished; but they were the best we had in California in those days. There were the beginning rumblings of new things. There was the basic Korbel; and then Christian Brothers had an XO, and they also had one they called a Tricentennial, that was really quite special. Parrot, who was a major wine importer, bottled one that they called VS. A.R. Morrow and Company had a six-year-old that was bottled at 100 proof. Windsor made a spirit called California Gold, and it was aged for thirteen years. And finally, Russ Woodbury had a brandy that was aged for a long time in a single barrel; it was really kind of special. We had a number of single malt scotch whiskeys and some pretty unusual liqueurs and other spirits. So it was a pretty complete list.

Geraci:

It seems regionally, you're covering the entire world.

17-00:22:03

David:

Yeah. Our coverage of Spain and Germany was certainly not what we had of California and France and Italy.

Geraci:

It's almost pre-South African beverages.

17-00:22:15

David:

Oh, we had just a couple of South African wines on our list. There was a Cabernet from—Oh, my. What's the name of that producer? Will I even be able to find it? Wines from other regions. White wine from other regions. We did pretty well with German. There were a couple of dry Sauterne. This just brings back an instant memory. 1954 Château Gilette. It had that incredible lush, rich color and aroma of grapes that were heavily infected with botrytis, but it was bone dry. It was fermented dry.

Geraci:

Interesting. But it had that straw-ish color?

17-00:23:14

David:

It had that straw color and that intense concentrated flavor, but no sugar. What an amazing thing to serve with a really rich fish dish, something— Oh, a piece of salmon poached in white wine and served with a cream sauce. Normally, I would serve Pinot noir with salmon, but this was the kind of wine that would stand up to it. And Château Carbonieux, which was just sort of a nice dry Sauterne. Otherwise, the Sauternes were sweet. The German wines divided into the Rhine and the Mosel, with the Spätlese and the Auslese and the Beerenauslese and the Trockenbeerenauslese. Then white wine from other regions: Alsace, Austria, Spain, Italy, Hungary, Australia. A fairly good spread of California Chardonnay. Of course, feeling uncomfortable in front of

your camera, I'm never going to find the section that has the other red wines. The little tabs have all broken off.

Geraci: Makes me feel good then, because when I pick up a wine list that's that large, that's exactly how lost I feel. [they laugh]

17-00:24:44

David: Red wine from other regions. Well, by golly, I don't see that South African one. There's a Santo Tomas Barbera, from Mexico; several Shiraz and Cabernets from Australia; some Portuguese and Spanish table wines.

Geraci: Were Argentinean or Chilean wines coming in at that time?

17-00:25:11

David: No, those we didn't have at all. They were here, but remember, Argentinean wines, until the last twenty years, were really—People aren't aware that Argentina used to actually produce more wine than France. It just was an *amazingly* large producer; but it was just ordinary jug-wine-quality stuff.

Geraci: Wasn't it used basically for bulk sale?

17-00:25:36

David: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Geraci: Or for blending purposes?

17-00:25:38

David: Absolutely. Just the very, very simplest wine. But as they realized the kind of interest in the world market, both the Argentineans and the Chileans got really, really serious about redoing—There was one story—and of course, I won't remember the man's name, who came to study here in Berkeley, got a PhD in one of the biological sciences, and his family had hundreds of acres of vineyards. He got really, really intrigued with California Cabernet and spent a lot of time in the Napa Valley and meeting people and learning what they were doing; went back and ripped out huge acreages and planted Cabernet. It's been a few years since I've visited Argentina and Chile. I went to judge wine. They have an international panel of judges. We spent a week in Argentina, a week in Chile. They were trying to get international exposure. It was fascinating that each winery in Argentina had three levels of wine. There was the entry-level wine, which was, give or take, eight or ten dollars a bottle. Then there was the regular important one, which ranged up to \$25 or so. And then there was the iconic wine. That was like from \$85 to \$185. They would really go out of their way to produce something really special. Well, this outfit was really making some fantastic wines. There's more and more of that coming now because they have the proper growing conditions and they can grow the right grapes. Once they found out what the public was looking for—Just like we discovered the importance of certain French oak barrels.

Geraci: That story is very familiar world-wide in the wine industry. You have wonderful geographic locations for growing grapes, and at first, they just produce grapes. It's used as the juice, it's used as bulk. Then all of a sudden, somebody there, you give them a decade or two decades, they start realizing the real money's in making wine, not in growing grapes.

17-00:27:57

David: Well, you know where they've really run into a serious problem is in France, in the South of France, where there're thousands and thousands of acres of grapes producing wine that just cannot be made into great wine. It just gets distilled. Well, it's gotten to the point where the French government doesn't want to distill it anymore because it's too costly. The amount that they've got to pay to support these farmers just doesn't make sense, because ordinary table wine—That stuff used to work as the ordinary commodity wine, back in the days when wine was cheaper than water, and it was drunk in lieu of water, in many instances. Well, the international growth of interest in wine has changed all that. You can't afford to grow wine and support growing it just because it grows there, because halfway around the world, somebody is producing wine at the same price, that's really a hell of a lot better.

Geraci: I don't think most people realize some of the bulk regions tradition. Sicily was one of the biggest bulk wine producers for all the Italian wine industry for years. Now they've finally learned, we've got some good grapes, let's make some of our own—There again, it's talking about middling, the premium, or up into the super-premium-type wines.

17-00:29:26

David: Well, right here in California—we don't even have to go overseas—the great Central Valley, which still produces amazing volume of things like Thompson seedless, for table grapes, and lots of raisins—Thompson and Black Monukka are still pretty common for raisins. We used to joke about how Ernest Gallo introduced French Colombard to the San Joaquin Valley. We used to call it Gallo's Chardonnay, because it was a grape that had a little more flavor and a little more acid than Thompson, had a little more character. And Kerrigan, as the farmers called Carignan, was and still remains, one of the most common red grapes. But areas like Lodi, for instance, have gotten *really*, really serious and heavily, heavily promote Zinfandel and other grapes that just happen to do well in that area.

Geraci: Well, even people like Mondavi and his Woodbridge moved out to that Lodi area. That's helped really establish that this is a serious grape-growing region.

17-00:30:48

David: Right. But specifically recognizing there are grapes that can be made into something special. Gosh, I remember going up to Amador County when I was a college student. We discovered people growing wine. There was a place called D'Agostini Winery, D-apostrophe-A-G-O-S-T-IN-I. They made three wines: a dry white muscat that they called Malvasia Bianca; a basic red wine

that they called Burgundy; and a 100 percent Zinfandel, aged a minimum of three years in these great big redwood tanks, that they called reserve burgundy. Wow, the reserve Burgundy was really one hell of a nice wine. I remember when I was running the Potluck Restaurant, I asked if they would bottle the reserve Burgundy for me in fifths with a cork, because they were normally selling it in screw cap. Historically, it was the Italian families up in the Mother Lode that were the supporters of this winery. They would buy it in gallon jugs and they'd bring back the empty gallon jugs whenever they wanted more. The guy said, "Yeah," he says, "We still have a cork press out there." He says, "If you'll take twenty-five cases at a time, I can do that." Well, he was making it for me for \$9 a case. That's seventy-five cents a bottle. When I would order twenty-five cases, I'd get the word out to my friends that this was coming—we used it as our house wine at the Potluck—and I would sell it for \$12 a case, if it was ordered in advance. You had to pick it up on the day that it arrived, because for \$3 a case profit that I was making, I wasn't going to warehouse it; I didn't have room to warehouse it. You had to come and get it that very day. So a bunch of it would be sold off and the rest we would pour as house wine. It was kind of nice when you ordered the house wine and the waiter came out with a bottle and pulled the cork for you, as opposed to prior to that, we used to just get, literally, gallon wine and decant it into empty bottles. So yeah, there's a lot of that being done in California. Then when you get down into the really hotter climate areas of the valley, down towards Fresno and Madera, you have people like Quady Winery making port and sherry, and unusual things like an Orange Muscat that he calls Essensia and a Black Muscat that he calls Elysium.

Geraci: I love the orange muscat.

17-00:33:51

David: Oh, isn't that wonderful? The other thing is that historically, we had always spoken of the center of the state being a hot-climate area. It wasn't until really the last twenty-five—well, thirty years, I guess now, that we finally had to come to grips with the fact that all the way down the length of this state, there are these little river valleys that open out into the ocean. The cooling breezes from the ocean cool off that little river valley, so that you're not restricted to hot climate growing areas. The Central Coast is producing fantastic wines, Chardonnay and Cabernet and Syrah.

Geraci: Well, Santa Barbara, with its transverse mountain range, that just bleeds through Santa Ynez, into Santa Maria.

17-00:34:45

David: Pinot noir from down there, the Santa Rita Hills—Or Santa Rita Hills is up by San Jose, but the Santa Barbara Hills area, there's just some absolutely marvelous stuff. So it's a matter of learning that these little isolate areas each have their own potential of something special.

Geraci: Good. Anything more on wine, before we shift to our next topic?

17-00:35:14

David: It's too bad we can't be drinking wine.

Geraci: It would make the conversation much more civilized, wouldn't it?

17-00:35:19

David: Right.

Geraci: The next topic I'd like to kind of shift to is that we found some notebooks of yours, where you've done a lot of private entertaining, here in your home, and cooked some *amazing* meals. And you've kept all these recipes and you've got them all in these binders.

17-00:35:38

David: Well, these are the menus, rather than recipes. Gee whiz. The very first one in here is May 5, 1969. So '69, that's what, forty-two years ago. The guests were Barbara Siebenman and Bob Young. I think Barbara was an editor at *Sunset* magazine; is that right? Haralyn and Bob Thompson. Bob Thompson wrote a wine column for the *Examiner* for many years, is one of the co-authors of that extraordinary *The California Wine Book*, published by the UC Press. He and Doris Muscatine edited that together. Then Shirley Sarvis, a great cookbook writer. All dear friends. I'll bet I haven't cracked this binder in the last twenty-five years, until today.

Geraci: This should bring back some good memories.

17-00:36:49

David: Before dinner, we had Laurent-Perrier special cuvée and a half bottle, a tenth, of Krug Johannisberg 1967, which was bottled in August of '68. So that meant that it was, what, eight months old before it was bottled. I served vichyssoise with chopped shallot tops, then poached sole, similar to a sole Normandy. It was stuffed with a prawn mousse, garnished with tiny mussels, oysters, crab legs, and butter-fried little croutons shaped like an N. Sadri rice; that's a Persian rice that my mother was very fond of. You don't see it anymore on the market. Aromatic, like a basmati. Peas and mushrooms were the veggie. The wine with that was a '64 Krug Chardonnay—so now, that's a Chardonnay that's already five years old—and a '64 Inglenook Chardonnay. Then there was an asparagus vinaigrette after the main course. A lappi cheese, L-A-P-P-I. I think that was a Norwegian or a Danish cheese. I served with that, a Heitz Cabernet, which he called Meritage on the label. It was a blend of 80 percent '54, 10 percent '56, and 10 percent '58. Joe Heitz was just getting started at the winery. I think this year is his fiftieth anniversary, so that would suggest he got started in '61. I remember this wine, because several of the wineries, the established wineries in the Napa Valley, were helping him out, getting things going; and Christian Brothers sold him a small amount of the 1954 Cabernet. So this was 80 percent Cabernet from Christian brothers, and

then he put in 10 percent '56 and 10 percent '58, to sort of freshen it up a little bit. It was a really very, very neat wine. For dessert I had a crepe, stuffed with a Grand Marnier soufflé and strawberries, and I softened some vanilla ice cream on the side. This is kind of primitive, simple stuff. Then for after dinner, drinks were offered. A choice of Izarra—You know that Izarra liqueur? It's yellow colored, sort of like a yellow chartreuse. Very, very intriguing. And there was green Chartreuse, Bisquit Cognac, Hennessy Cognac, Tuaca. Son of a gun!

Geraci: Now, that was 1969, correct?

17-00:40:04

David: Right. Then in November of '69, we had our good friends Bob and Dorothy Walker, Dave and Dorothy Bynum. Now, Dave was a son of Lindsey Bynum, who wrote a great book California wine, and was also the founder of the wine judging at the California state fair. Then Dave Bynum went on to build his own winery, as well. Norm and Lorna Branglan. Gosh, Norm was just such a wonderful figure in Berkeley, and he was the manager of one of the big downtown savings and loan organizations. His wife Lorna was a psychiatrist or a psychologist. Boy, we ate rich food in those days. [Geraci laughs] Before dinner, we started, again, with a couple of bottles of that Laurent-Perrier special cuvée. That was my find of the month, I guess. Croissants with sweet butter; baked oysters with a mussel cream sauce. We used to go out and harvest our own mussels in those days, out at Pillar Point, in Half Moon Bay. We served a 1967 Meursault. There was a romaine, spinach and basil salad; then a roast fillet mignon with a tarragon brown sauce; mushrooms stuffed with chestnut purée; and cut string beans with sour cream and dill. We served two red Bordeaux, a '59 Château Meyney and a '61 Talbot. Then a couple of cheeses. With the cheese, we served a 1959 Grand Echezeaux. It says, "fine, rich, and sweet." That should've been a hell of a nice way to end the meal. Then a Cognac cream with macadamia nuts and whipped cream on top, and various candied flowers for the garnish. *Wow!* Man, talk about memories!

Geraci: The thing I'd like to bring up at this point is that we're talking 1969. You're at the very beginning of this explosion of American interest in fine food and wine.

17-00:42:28

David: Yeah, we were. Those were the days. Well, here's Bill and Grace Fretter; again, a university connection. Bill Fretter was a physicist at CAL and rose to be vice president, under—Oh, boy. It was before Charlie Hitch. I'm not sure who the president was at that time. Bob and Dottie Adamson. Bob was a psychiatrist in Berkeley and one of the founders of the Berkeley Wine and Food Society. Actually, the Fretters were in the Wine and Food Society. And then Joe and Alice Heitz. We started with a Mosel, a 1966, so a three-year-old Mosel, and a three year-old Keidricher Sandgrub, which is a Rhine, if I remember correctly. Croissants and sweet butter on the table. Here's baked

oysters with that mussel cream sauce again. This is beginning to sound repetitive. But with crowd, I had a little more fun with the wine. We had a 1957 Meursault and a 1966 Corton-Charlemagne. So two really rich, intriguing white Burgundies. For the meat, we had a magnum of 1954 Grand-Puy-Ducasse. So that was already sixteen years old. Again, a Burgundy with the cheese. Burgundy was the Pommard grand Clos des Epenots, 1955. So again, a fourteen-year-old. We had a 1948 Château Climens, in a half bottle, for dessert—great, great, wonderful sauterne—and a half bottle of 1937 Château Rayne Vigneau. My note was that the Climes was great and Rayne Vigneau was getting old. [they laugh]

Geraci: It had gone over the top.

17-00:44:51

David:

Well, I didn't say that; I did say it was getting old. 1971, here's Alex Bepaloff. He wrote some wine books, but he was a wine writer for *New York Magazine*. Wait a minute. August of '71. Wow. This is a historic date because—Yeah. We met him at an event, at a dinner somewhere, and just fell in love with this guy and just immediately had to find a time that we could see him again. The only time—he was out here visiting from New York—that he had available was a lunchtime. So we did a lunch on this Friday, and Shirley Sarvis, the wine writer, was here again; Bob and Harolyn Thompson; Doris and Dave Bynum—all the wine nuts. Trying to make this a simple meal, I took some chicken breast and pulled out the fillet and then cut the remainder of the breast into three or four long strips, so they were essentially the same size as the fillet. My plan was to sauté it in butter, deglaze it with a little white wine, and finish it with a splash of cream. Well, I opened the refrigerator and there was a bottle of a sweet Sauterne in the refrigerator, and open, a partial bottle of Sauterne. I picked it up and I remember thinking about it. I thought, gee, why not? I'll bet you a little bit of sugar would be interesting in this thing. I'll tell you, it was such a smash success that when I opened the restaurant, five, six months later, I had on the menu, Breast of Chicken Alexis Bepaloff. That and my mother's Assyrian rack of lamb are the only items that remained on the menu from the day we opened until the day we closed.

Geraci: Amazing.

17-00:47:23

David:

Pure serendipity that created it. What's *really* hilarious is that that very night, we went to dinner at the home of Frances and Walt Peterson. Walt was a chemist; I believe he worked for Shell Oil in Emeryville. A really serious wine nut and home winemaker. Again, one of the founding members of the Berkeley Wine and Food Society, *and* the father of Joel Peterson, who's the guy that really put Zinfandel on the map, with the wine that he makes at—Well, now I'm going to block the name of his winery. He got so successful he sold it out for big money, and now he's there as a consultant. Ravenswood.

Geraci: Oh, okay.

17-00:48:21

David:

And Bill and Ruthanne Dickerson, and Alex Bespaloff, who had just been to our house for lunch, and here he is for dinner. We're a little shocked at seeing each other. He sent us a thank-you note afterwards, for the lunch, and I'll never forget, he said on his note, "I don't know what you did between lunch and dinner, but I stopped by at a roadside prayer stand and prayed." [they laugh] The guy was such a character. Gee whiz. Those were the days, my friends. Oh, we did, at Narsai's Restaurant—Of course, it's a beautifully printed menu, but I can't remember how this was organized or around what event. It was November 4, 1976. A Madeira party. We started with a 1950 Sercial that was bottled in '75, just for walking around. Then we sat down to terrapin, with a 1940 Sercial bottled in '75; so that was a thirty-five-year-old. The main course was roast squab with a Madeira sauce, and with that we served a 1959 Beaune from the Hospices de Beaune. So that's already, what, a sixteen year-old Hospice de Beaune. There was a salad and then a Madeira cake with a 1935 Bual, bottled in '69. I have a one-word description: stinky. Then new walnuts. These are walnuts that were so fresh you could actually peel the skin off. A 1920 Bual that was bottled in '74; a 1914 Bual bottled in '73; an '06 Malmsey bottled in '73; an '05 Sercial bottled in '73; and an 1870 Sercial.

Geraci: Oh, my goodness!

17-00:51:20

David:

All of the vintage Madiera was bottled and shipped by the firm of VVA, Abudarham. Now, if Veni were here, she could probably say, oh, don't you remember? That's the time that you and Barney did this with somebody and so forth. Here's a birthday party I did in January of '77, for a good friend, Stan Schwartz. Oh, no, I didn't do it; this was at Stan's house. I was a guest.

Geraci: But I like the way that you kept these—It's almost like a journal. You kept this running log, with your own personal notes.

17-00:52:26

David:

Here's in 1978, a few years down the line, and Alex Bespaloff was here. We started with a duck liver pâté. That duck liver pâté with the port aspic was, far and away, the favorite pâté in all the years—We still make it these days, for special events. It's something so simple and easy to make, and just so delicious. We served mussels on the shell, with a bourgiugnonne butter. Sort of like you might do with snails. Scallops Bernard, veal Robert. My chef at that time was Robert Boyle, so—I don't even remember what we did with that. A squab; a cheese course with St. Andre and kasseri and Supreme wa a double-cream, the first double-cream brie, I think, that came on the market. I covered it with toasted pine nuts. There was a pear and quince tart and a praline tart. And some interesting wines. '77 Phelps Gewürztraminer before dinner; '73 Schramsberg Blanc de Noirs when we sat down; and then three

Chardonnays from '74: a Sterling, a Mayacamas and a Spring Mountain. Mind you, this was in '78, so they were four-year-old Chardonnays.

Geraci: So there seems to be a California theme going on in this one.

17-00:54:14

David: Oh, yeah. Yeah, for sure. These were all California wines.

Geraci: What's interesting, if this is '78, this is two years after the great Paris tasting. Especially with the Chardonnays, California Chardonnay is starting to come into its own.

17-00:54:24

David: Right. Moscato Amabile, we ended up with, a Louis Martini Moscato Amabile; surely, you've had that.

Geraci: Yes.

17-00:54:31

David: The amiable Muscat, Barney Rhodes used to call it.

Geraci: [laughs] And it is amiable.

17-00:54:36

David: Oh, gosh.

Geraci: I think it's the bouquet, the fragrance, that is just so floral and beautiful.

17-00:54:44

David: Floral and just enough sweetness there to tickle your fancy and enough acidity to tingle. Well, that's the oldest ones, dating back to 1969 to '79. Then this is the current—Well, starting since '08. These days, we actually print up a menu.

Geraci: Now, do you do that on your own printer?

17-00:55:22

David: Yeah, but not in the Heidelberg; these are just done on a computer.

Geraci: Oh, okay.

17-00:55:31

David: It would take too much time to do that and to do the dinner. This was my worksheet. So the date for this is '08. We started with Beau Soleil oysters with a kaffir vinaigrette; Wellfleet littleneck clams bourguignon; and that duck liver pâté I was talking about, with our strass rye bread; and a chicken bastilla, which is unlike me. Why I did that, I'm not sure.

Geraci: What's a chicken bastilla?

17-00:56:15

David:

Bastilla is that Moroccan dish that's traditionally made with pigeon, but they also do it with chicken. It's puff dough and walnuts and a little sprinkling of powdered sugar on top. So there's a hint of sweetness, but it's a savory dish. With that, we had the '98 Iron Horse Blanc de Blancs and the '96 Iron Horse Blanc de Blancs, late disgorged. Then we sat down to caviar with corn blini—this is our homemade caviar—and a 1970 Ayala Blanc de Blancs. Then a California black cod with sauce Dugléré, served over little baby tatsoi leaves. A dry corn bread—it's a bread that I discovered in the Barossa Valley, that's become one of our favorite breads—and an '05 Stony Hill Chardonnay. Then a lamb loin two ways, with Romano beans and a rice and rye pilaf. The pilaf at the restaurant was always two grains—rice and rye, rice and whole wheat berries, rice and wild rice, rice and brown rice, rice and barley. It just gave it a little more interesting texture and color and flavor. Then I had a black rice and black potato bread. We served two Mayacamas Cabernets, an '80 and a '79. Once again, this is in '08, so those wines were, what, twenty-eight, twenty-nine years old. And a last-of-summer berry pudding, with a 1955 Château Suduiraut. Then we had some dried fuyu, from our own tree, and some membrillo that I made out of the quince growing in the backyard, and a 1934 Fonseca port. Oh, I was talking earlier about the Hennessy Grande Champagne Cognac, and I couldn't remember what year it was; here it is. It's a 1972 and was bottled in '94. So remember, we bought that back in '77, but it sat in that bond until '94, before we finally bottled it.

Geraci:

Boy, that must've given it some *real character*.

17-00:58:33

David:

Oh, it's just fascinating, those things. So these days, as I say, we print up little menus. We try to do the dinners always for twelve people, because twelve fit comfortably at that table. If we make a mistake or we can't figure out exactly how to divide the table up, we can squeeze in two more; so now we frequently will have fourteen. Now, here's a twelfth night dinner. We've been doing that occasionally, in recent years. This was on January 10 of '09. We started with a magnum of the Roederer Estate that was disgorged in October in '04. So that would be nominally, a 2000. So they would be essentially nine years old. Duck liver pâté on a gluten-free bread, because we had a guest coming who was gluten intolerant. I made a black rice and corn bread; a lot of crudité, with a fennel pollen salt; Cape Cod Barnstable oysters and beausoleil oysters. Then we sat down to a Roederer Estate—Oh, no, that's the same wine. Well, why would I continue with the same wine? That doesn't make sense.

Geraci:

[laughs] My God!

17-01:00:03

David:

Gee whiz. Caviar on corn blini.

Geraci:

We're just finishing this tape. So let's stop.

Begin Audiofile 18 10-18-2011.mp3

Geraci: Today's date, Tuesday, October 18, 2011. Seated with me is Narsai David. This is interview number nine, tape number eighteen. When we left off, we were looking at the home menu books.

18-00:00:17

David: Yeah, here's one more I pulled out, and then we'll go to something else. But you'll get a kick out of this one, because there's a little group that we call Le Club 34. All friends who were born in '34.

Geraci: Oh, how interesting.

18-00:00:31

David: Or at least one member of the couple has to have been born in '34.

Geraci: Born in '34. Interesting.

18-00:00:35

David: Celebrating the tenth meeting of Le Club 34, December 27, 2009. We started with some little tiny arancini and a duck breast and roast chestnuts and Wellfleet oysters. With those, there was a 1975 Veuve Clicquot Champagne and a 1949 Lanson Extra, in a magnum. It *really* was extra. I remember it clearly. But in my notes here, I even wrote, "splendid," asterisk, "wow."

Geraci: You were impressed.

18-00:01:18

David: Yeah. We sat down with caviars with blini and crème fraîche, and 1921 Pol Roger Extra Cuvée Reserve. I have to side step one second here to tell you about that. It not only was the best wine of the evening, it just blew everybody's socks off. My son Danny, who dabbles a little bit in marketing old wine, saw this menu afterwards and said, "Gee, do you have any more of that '21?" I said, "Yeah, there's a little down there, why?" He said, "Well, before you drink it all, let me see if I can find out something about its value for you." Well, he found out that it was selling for \$3- and \$4,000 a bottle at auction. I said, "Holy smokes. I can't afford to drink champagne that's worth \$4,000 a bottle." Well, he took three bottles and sold it for \$14,000. I was just dumbfounded. Then the next course was lobster Kensington, as a throwback to my restaurant days, where the raw lobster meat was pulled out of the shell, cut into chunks, along with chunks of veal sweetbreads, and sautéed with a rich cream sauce and white wine. We served that with a potato amaranth bread and two—no, three old Chardonnays: a '75 Trefethen in a magnum, a '75 Stony Hill, and a '73 Chateau Montelena. Now, remember, '73 Montelena is the one that won that great Paris judging. I made some comments on the wines. On the '75 Trefethen in the magnum, I put, "fresh and light, but tannic;" the Stony Hill '75, "wow!" exclamation mark; and the '73 Montelena, "amazing balance." For the meat, we had a roast lamb loin, with

salsify and parsnips in brown butter for one vegetable, spinach en branche for another; and sautéed chanterelle; and then some of that dry corn bread that I like. With the meat, we had the '34 Château Lafite, a '34 Château Montrose, a '75 Mayacamas Cabernet, a '75 Ridge Montebello cabernet, and—I guess we just had to do it—'73 Stags' Leap, which again, is the one that beat the French in that great judging in '76. So we had both the '73 Montelena Chardonnay and the '73 Stags' Leap Cabernet at that dinner. Then for cheese, we had a stilton, a California parmesan, some celery and dried fruit, and I made a burgundy walnut bread. We served a 1980 Beaulieu Private Reserve Cabernet; a 1934 Clos des Lambrays, a burgundy; and an 1894 Château Giscours. “Wow. Soft and thin, but still fruity. But thin and astringent on the finish.” We finished with a princess cake and a 1934 Château Guiraud sauterne and a 1975 Château Doisy Daene, in half bottles. Then there were some little sweets to nibble on after dinner, along with a bottle of 1934 Fonseca port.

Geraci: That is an amazing wine list for a dinner.

18-00:05:27

David: That was a pretty nice collection. That was a pretty nice collection. Now, a month later, we did a Robbie Burns dinner, January of 2010. We do that every once in a while. In fact, I have here a copy of the *Address to a Haggis*, written by Burns in 1786. One of the guests was kind enough to stand up and read it. And a real haggis, made in a sheep's paunch. But I said that was going to be it for the menus; you've got other things, I'm sure.

Geraci: Well, when we were off camera, you were talking about your mom and something that she was cooking up for a holiday.

18-00:06:20

David: Well, the Assyrian New Year's Day breakfast is essentially a tripe soup. Well, no, it's not like menudo. Menudo has a lot different things going on. Here, you just have the concentrated flavors of meat. The name for it in Assyrian is Reesh Ekli, which is a contraction of risha, meaning head, and ékli, meaning feet. So heads and feet. It's poor man's food.

Geraci: It's whole-animal cooking.

18-00:06:56

David: The whole-animal cooking. The landowner gets the muscle meat and the rest of it you get what's left. My mother always felt uncomfortable about using the head, though, so she used beef tripe, a veal shank, and pigs feet. So it got her enough of that gelatinous, soft-textured stuff, like you get off the pigs feet. Meat from the veal shank. Then of course, tripe has its own special character. She'd put this in a pot, cover it with water, and it literally simmered all night long. No seasoning, not even salt. Then in the morning, she would skim off the surface fat, ladle it into bowls, and at the table, she would pass crushed raw garlic that had a fair amount of salt she used to help crush the garlic. So that was the seasoning you put on it, the salt and the garlic. Although we had

no prohibition against alcohol, they rarely drank alcohol in the house. When one of my mother's brothers would come to visit, he would frequently bring beer, wine, brandy, whisky, whatever; and when he'd come on his next visit, what they hadn't consumed was still sitting on the shelf. It was something that you did for special occasions. Well, suddenly Mom would appear at the table with a bottle of brandy, and go around and pour a glass for each of the adults. She would say, in Assyrian, "Here, drink this because it melts the fat." Well, of course, this is just folk medicine, right? But we do know that alcohol helps control fat, cholesterol, et cetera. I noticed that the Reesh Ekli left over in the refrigerator would just set up, solidify, hard as a gel could be. In high school days, I worked as a helper in a butcher shop. I'd go late in the afternoon and slice lunchmeats and cheeses, and then I would wash up the meat slicer and the grinder and the saw and such. But it reminded me of the head cheese that we had in the store. I thought, this sure tastes a lot better than that head cheese. So I took some, melted it, totally boned it out, got rid of all the bones, and poured it into an empty one-quart milk carton. The next day, of course, it had gelled up solid. I cut the carton open and I'll tell you, with a couple of slices of good bread and a slather of mayonnaise and mustard, it was the most delicious head cheese sandwich you've ever had in your life. It was just real stuff. The head cheese you buy in a store these days, it's really little pieces of meat with some gelatin base to bind it together into a loaf. It was pretty neat stuff.

Geraci: It was real head cheese.

18-00:10:15

David: It was the real stuff.

Geraci: Well, I'm going to turn this off for just a second, and then when we restart, we're going to talk about about the art, and I want you to talk about each of those things, and then we can finish this tape off with that. [audiofile stops & restarts] Okay, we're restarting. First of all, let's talk about the sculpture that you just got here.

18-00:10:39

David: Okay. The Assyrian Aid Society, of which I've been the president for some seventeen or eighteen years, just celebrated its twentieth anniversary, and the board had presented me with this little sculpture. It's an artist's freeform rendition of—There was a photograph we got several years ago from Iraq, in one of the school graduation celebrations, where this young boy had the Assyrian flag wrapped around him. So the sculptor, Fred Parhad, who's the same one that's done all of this other bronze work, an Assyrian guy, did this sculpture and he has this—It's no longer a child figure, it's an adult figure, but wrapped in the Assyrian flag. Then an inscription at the base that says, "For his passionate commitment to Assyrians, dedicated leadership and inspiring humanitarianism, the Assyrian Aid Society of America expresses its

appreciation to Narsai Michael David, president, Assyrian Aid Society of America, 1994 to 2011.”

Geraci: That’s a very nice commemorative—

18-00:11:59

David: I’ve got to tell you, it was a very touching thing. It was the twentieth anniversary dinner. It was down in the Central Valley, in Turlock. These are done as fundraising things, but they also honored me because I had just stepped down as president. They made me chairman of the board.

Geraci: Also it’s in your old home stomping grounds.

18-00:12:24

David: It’s in my old stomping grounds. But then even perhaps—maybe this sounds kind of funny, but—I have to admit that this, frankly, astounded me even more. You see these flags that have flown over the US Capitol, that are done when somebody dies or after a death or something. Anna Eshoo, the Assyrian congresswoman from the peninsula, was unable to be at the event, but she sent a videotape, congratulating me and thanking me for my work, and then sent along this flag and the certificate.

Geraci: An actual flag that’s flown over the capitol.

18-00:13:15

David: Actual flag that’s flown over the capitol. It’s funny, there’s part of me that is really excited and proud to show you these things and talk about them; but there’s also part of me that says, holy smokes. This is not the end of the line, folks.

Geraci: [laughs] I haven’t died yet.

18-00:13:39

David: I’ve programmed a minimum of nine-zero to come after my name, in terms of the number of years that [I] live. So there’s fifteen more you’re going to have to suffer with me. But it just was really amazing. So that was January 8. Then October 13 was the twentieth anniversary of the Berkeley Community Fund. The Community Fund has been giving the Benjamin Ide Wheeler Medal, on an annual basis, for the last oh, I don’t know, fifteen years or so. It’s a medal that was created by the service council of Berkeley. This was a council made up of representatives from all of the service clubs in Berkeley, starting in 1929. They named it after Benjamin Wheeler, one of the early presidents, and apparently, one of the great presidents, of the university.

Geraci: Namesake for Wheeler Hall.

18-00:14:55

David: And for Wheeler Hall, of course. When the service council retired, they turned the award over to us and we made it into an annual affair, and they gave it to

me for this year. So there's Benjamin Ide Wheeler, looking at the camera. The engraving on the back says, "Bestowed for distinguished service, upon Narsai Michael David, by the Berkeley Community Fund, 2011." As exciting and memorable as the Assyrian thing was, I don't want to be put in a position of saying which one was more important or which one meant more. In their own way, they each are something so special. The Assyrian thing, it was sort of like a homecoming. I went back to my hometown of Turlock. 250 or 280 people showed up, mostly Assyrians, and a lot of whom I knew, and of course, some relatives. Then to come up here and have this presentation, surrounded by 250 Berkeleyans, close friends, my peers in the community. So as I say, they're both very, very special feelings, very special occasions.

Geraci: But they don't mark the end.

18-00:16:40

David: Oh, God, no. I've got too much more I have to do.

Geraci: [laughs] Have to keep that in mind.

18-00:16:46

David: Don't even think about it.

Geraci: A couple other things that we took still pictures of are some of the items that were in the restaurant itself. I know you had your maître d' podium.

18-00:17:02

David: The maître d' stand was carved out of walnut, solid walnut, by Miles Karpilow. M-I-L-E-S, K-A-R-P-I-L-O-W. Sadly, he died just a couple years ago. This table that you're sitting at was carved by him, as well. As you see, it's this wonderful carved thing, smooth, supple lines. As I said, on those awful, terrible, very slow nights, early in our history, I would stand out there and gently massage the sides of it, [they laugh] to keep me company, waiting for the next customer to come in the door.

Geraci: So the goal was not to spend too much time at that post.

18-00:18:02

David: Right. Right.

Geraci: Then you also had the other piece that was on the wall there.

18-00:18:11

David: There was the tasting bar from the market, which was a table carved in walnut. There was a large center panel and two panels on each side. So the whole thing was about ten feet long. No, it was twelve feet long. It wouldn't fit here, so we removed two of the panels that were each two feet long, and that brought it down to about eight feet long, and Miles carved a new top for it. The two panels that we removed, we've now decided that we're going to redo that entire wall, and those two panels will be mounted in the wall, up

high, as doors that open, with probably unusual liqueurs behind them. Then we'll have all our wine glasses on that wall, and other such things.

Geraci: Which will be great for entertaining, with the table right there.

18-00:19:16

David: That'll just be built right into it.

Geraci: Right. Then also we looked at some of the pieces of art in your house here, that were actually in the restaurant or the market. We have the two on the wall right here. You said this was a Mexican artist?

18-00:19:33

David: These are paintings by a Mexican artist named Rafael Cauduro, R-A-F-A-E-L, C-A-U-D-U-R-O. He started making a living as a graphic artist, but you can see that—and this is very early in this fine art period—he was already far beyond just being a graphic artist. He has gone on to quite some fame and recognition in Mexico, as well as the rest of the world.

Geraci: But then too, he's in one and his wife is in the other.

18-00:20:07

David: Right, it's a self-portrait of himself, and then his wife posed for the other one.

Geraci: I find it very interesting that in the self-portrait of himself, he has himself almost framed.

18-00:20:19

David: It is, like a mirror, exactly.

Geraci: I wonder what his thought was when he was putting that together.

18-00:20:26

David: The more you study those, the more intriguing they get.

Geraci: And his wife has this far-off, distant stare into—

18-00:20:33

David: Yeah, they've been in our life for, I don't know how long it is, thirty or thirty-five years now. Every time I look at it, I see something different. Sometimes some of the same things come back, but there's always something different to see.

Geraci: Then you also had some of the pieces of art that we looked at as we were walking up your stairwell here.

18-00:20:50

David: Those are engravings done by Louis Icart, L-O-U-I-S, I-C-A-R-T. He's a French Art Nouveau artist. I'm sorry, a French Art Deco artist. Those were done pretty much in the twenties and thirties. They are all lithographs. No, I'm

sorry. Those are engravings. The Icarts are engravings. The lithographs are the four pieces that are on the wall and you took pictures of those, as well. The tall upright, a woman in four poses, titled *Four Times of Day*, done by Alphonse Mucha. A-L-P-H-O-N-S-E, M as in Michael-U-C-H-A, a French Art Nouveau lithographer. Those are lithographs. They're not as famous as his *Four Seasons*; that's his most famous, perhaps. But to be honest with you, I've always preferred this one. There's a more gentle, more subtle, more delicate quality to it.

Geraci: The *Four Seasons* represents time in a larger spectrum; this is the four times in a day. It's just shortening that time period up a little bit. Then we also took a couple pictures of both the busts of you and Veni.

18-00:22:26

David: Ah. Now, those are done by the same artist that did this, Fred Parhad. He's becoming mighty damn good at doing portraits. He has spent much of his life doing Assyrian art. You've seen, out in the print shop and in the studio, various busts that he's done of Assyrian kings and warriors and princes and queens. Here in the entryway, you also took photographs of those two bronze maquettes for larger-than-life statues; the first, of Ashurbanipal, which was installed at the San Francisco main library. In the finished piece, Ashurbanipal stands there holding a lion cub under his right arm; and in his left hand, he's holding a clay tablet, with a cuneiform inscription in it, describing this as a gift from the Assyrian people to the City of San Francisco. In the little maquette you see here, which is the first rendering the artist did, instead of the clay tablet, he's holding a lotus blossom, which in itself, was a symbol of his power as king. But we really wanted to show off the fact that Ashurbanipal had the world's first library. Also, to be honest with you, when people first looked at this, they just thought it looked kind of wimpy, kind of like a wilted flower.

Geraci: [laughs] He's got a little wilted flower in his hand.

18-00:24:11

David: So it got changed into the tablet. I'm really pleased, because I was able to actually do the incision into the clay, of all of those cuneiform characters. No, I cannot read cuneiform, I cannot write cuneiform. But an Assyriologist wrote it all out for me and I sort of learned how to—Carved is hardly the word. I sharpened a piece of plaster into a wedge shape and I learned that you sort of roll it into the clay. How hard you press it and how deep you press it determines the weight of the stroke. In fact, you can get a picture of that, too because in the back porch here, I have a casting of the actual bronze tablet from the full-size statue that's in San Francisco.

Geraci: Oh, we'll need to get a photo of that.

18-00:25:15

David:

So it was at the side entrance of the main library. Then when they built the new library across the street, the old library became the Asian Art Museum. So he now stands there with his back to the Asian Art Museum, looking over at the new library. The other piece in the entryway here is of Shamiram, S-H-A-M-I-R-A-M, an Assyrian queen. In Assyrian, we call her Shamiram; the Greek named her Semiramis, and that's the name that's perhaps more commonly associated with her. S-E-M as in Michael-I-R-A-M-I-S. Semiramis. I better do that again. S as in Sam-E-M as in Michael-I-R-A-M as in Michael-I-S as in Sam, Semiramis. That, again, is a maquette. She's standing there with a lioness curled at her feet. She's understood to be the first queen to rule an empire in her own right, as opposed to just being married to the king. We're hoping that that'll be mounted in a public space soon.

Geraci:

Oh, great.

18-00:26:47

David:

What else did we look at? Out in the backyard, we saw the sculpture of the reclining nude that had been over the bar in the restaurant. It's some eighteen or twenty feet long, made by Martin Metal, spelled like the word metal, M-E-T-A-L, an artist here in Berkeley. It was made of the three-quarter-inch steel rods that held together this massive redwood tank, which we recycled into wood that we used in building the restaurant. It was a 200,000-gallon tank, up in the Oakland Hills, called the Beacon Hill Reservoir. We used—well, the front door of the house here is made out of redwood from those staves; and the entrance to the cottage, the same; and the closet doors here are made out of some of that amazing virgin-forest redwood that's in a category by itself. You'll never see wood like that again. This was about to be torn down, to be replaced by a two-million-gallon underground concrete vault, and we were fortunate enough to be able to buy it and recycle it.

Geraci:

And recycle it well.

18-00:28:09

David:

Yeah. Well, we have wonderful, wonderful memories with that. What other art did we see?

Geraci:

Well, one other thing we did take a picture of out there, too was the very special plant you had from Mexico, that we were talking about the leaves.

18-00:28:21

David:

Oh. The *hoja sante*, H-O-J-A, S as in Sam-A-N-T-E. It's this huge leaf, the size of a shovel, spade. Right now it's in blossom, and the blossom is this amazing little white pointed tip. It's maybe a quarter-inch in diameter and three inches long. It's a little spike that rises up at the back side of the leaf. Were I to do a dinner party this time of year, I would use one of those leaves, with that little blossom sticking up, on my seafood plate. Whatever seafood dish I was going to serve to start the meal would be served on this. This would

be a liner on the plate. It's just so beautiful. It has a very distinct fennel kind of flavor. In Mexico, it's used in much the same way the corn husk is used for tamales. You can wrap masa in it and cook it in it. But unlike the corn husk, this is edible and it's really tasty. It has that anise-fennel sort of flavor.

Geraci: It's a wonderful taste.

18-00:29:33

David: Great flavor. Warning. If you decide to plant it, it sends out those little root suckers, rhizomes, roots—I don't know what, even, they're called. But they started raising the bricks surrounding that little entry area.

Geraci: It's almost like a bamboo, in some ways, then.

18-00:29:49

David: It just goes like crazy. So we almost totally pulled it out, and then I decided if I cut it way back, into the little corner of that island and keep an eye on it—So if you ever want some, more than happy to give you a cutting.

Geraci: I don't need my yard taken over.

18-00:30:08

David: You're on your own to plant it in some pot or something, so it can't take over your hard.

Geraci: To contain this thing, right?

18-00:30:17

David: There're those two Chinese pieces of embroidery. I don't have any of the history of it. The dark brown one that's here in the dining room was described to me as a Mandarin's cloak. The one upstairs in the bedroom is also a cloak, and it has the classic fight of the phoenix and the dragon. Beyond that, I don't know any more of the detail.

Geraci: But they're wonderful pieces.

18-00:30:50

David: They're just magnificent, magnificent pieces.

Geraci: Yeah, magnificent. Then just with art within the house, you had the two pieces you said were by another Mexican artist, I believe, in the dining room.

18-00:30:59

David: Oh, Guillermo Mesa, G-U-I-L-L-E-R-M-O, and then last name Mesa; M as in Michael-E-S as in Sam-A. Marvelous artist. Oh, he can't still be alive; I don't know how old he would've been now. But he was sort of at the tail end of those—That great triumvirate. There was Siqueiros, Orozco and—I'm probably forgetting the most famous one. Siqueiros, Orozco and—Not Tamayo [actually, the third one is Rivera].

Geraci: See, I only know of Orozco.

18-00:31:50

David: You don't know Siqueiros? You must know Siqueiros.

Geraci: No, I don't. In Guadalajara, I've seen a lot of the original Orozcos.

18-00:31:56

David: Oh, yeah. Siqueiros did a lot of work here in San Francisco, too. Anyway, we love Mexico. We used to go to Mexico very, very frequently, but we've just gotten so frightened by—We even bought a time share in Puerto Vallarta, and we've owned it for, oh, seven or eight years, and we've only used it once. We're afraid. It's no longer just in those border states, where the drug dealings are going on; last year, I read that Acapulco had the highest murder rate of any city in Mexico. You think of that as a tourist town.

Geraci: It's thousands that have died, at this point. Thousands.

18-00:32:41

David: Just unbelievable. Anyway, I'm really anxious for things to loosen up, so we can go back and visit. The art in this room, other than that, that's not from the restaurant. But over the mantel here, that piece by Tom Holland is very important to us. His work is important to us. He's one of the three artists that did posters for us. In fact, that's a picture that you should get. In the kitchen, we have the original of the poster that he did, commemorating the fifth anniversary of our market. We did a series of four posters. Harold Paris, P-A-R-I-S, did the first one. He was going to do a suite of three posters, but sadly, he died after doing the first one. He taught in the art department at Berkeley. He and Peter Voulkos and Martin Metal were the founders of the Berkeley Art Foundry. Voulkos, of course, has become by far, the most famous of those three—his name is spelled V as in Victor-O-U-L-K-O-S as in Sam—and Martin Metal, the least well known. He's the one that did the sculpture of the nude in the backyard. But Harold did the first poster. We would print 1,000 copies. We would always print a hundred numbered copies on rag paper, that the artist and I would give personally to people; and the rest of them were available on a first come, first served basis. If people came to dinner on the night that we first released it, the artist was there and would sign them for people, which was really nice. Then Raymond Saunders, a local artist who teaches at California College of the Arts, did two posters; and then finally, Tom Holland did the last one. As I said, the original of his, you'll see.

Geraci: Yeah, right, in the kitchen.

18-00:35:04

David: In the kitchen. Actually, he did two different versions and asked me to choose which one I wanted. It was not an easy choice, but I chose one. Of course, I wanted to keep the original. I said, "Well, now, what about the second one? What's going to happen to that?" He said, "Oh, that's yours, too." I said, "Oh,

thank God, because I wouldn't want somebody else to have the original of the Narsai market poster that was never even reproduced." So Tom Holland's work is important to us. Oh, the cigar humidor. Those were the days we actually had cigars and actually smoked them. Yes, there were always some Cuban cigars in there. And no, we didn't buy them from Cuba; we bought them from a tobacconist in Switzerland named Tabac Rhein, R-H-E-I-N. I guess they must've been on the Rhine River. Tabac is spelled T-A-B as in Boy-A-C. They came in a box that just said Tabac Rhein, and cellophane, without any markings on them. But my favorite cigar was the Montecristo number two. I'll tell you, there's not another cigar in the world that's shaped like it, much less taste like it. But there's none that are even shaped like it. So Miles Karpilow, again, carved that humidor. It's lined with Spanish cedar inside, and the outside is walnut.

Geraci: Following that same, how he follows the natural curves in the grains of the wood.

18-00:36:56

David: I have upstairs one of the table lamps that we had at the restaurant.

Geraci: Oh, yeah.

18-00:37:05

David: Again, Miles did the base. I was insistent that he carve the original out of walnut, because though this was going to be cast in bronze—Obviously, the easiest thing to do would be to carve it in a soft wood like pine or—Hell, they use even softer woods than that. But I felt that the way his hand stroked that dense walnut would be very different than what would happen if he was working with balsa wood or pine or something, and so I insisted that he carve the original out of walnut. He did. We then cast that in bronze. Then the glassblower Randy Strong, R-A-N-D-Y, Strong—very, very famous now, here in Berkeley; when we built the restaurant, he wasn't quite so famous yet—he blew some little globes that fit on top of that bronze base, and then we burned a candle inside it. It made for a very distinctive table lamp. I enjoyed working with artists. I may have, in an earlier session, talked about how we got the artwork in there. I don't know, this may be a repeat.

Geraci: Right. We talked about getting it in there.

18-00:38:34

David: I didn't have much money, but I wanted some art. So we met there, as we were laying out the restaurant and building it. I thought it'd be nice to have a piece of sculpture by Martin at the bar. The idea of making something out of those steel rods from the tank. As we stood there cogitating, he and Miles Karpilow, the woodworker, were there. Martin himself said, "Well, we could put—" No, I don't know who it was. Somebody else said, "Well, how about a nude over the bar?" We all laughed and say, ha-ha; yeah, sure, wouldn't that be great to have a nude over the bar? A few minutes later, that had sort of

soaked in and I turned to him and said, “Hey, Martin, what about that? What’s the possibility of making a nude?” He said, “Yeah, sure. We can make a nude.” “But,” I said, “Something large enough to go across there?” He says, “Yeah, sure.” His wife posed for it and that became the sculpture over the bar, a nude over the bar. It just really happened. We were able to do it, so we were able to start with some original art. Miles carved the bar top, which is that solid piece of walnut, twenty-one feet long. We got two slices that came out of the same tree. The bar originally, as I had drawn it out, was going to be sixteen feet long. But when I found these two pieces of walnut, I figured, there’s no way I’m going to cut that piece of walnut. The bar is suddenly going to be five feet longer. So we’ll lose one table or two tables in that back banquet room, but we’re not going to cut this piece of wood shorter. Miles essentially carved and sculpted the edges, much as on this walnut table.

Geraci: Speaking of the bar and extending it and losing a table, today the hot thing to do is service at the bar.

18-00:40:34

David: Oh, boy, that’s become big news. As a matter of fact, more and more restaurants are making not only—For a while, they were starting to put in a communal table. Now the communal tables are at the height of a bar, with high stools, so that you not only can experience the communal table, but you can also experience sitting up high, like you’re at a bar.

Geraci: Bar service is hot.

18-00:41:01

David: And you’re not having to look at the bartender; you’re looking at your date, sitting across from you, or somebody else. When you’re at a communal table, more often than not, you don’t have a date and you’re going there to meet somebody else who’s looking to meet somebody else. Yeah, the mood in restaurants and bars has changed. And the noise. *Good God!* It is so noisy in the new restaurants, you can’t hear yourself think. And they thrive on it. My memory was, the important thing was to dampen down the noise so people could hear each other talk.

Geraci: Well, at least have a conversation.

18-00:41:42

David: Yeah!

Geraci: To be able to understand the person.

18-00:41:44

David: You can’t do that in today’s—

Geraci: There’s nothing worse than being at a dinner and no one’s talking. The communal aspect of dinner requires conversation.

18-00:41:54

David:

We had some recorded classical music, usually string trios and—Very simple background music. Early in the evening, when there was no one there, the music was high enough that you could hear it. But as people started coming in, I would keep turning down the volume, lower and lower, because people talk louder than the ambient sound, in order to be able to hear each other. If I left the music up, if I raised the sound of the music so everybody could hear it, then they'd have to be talking louder, and it escalates to the point that it sounds like a madhouse. Well, wow, restaurants these days, I think, have decided they don't even want acoustic tile on the ceiling, because they want the sound to bounce around. People want this alive, vibrant, jumping—It's too much for me.

Geraci:

Even a lot of restaurant reviews now will put the little bells or something—to let you know what noise levels are, how many decibels it's—

18-00:43:01

David:

More and more of the restaurants that are getting the high ratings have the real giant bells dinging.

Geraci:

Well, I think for today, that's just it.

18-00:43:14

David:

Have we covered it there for today? Okay.

Geraci:

Yeah, I think we're pretty good. Well, thank you very much.

Interview 10: August 14, 2012

[Begin Audio File 19]

Geraci: I am Vic Geraci, food and wine historian from UC Berkeley Regional Oral History Office. Today's date is August 14, 2012, and seated with me is Narsai David. This is our final interview, number ten, and this will tape number nineteen. This interview is to be conducted at the Bancroft Library in Berkeley, California. Basically, we have had eighteen hours together and we have talked about a lot of things. I'd like to finalize with some things; but also there's a couple of things before I get into finalizing. I noticed that you've done some cruises, like with Windstar, in the Mediterranean. What did you do on those?

19-00:01:01

David: That was kind of fun. That was the most recent one. Going back some time, at KCBS Radio, we used to sponsor a number of cruises. We went to Alaska twice, through the Inland Passage; we went to Tahiti; we went to Bermuda. I would design menus for our group to eat, I would do a cooking demonstration, I would do a wine tasting, or just do a chat and a question and answer, sort of like when we had the talk show on KCBS. But it'd been quite a few years since we'd done any of those things. Then this Windstar—which by the way, once it was on high sea, they literally shut off all the engines and we traveled with wind power. It was really, really fascinating.

Geraci: Really? Oh, so the name does have a meaning... Interesting.

19-00:02:07

David: I did a very brief cooking demonstration one day, because they weren't really set up with enough equipment for me to do much of a cooking demonstration. Then I did a chocolate tasting, which is always everybody's favorite. I had ten or twelve different chocolates, all from Guittard, who I dearly love what they do, starting with a white chocolate that was made entirely of cocoa bean and one that was with the less expensive fats, like palm kernel oil and coconut oil, and showed them the difference between the real stuff and the other stuff; working our way up through the various milks and the various dark chocolates; and finally the cocoa nibs and the actual full-tilt. We did a wine tasting. That week went awfully fast, from Barcelona to Rome. Actually, Veni and I got to Barcelona, I think four or five days early, on our own; and likewise, we stayed in Rome for four or five days at the end of it. So it was more than two weeks overall. We really had a good time.

Geraci: Those must be fun little working vacations.

19-00:03:33

David: Yeah, yeah. It's not that much work, because I love—as you know by now—to talk about food and wine, and that's sort of what I was doing.

Geraci: I know another thing that we had talked about was that you praised the City College of San Francisco's food program, for what they were doing with a lot

of the young people. Recently in the news, we're now talking about the institution, as a community college, is in real financial trouble. They may lose their accreditation.

19-00:04:16

David: They specifically, or several community colleges are in the same boat, or what?

Geraci: Several have been pinpointed, but they're one of the major ones.

19-00:04:24

David: Oh, is that right? No, I hadn't heard that.

Geraci: What kind of impact would that have?

19-00:04:29

David: Well, let me put in a plug for community college culinary arts programs, generally. The one that I'm most familiar with is Contra Costa College, which is run by a man named Nader Sharkes, N-A-D-E-R, S-H-A-R-K-E-S, and then the Diablo Valley College program. I've often compared those two, plus the San Francisco City College program—with the places like these fancy colleges that are for-profit colleges. Many of them are now owned by the same company and they have national distribution. In my experience, dating back to the restaurant days, the kids that came out of these community college programs were far more ready to work, far more willing to work, far more open to learning. The ones that go to these fancy schools, maybe you learned how to make a proper chaud-froid on a roast turkey, but when's the last time you needed to see a chaud-froid glaze on a roast turkey? They come out being lulled into thinking that they're going to get a job as a chef. They're getting \$50,000, the last I checked, for a sixteen-month course.

Geraci: Whether they finish it or not.

19-00:06:01

David: And here's the real punch line that's fascinating to me. Most of the kids that do this program don't have \$50,000—or \$51,000, I think it is—so they qualify for a federal loan. The college gets the \$51,000. After a few months, a lot of these kids drop out because they realize there's no way they're going to spend eight or ten hours a day standing over a hot stove, and they just quit. Well, guess what? They now owe that money to the federal government. The college has made the fifty-one-grand, and now they've got an empty seat that they can fill and sell to someone else. So these colleges are making a lot of money. The kids aren't getting what I consider as practical and realistic an education as the ones in the community colleges. It just is an absurdity. So now you say that San Francisco City College is in risk of losing its accreditation. Is there a problem with their program? Or is it that they've gotten so broke they can't afford to keep it going?

Geraci: It's a combination of all the above. Hard times, cutbacks on programs, over expansion, in some programs and areas, graduation rates.

19-00:07:24

David: So it's not just the culinary arts program; you're talking about the whole college.

Geraci: No, it's the entire college. But what came to my mind immediately is I know you had talked so highly about how this is a great way to prepare for jobs in the food industry.

19-00:07:40

David: I tell people constantly, if they really, truly want to go to a school, I say, "First of all, my primary advice is, get a job in a restaurant." Let me do a quick throwback to when my son Danny graduated from Berkeley High. He went and spent the summer working for Roger Vergé, at Moulin de Mougins, in the South of France—a three-star restaurant. Every week he would call home, just so disappointed. This is dumb. I'm not learning anything. This is stupid. All I'm doing is straining stocks and pureeing sauces and vegetables and yadda-yadda. Let me tell you, he came home from that experience so much more sophisticated than his father, in the subtle nuances of using fruits and vegetables and herbs to flavor sauces. When he comes to dinner now, frequently I'll ask him if he'd like to make a sauce for whatever is happening, and I swear, things that I would never imagine. He'll find some piece of fruit in the refrigerator and toss it into the blender and press it through the hair sieve to get just the essence of it—a little touch of this, a little touch of that. Just being present in a kitchen, where the real work is happening, it rubbed off on him to that degree and he learned an awful lot. So my first advice to kids is, try and get a job in a restaurant. Yes, if you're just washing dishes or peeling potatoes, it sounds like you're not learning anything; but being involved and being hooked into the ambience, you will be learning a lot. Then secondly, if you go to a community college for two years, you not only can get some formal training, but you can also pick up an AA degree. And who knows? You may get intrigued enough with the education that you can parlay that into a bachelor's degree, by moving on to a four-year school. So in no event can I imagine recommending these for-profit colleges. I shouldn't say in no event. Certainly, the CIA [Culinary Institute of America] is an exception.

Geraci: Like Jacques Pepin?

19-00:10:04

David: Oh, yeah.

Geraci: He's very tied into CIA.

19-00:10:07

David: Well, actually, no. Now he's involved with the French Culinary Institute.

Geraci: Oh, the French Culinary Institute.

19-00:10:12

David: They've just opened a branch in the Santa Clara-San José area.

Geraci: Interesting.

19-00:10:22

David: I haven't followed that up yet. Johnson & Wales is another. There are some really, really fine schools. Cornell has a great program. But when I think of these programs that are just hustling kids and trying to tell them they're going to become chefs after sixteen months in their program, and thank you, that'll be \$51,000—that one drives me to a distraction.

Geraci: Well, it almost seems that there's an attitude issue that's involved there. Everybody wants to be the celebrity, the great chef.

19-00:11:01

David: And they get lulled into thinking they're going to get a job as a chef. Hell, they'll be lucky—When I had the restaurant, if somebody showed on their résumé that they'd gone to that school, it got to the point that I just dismissed it out of hand, because that school changed so profoundly from the way it was created. Yet if I saw someone that had gone to a community college, I figured, well, they're not going to be afraid to work; let's give them a try.

Geraci: Have you done any teaching in any of these programs?

19-00:11:31

David: No. No, never have. I've served on advisory boards, but I've never—That's interesting you mention that. I was commenting earlier, how sometimes I wonder what to do with my spare time. Maybe that would be something that I should consider. I got a call maybe six months ago, from a guy named Ted Siegel, who was the last chef I had at Narsai's. He was the chef when I closed in 1985. He's from New York. He had gone back to New York, worked in restaurants, and was then, when he called, working teaching at some culinary program. He just had an urge to call and talk about the old days. He was really anxious to tell me that just that day in his class, he had been talking to his class about not wasting anything, and about how I taught him to cut the little bits of meat in between the rib bones, when we French trim or French a rack of lamb; and how we used that meat plus the flap meat—because we served only the rib eye on the bone at the table—we used all of those trimmings to make moussaka or to make employees' meals or to make grape-leaf dolma. It wasn't long before we were making sausages, when we opened the market. There was a great demand for sausages and lamb was the primary meat that we used in the restaurant. We sold more lamb, by far, than beef. One time I thought, gee, maybe I could grind some of the lamb in one of our sausages. But if you get more than 10 percent lamb in there, it starts to taste like lamb. So I said, "Well, wait a minute. Why don't we just make a lamb sausage?" So

we used all of the ingredients that were in the Assyrian rack of lamb—pomegranate juice, garlic, onions, basil, et cetera—to flavor this, and called it Assyrian lamb sausages. Wow! They were selling like crazy. Then I made the Tunisian lamb sausage and I made a merguez, and pretty soon I was buying lamb shoulders and boning them out and grinding them, to make these sausages. But there never was waste in that kitchen. We found ways to use everything. I may have mentioned this to you before, but one time, after I'd been away on a vacation for a couple weeks, I came home and in the garbage can in the kitchen—One of the guys on the staff was a theatrical set designer and an artist. He had cut a circle of paper and very lavishly printed on it, Welcome Home, Boss, and set it down in the garbage can. Because everybody knew that Narsai could not walk through the kitchen without looking in the garbage can.

Geraci: Where there better really be garbage in there.

19-00:14:48

David: Yeah. Bones and trimmings out to be in the stockpot. If nothing else, they ought to be in the stockpot. I always let the chef and sous chef create an appetizer or a soup, without my advance approval, once. If I liked it, it became a formal recipe that was in the house cookbook; and if I didn't like it, then we just didn't do it again. There was a cold seafood cocktail, with these large flakes of a white fish that was just so beautifully presented, and a sauce on it that was absolutely delicious. I said, "Hey, where'd this come from?" Because we don't have any kind of white fish on the menu. This guy was our first sous chef, Yoram Werner. He was from Israel. He said, "Well, we had a fish soup scheduled for the Monday night special dinner, and I asked for some white fish bones. Well, these trimmings came in from Halibut that the guy was working on, and all of those belly portions had thick layers of meat on them. So I put it in a pot and cooked it, just long enough for the meat to firm up. Then I took it out and strained it, put all the bones and skin back in the pot and continued cooking them for the stock. But meanwhile, here was all of this wonderful fish that we used for making an appetizer." Well, now, that's nothing more than good common sense. To this day, I read these recipes that call for peeling and chopping X number of carrots and onion and putting them in the pot to make a stock, and then straining them out and throwing them away. Well, my stocks, I make with the carrot peelings and the onion peelings and the onion trimmings, the core and the tip, and the parsley stems and the trimmings from the leeks and so forth. The carrot itself gets chopped up and put into the finished soup, so you can eat it.

Geraci: Could it be that we've become so separated from our food that we've forgot how to prepare it? In other words, the era of processing. Everybody expects the vegetable, the meat to come ready to cook. We've forgotten how to process.

19-00:17:26

David:

Well, we've forgotten how to process, but we have become so wasteful. We've become so wasteful. I can never forget a very, very snazzy new restaurant that opened in San Francisco to great acclaim. I loaned some of the silver trays that we used in catering to them, for their preview party, setting out hors d'oeuvres for their preview event, and I got a tour of the kitchen, while things were underway. Things were really happening; they were going to be serving dinner that night. Here was a cook trimming a loin of swordfish and making it into a perfectly round bullet, about this long. He was sort of neatly trimming it, to get this perfect round cylinder, so they could cut round, beautiful medallions. As he's trimming it, he's shoving the trim off the edge of his workbench. Now, I'm presuming that he has a tray jack with a hotel pan sitting there to collect it. We're cruising around through the kitchen. I got to the other side, I looked over, there was a garbage can. Now, boneless swordfish loin was one of the, if not *the* most expensive cut of fish you could buy, in those days. All of it except for the skin—not only usable, but prime meat—was going in the garbage can. Jeremiah Tower at Stars—Oh, that's something I'm going to have to tell you about. There was a reunion of Stars people recently. But when Stars was at its heyday—and that remains, in my mind, the absolute ultimate American brasserie. I've never seen a place that captures the feeling of a brasserie as well as Stars did. But one of the things that was always on the menu were three skewers, three different skewers. On any given day, it could be swordfish, which would've been made out of those trimmings; or lamb or kidneys. If you've got lamb—Lamb kidneys were frequently an appetizer in our restaurant, because when I bought the lamb loin, it came with a couple of kidneys on it. At Stars, whatever meat was being trimmed or whatever fish was being trimmed that day, the odd pieces would get run up on a skewer and it would become something that they sold. It converted it into real money. And guess what? It was wonderful. My wife and I would stop at Stars late at night, after the theater, and she inevitably ordered a hamburger and a gin and tonic, and I inevitably ordered one of each skewer, plus a favorite beer. Well, that's common sense. Why in the world would you throw away that stuff?

Geraci:

As we've talked about before, obviously, that's a tradition that came to you from your mother. You always talked about waste not, want not and these types of things. Now, we were on this education thing. What people have you mentored? We've talked about quite a few.

19-00:21:07

David:

Well, there are a lot of them. I can't point to a long list of people that have made the hit parade, in terms of having a big name. They certainly made my hit parade. Well, just a month ago, I went to the fiftieth anniversary of Dianda's Bakery, down in the Mission. It started out in North Beach and then moved to the Mission, but has an outlet, I think, in North Beach, still. A guy named Floyd Goldberg, from Brooklyn, who was the first baker I hired, was trained by my pastry chef. In fact, that's a story in itself. My pastry chef, Josef

Maximilian Strasser, was from Bavaria. When we decided to open the market and bake bread, baking bread was below the dignity of a master pastry chef. He didn't do yeast work; that was for another breed of people. But he took Floyd Goldberg under his wing and showed him how to bake bread. Vic, I can tell you, from the very beginning, we had tastings—cuttings, as we called them in those days—every week. The entire management staff would sit around a table. We would compare our croissants and our baguettes to whatever—Everybody on the staff was on the lookout. Whenever they found something that looked good or was special—a cake, a cookie or whatever—they would buy it and bring it to the tasting, and we would make comparisons. From the very beginning, our baguettes and our croissants absolutely were hands down, the best ones you could get ahold of. We were the first people to make the *épi*, that baguette that's a little like a stalk of wheat. This kid, Floyd Goldberg, by golly, was baking this amazing stuff. So he got a job working at Dianda's; and a few years ago, when the family decided to retire, they sold the business to three employees, and Floyd is one of them. Well, I hadn't seen him since the restaurant closed, twenty-seven years ago. It was really kind of charming. A couple of former chefs were teaching. One, Bob Boyle was actually teaching at San Francisco City College. He retired and moved to New York. Ted Siegel was teaching. They keep popping up, time and again, here and there.

Geraci: Kind of checking in, right?

19-00:23:50

David: Yeah.

Geraci: But I know even Christopher Lee was a waiter for you.

19-00:24:57

David: No, he was actually my catering manager.

Geraci: Your catering manager?

19-00:24:00

David: Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah, for ten years, he was the catering manager. He had a bachelor's in philosophy; and when the restaurant closed, he said that he was thinking of going back to school to get a PhD in philosophy. Well, a little time went by and he was sitting around with nothing to do, so he took a job as a cook at Chez Panisse. His wife Janet was the *maitre 'd* at Chez Panisse, in the main dining room. And boy, he got hooked. Well, when we did these catering jobs, he definitely supervised what was going on in the kitchen. He liked to cook. As I say, he really got hooked; and before long, he became the chef at Chez Panisse, and then finally went off to open his own restaurant, *Eccolo*. He's doing a lot of consulting now, and the last time I talked to him, he spoke somewhat wistfully of the possibility of having a butcher shop, a really classic butcher shop, with of course, sausages and terrines and such, made in house, as well.

Geraci: But he's very much into salumis now.

19-00:25:18

David: A salumeria, that's right. In my restaurant days, sausage making and pâté making was called charcuterie. It had a French twist. But the new buzzword is salumi. Nowadays, it has to have an Italian twist. Talking about Italian, I don't know if this is to the point, but what's happening with pizza these days is really kind of surprising to me. Suddenly, pizza has become important, and people are opening pizzerias so fast you can't keep up with them. I just wonder; the similarities are so great, how long is that going to work? How long can that continue?

Geraci: In some ways, is it not that we've become so aware—at least for middle-class to upper-class—that good food, fine food now has the same meaning to us as expensive—Same thing with wines. People pay, I think sometimes, far too much money for the wines that they're buying—Only because, well, it costs a lot; it must be good. It's fancy. I think we went through French cooking, fifties, sixties, seventies, even in the eighties, and then we started with the Italian cuisine. Now we're doing the same thing we did with French cuisine to the Italian cuisine. Where is it going next? I think immigration has also shifted a lot, the way we think about food in this country, between Mexican, Southeast Asians.

19-00:27:02

David: Gee, it's high time, though, that Mexican food is finally getting some recognition. Mexican cuisine can be some of the most amazing, remarkable, sophisticated cuisine in the world. The use of ingredients there is really, really impressive. Go through a classic Mexican market in Mexico and just the vision of those moles that are spread out. Mole is not just that black stuff or that red stuff; it can be yellow or green or pale green or dark green or chocolate brown or virtually black. It's just a combination of different spices and herbs and things like chocolate. There's no artificial coloring in it. This is what, in these little remote villages, they'd put together with the ingredients that were at hand. That's what created this collection of spices.

Geraci: Then it ended up with a little bit of the French idea, from the 1850s, when Maximilian was there. So now you have a blending of maybe some French techniques with some good Mexican ingredients.

19-00:28:08

David: Well, let's not forget the Spaniards, too and their influence.

Geraci: Oh, true.

19-00:28:11

David: Yeah. But in America, it's just been tacos and tortillas and tamales. Why don't we have more restaurants that are really doing serious Mexican food? I don't

get it. You'd think that it would've just been a natural. It's maybe starting to happen. I hear about Mexican restaurants from time to time.

Geraci: What about in the Bay Area? We have serious Mexican cuisine.

19-00:28:41

David: Well, not enough for my taste. There's some places—Well, Picante, here in Berkeley, makes wonderful Mexican food. But it's the kind of thing where you go to a counter and place your order and pay for it, and then they deliver it to your table. To me, that's more like take-out food. But wow, the quality is wonderful. If only he was willing to make it into a regular table-service restaurant, I think he has the kind of commitment and the kind of staff to make that happen. Believe me, if you know of some that you would recommend—

Geraci: Doña Tomás?

19-00:29:27

David: Well, Doña Tomás is pretty good. I've had some nice meals there. Tamarindo, in Oakland, tiny little place that does a nice job. But with the heavy Mexican influence in California, I would've thought that there'd be a lot of them, and there aren't a lot of them.

Geraci: Well, regretfully, the cuisine seems to have shifted towards the Southwest.

19-00:29:52

David: Mex-Tex?

Geraci: Mex-Tex.

19-00:29:53

David: Or Tex-Mex or whatever they're called.

Geraci: Yeah, whatever. It's shifted to there. But people forget all the regional cuisines that come out of Mexico. There's some vast differences in the regions. One of the things that, in one of the interviews, you were just getting ready to go to—Talk a little bit more was your latest *Wine Spectator* award. At least recognition.

19-00:30:23

David: Recognition. Gee, whiz. I don't remember; what year was it? I guess this was the thirtieth anniversary—does that sound right?—of the *Wine Spectator* awards. I'll never forget the call that came from Marvin Shanken, the publisher. He's not the guy that founded the *Wine Spectator*. The *Wine Spectator* was created as a little tabloid paper.

Geraci: It was down in San Diego.

19-00:30:51

David:

San Diego. I can't remember the guy's name. Wow, he turned it into this amazing powerhouse and the beginning of a magazine empire, with *Cigar Aficionado* and the distilled spirits one; I forget what he calls that. But anyway, he called one day to say that we'd been chosen to get the Grand Award. They were doing these awards and there were two categories, and we were going to be in the Grand Award category. I said, "Wow, that's really exciting. How many are going to be in the Grand Award category." He said, "Well, to be really honest with you, we haven't decided yet, whether to cut it off at three or at thirteen."

Geraci:

Either way is fine with you.

19-00:31:46

David:

Either way is fine with me. So that means we were one of the top three, because he's telling me that. As it turned out, they did thirteen. So they did this wingding of a reception in New York, promoting the thirtieth anniversary. There were two or three restaurateurs there who have had the Grand Award ever since the beginning. Piero Selvaggio, from Los Angeles, was one, and I believe there was someone there from Bern's Steakhouse, in Florida. But yeah, the wine list was pretty important. We had some 1500 wines on the list.

Geraci:

Oh, I know. We've looked at it in past interviews. You mean, as I refer to it, the wine bible.

19-00:32:46

David:

[chuckles] The wine bible.

Geraci:

It's *huge*.

19-00:32:49

David:

Yeah. Frank Prial, in the *New York Times*, called it one of the ten finest lists in the world, which always made me smile a little bit.

Geraci:

Well, that's quite an honor, in and of itself. A little bit more about projects you have going at this time or projects you're thinking about for the future. I know you just started working on a cookbook.

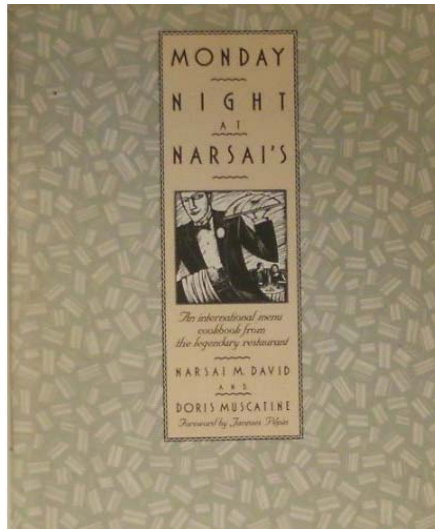
19-00:33:14

David:

Right. I did one cookbook, how many years ago, with Doris Muscatine, called *Monday Night at Narsai's*. As you recall, on Monday nights we used to do a special dinner, from a different country each week. This book is the kind of cooking that you could easily do at home. Now, some of the dishes might end up being kind of fancy, but they can be done easily and comfortably for everyday cooking. The kind of stuff that we eat at home regularly. We eat a lot of vegetables and a lot of beans. I'm sure I've mentioned this before. In some measure, for weight control.

Geraci:

As we get older, we have to be more concerned with that.



(Book cover of *Monday Night at Narsai's*, co-authored with Doris Muscatine.)

19-00:34:05

David:

But in some measure, also just because on the nights that we eat out, we get more than enough meat products. So it gives our body a chance to relax and recover from what we're doing to it the rest of the time, with all that rich food. So it'll be a collection of recipes that you can use for everyday cooking, using some of the little helpful hints. We were talking a while ago about avoiding waste. I keep a little plastic bag on the door of the freezer. Yesterday at lunch, I peeled a carrot. I just eat some raw vegetable or pickled vegetables at lunch. So the peeling of that carrot went into that bag. For dinner, we made a simple—I call it my mother's Assyrian stew. There were fresh tomatoes that I dropped into boiling water for a minute to blanch them. The peeling and the core that was cut off dropped into that little bowl. A leek, the bottom of the leek, the tips of the leek, the irregular parts of the leek, the outside layer, the top and the bottom of onion—all of that, as I'm preparing it, I'm throwing it into this little bowl at the side of the workbench, and then I just dump the whole bowl into that plastic bag in the freezer. Well, about the time that bag gets full—Except this time of year, when now the tomatoes are finally in and onions are finally in—We eat a lot of raw tomatoes and onions in our house. So I now have an extra bag, a full one, already in the freezer. So next week I'll pick up twenty pounds of chicken bones, chicken carcasses, and make a big stock out of it. It's so simple. Everything gets put in a pot, simmers all night long. In the morning, I'll strain it and put that stock into the refrigerator. Whatever fat has been rendered out of the meat and/or bones floats to the top and congeals. So I skim that off and throw it away. I've put in spices, but never any salt. So now I have a stock that is salt-free and fat-free. I freeze that in one-quart containers, for when we want to make soup, and one-cup

containers for our usual stir fry. That becomes the liquid that I deglaze the pan with. Well, that stock costs me very little. And it's the real thing and it's available at all times, and it's easy. If you get into the rhythm of doing things like this—By the way, Chinatown is the best place to buy those chicken bones, because they're only forty-nine cents a pound or something like that.

Geraci: But one thing you just mentioned there is that there again, Americans—and I think it's becoming a worldwide phenomenon—are no longer used to having to do that extra work for our food or for our meals. We just buy stock.

19-00:37:30

David: Well, it's fascinating. This switches me to Julia Child. As you know, this week is the 100th anniversary of her birth, and a lot of restaurants have her name on the menu, with a recipe and memory of. KCBS pulled out this half-hour in-depth interview that I did with Julia in 1995. Aside from the fact that she was just a singular, once-in-a-lifetime persona—Her character, her personhood is just such an amazing reality. But talking about cooking at home, she was quick to say that she had never learned how to cook at home, because of course, in those days, everyone had cooks. Now, that's not quite the everyone that you and I know. But her family had a professional cook on the staff. Things just don't need to be so complicated or so compounded. I would never suggest somebody go out and make a quart of stock, because making four quarts of stock or six quarts of stock, depending on how big a pot you have, is no more work than doing the one quart, and you've got something in your freezer that you can grab at a moment's notice. People, I think, are doing more— For instance, there's more gardening being done. More people are growing vegetables and fruits in their gardens. I'm really, really pleased to see that, really impressed with that. I think the idea of doing more regular preparation at home is starting to catch hold.

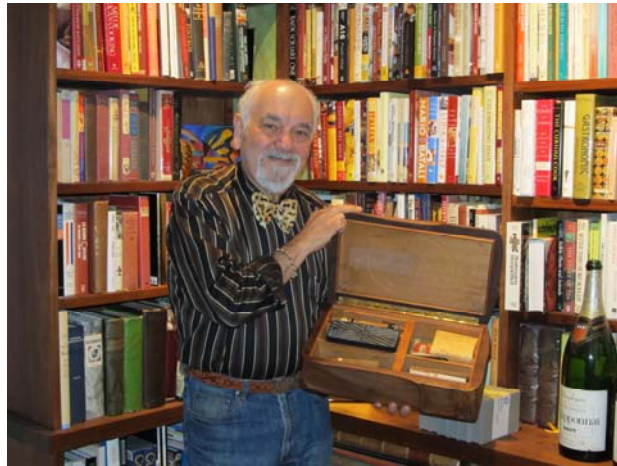
Geraci: It seems it's almost cyclical. We had the victory gardens of World War I and World War II; and then in the fifties, sixties, it kind of died out again. Now we are finally getting back to the gardens. But I think even within food, as you mentioned—Doris Muscatine, who you did your first cookbook with, Doris' stories about childhood at home. Her mom couldn't cook. We lose touch with food, and then almost another generation comes in and they try to get back in touch. There seems to be a struggle or a battle with us as a people.

19-00:40:27

David: I'm looking at a book behind you, labeled *Polyantha*. Is there something there about how we do and don't want to repeat and copy, one generation to the next? Interesting.

Geraci: It is a constant struggle. Especially in Berkeley, as we've talked about before, the ability of someone like Alice Waters to change a community's ideology of what it meant to cook, to go out to dinner, to eat. What is local, what is

sustainable? These are words that weren't even on the table at that time. Yet, they're very traditional a generation before.



(Narsai in his personal food and wine library.)

19-00:41:17

David: Oh, of course. That's the *only* way it was done the generation before.

Geraci: That's the only way.

19-00:41:20

David: It was truly a return to the old ways, a return to the original ways, a return to the basics.

Geraci: So it's not a revolution, it's regaining lost knowledge or lost past practices. A fun question, as we look at this—and I think for you, in particular—if you were to open a restaurant today, what would it be like? What would be the next-generation Narsai's?

19-00:41:53

David: Boy, that is a good question. It would not be a complete five-course price fix menu, as Narsai's was, because I think people aren't eating that way so much anymore. There would be a selection of soups and appetizers and salads and main courses and desserts, so that somebody could put together a five-course meal; but more and more, people are having just a salad and a main course. The one thing that will never change, if I were to open a restaurant, is that the main course will have, in addition to the meat, a starch and a vegetable. I yearn for vegetables when I go out to restaurants. I have to have a side order of vegetables. It just is so frustrating. A meal comes and goes and people have not had any vegetables. With all of this talk and interest in vegetables, how come it's not showing up in the menus in restaurants? There would be,

certainly, some braised dishes on the menu on a regular basis. There would be a temptation, I think, to have a rotisserie. We were talking earlier about chicken. It is really, really hard to beat the flavor of chicken that comes off a rotisseries. I don't care whether it's charcoal or gas or electric. Most rotisseries have the heat source behind the bird, rather than underneath it, so what the source of the heat is really, truly doesn't have any bearing on the taste. It's only when the fire is below it and you make the smoke, which comes back up and flavors the food, that that's a difference. But it would be tricky, and one would have to be very careful in how this was done, because if I couldn't serve that chicken within a half hour of its coming off the rotisserie, I would not serve it. So it would take a while to work out a rhythm, so that you knew how many to be putting on the spit and how to control it. Because although it's some of the most delicious chicken you could ever have, if that chicken gets overcooked, it's also some of the worst chicken you could ever have. So things of that ilk. Braised stew kinds of things, braised dishes, hearty meals in the winter months and lighter meals in the summer months. But I guess casual is the word. We have become a much more casual people.

Geraci: But we make it casual, but we expect formal food. How would you respond to that?

19-00:45:13

David: I don't know that we expect formal food; we expect *good* food. If by formal, you're talking about presentation and elegance, when I see—and it's just last week, again—famous chefs putting on a dinner and there's a photograph in the paper, using tweezers to put little bits of microgreen on to garnish something. If formality means covering everything with a bizarre foam; if formality means molecular gastronomy, please count me out. That's my idea of fun and games. If somebody wants to play these games, I think that's perfectly fine. But that's not a way of eating. That sounds a little bit like the Romans feeding Christians to the lions. Gee, it's fun; this is something different. Look what we can taste, look what we can watch, look what we can see. That's carrying it to an extreme that I'm very uncomfortable with. At a fund-raising event a couple years ago, we had this—I forget what it was called. I think it was called a pineapple egg. There was this perfect yellow sphere put on a crouton, and we were told to pop it in our mouth whole. The texture of the ball was sort of bouncy, a little bit, soft, but there was a distinct skin on it. And as you bit down into it, it burst open and it was full of—I think it was pineapple juice. I'm pretty sure that's what this thing was. Well, the guy had frozen little scoops of pineapple juice, and then dropped them into something like a liquid nitrogen, which created a skin on it. Then it's defrosted. So how the skin was created or what the magic technology was, I didn't bother spending too much time to figure out. Yeah, it was fun. We're walking around at this fund-raising event, you popped into your mouth and said, "Well, hey, that was really kind of neat." But we've gotten to the point that people want the entire dinner to be these exotic little bursts of—Of what? Of excitement. A little bit of that for fun once in a while, but that's not my

idea of how to run a restaurant. That's not my idea of how to cook. In fact, the word restaurant, the word restaurateur, I fear that we really have a generation of restaurateurs that do not understand the meaning of that word. Restaurateur is just a simple French word that means restorer. One goes to a restaurant to be restored, to be taken care of, to be made happy, to be made comfortable, to be made at home, to be relaxed, to enjoy. There are more and more restaurants in which the chef is so damn highfalutin that you either have it the way the chef wants to serve it or you can't have it any other way. If they serve water at the table with no ice, that's the way you're going to have to have it, because that's the way it's done in—pick your choice of what country. Well, okay. Maybe that's how it's done in that country, but first, this isn't that country, and in this country, we have a tradition of having ice cubes in the water. I happen to like ice in my water. Or the only seasoning that you can have is done this way and no other alternative. That's not taking care of people, that's not restoring people, that's not serving people's needs. That's trying to show that you're such a grand artist that it's your way or no other way. Sometimes I think these chefs are beginning to sound like they think they are Picasso, and once they put it down, that's it and you take it or leave it.

Geraci: You almost have the cult of that celebrity chef and the followers, the accolades, who whatever the chef says has to be the truth.

19-00:50:08

David: Accolades and acolytes, both.

Geraci: Accolades and acolytes, both, yeah. In talking about if you had your own restaurant today, what would it physically be like?

19-00:50:25

David: Certainly, a relaxed ambiance. Casual dress for the waiters, but a uniform dress. I would want tablecloths on the tables. My idea of background music is that the music is there to sort of fill the gaps in conversation. Because I discovered early on in the restaurant, that if I wanted everybody to hear the music, I'd turn up the music a little louder; well, then people talked a little louder. I turned it up a little louder and they'd talk a little louder, and pretty soon we had a noisy place. Well, music was kept down low. At the beginning of the evening, when there were few people in the place, you didn't feel like you were in an empty room. By the time the room got buzzing, the music volume got turned down a little bit, because you can't possibly appreciate it or enjoy it without being able to hear it. If you can hear it, then you've got to talk louder to be able to hear who you're talking to.

Geraci: There's also the idea that a meal is supposed to be a communal—It's a social event.

19-00:51:47

David: But wow, the social event—The newest restaurants, opened by the younger people, are so damn noisy you can't hear yourself think. I just don't get it.

What is it about that excitement that they like? Maybe it's that their hearing got destroyed by all of that rock and roll music.

Geraci: [they laugh] That could very well be. If you were to open Narsai's today, do you think it would be successful?

19-00:52:23

David: You mean the old Narsai's?

Geraci: Yeah.

19-00:52:27

David: Oh, I think I could make it successful. I don't think I could have that large a restaurant—120 to 140 seats—and expect to fill that with people that want a five-course meal. When that last—well, one of those recessions hit in the mid-seventies, I created a petite dinner, a three-course meal that we served only from five o'clock until six-thirty, I think. So that first of all, it encouraged some early business. You could have any three courses. Remember, our meal was soup, appetizer, main course, salad and dessert. You could have any three courses you wanted out of that, at a fixed discount off the five-course menu. A hungry person would get the appetizer, the entrée and dessert. Women frequently got the clear-broth soup and the salad and a dessert, or the soup and salad and an appetizer, so they made it a lighter meal. I don't think I could fill that many seats with people that want a five-course meal.

Geraci: First of all, the competition today —There's no lack of restaurants in the Bay Area.

19-00:54:07

David: Yeah, but I think a restaurateur, to be successful, has to be able to produce something that meets the needs of the people to such a degree that that's what creates the success. There were plenty of restaurants around when Narsai's was going. We had plenty of people that came from San Francisco and Marin County. In fact, American Express told me that we had the highest per-person check average of any restaurant in the Bay Area at that time.

Geraci: Interesting.

19-00:54:53

David: So we were drawing people from literally all over the Bay Area, because we had something to offer, the way we offered it. We weren't the only place that served complete dinners. I just think that people's desires and needs today have changed somewhat. I think a five-course meal is more than most people—When I go out, I only want three courses.

Geraci: Many people today are eating lighter, to begin with.

19-00:55:33

David:

The dinner parties, when I do a fancy dinner party at our home, we have some simple hors d'oeuvres—lots of raw vegetables and simple things that are not too complicated, but give you something to munch on while you're standing around. Then I used to start out with something like caviar with some blini, and then an appetizer, and then the main course and then dessert. I'm more and more cutting it down to just three courses at the table. Hors d'oeuvres and then one appetizer, main course and dessert. So a new Narsai's would, I think, maybe still do something like the Monday night dinner; and that could be a five-course menu. But that was always served in addition to the regular menu. There was no time that you were limited to just that one meal. That meal was an addition to the entire menu, at all times.

Geraci:

Boy, that kept your staff busy, didn't it?

19-00:56:42

David:

Oh, yeah. Yeah. But it was also a form of excitement for them, because it kept them on their toes. We were always doing something different. We had to go out and find special ingredients to pull something off. The chef and the pastry chef, particularly, got a chance to sort of strut their stuff a little bit, polish their swords. Yeah, that was a lot of fun. That was a lot of fun. So it would be a smaller restaurant, more casual. No, I would not expose the kitchen. The kitchen is a wonderful place; leave it back in the kitchen, where kitchens belong. If you're opening a barbecue joint or a beach-front place, where you can watch the cooking— Two years ago, when I went to Taiwan, I think just an absolutely memorable meal was on the east coast of Taiwan, in an area inhabited by some of the aboriginal tribes. We had a beach-front meal, in which the chef-owner was in a bathing suit—

Geraci:

Truly beach-front.

19-00:58:00

David:

—and had been out and harvested some fish that day, which is what was served. You could see the kitchen and you could see the ocean that the fish came out of and it was a wonderful, wonderful experience. But when I'm eating in a restaurant, I want a little more sanity. I want a little more serenity. If I want the boisterous, crazy stuff, at a beachfront or at a bar is the place for that.

Geraci:

Because we go through these trends. Everything from the communal table to now bar service for dinners, eating, the chef's table.

19-00:58:53

David:

Oh, boy, how about \$500 a person for the chef's table? There are two of those going on in the Bay Area right now. \$500. You have no idea what you're going to be served. Just shut up and sit down and eat it. One of these places, you pay before you sit down. Well, I may be exaggerating. Maybe only \$495.

Geraci: Five-dollar discount, this week only, right?

19-00:59:18

David: Wow. I don't get it. That's the decline and fall of Western Civilization.

Geraci: You talk about disposable income. I think we're right at the end of this tape, so this is a perfect place to stop.

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Geraci: Today's date, August 14, 2012, and seated with me is Narsai David. This is interview number ten, tape number twenty. When we finished up on the last tape, we were talking about what would the new Narsai's Restaurant be like.

20-00:00:21

David: I was describing those menus. It occurred to me, when I made a reference to starting dinners at home with caviar and blini, let me emphasize for the record, that that was caviar that we make ourselves. I don't think I have ever bought a jar of caviar. In the old days, we used to be able to buy sturgeon roe from Oregon, and made fresh caviar. Nowadays, if anybody ever catches a sturgeon with roe in it that I know, we get to process that; but otherwise, these days, the only caviar we're serving is salmon or steelhead, because I can buy that roe regularly. It's a wonderful thing, caviar; but no, I would not pay \$500 a pound or \$1,000 a pound or whatever it is for it.

Geraci: We've talked a lot about, in the interviews, the phenomenon going on in the Bay Area, moving to local, and sustainable. I think given the political climate of the nation today, where is American agriculture moving? Because restaurants have become a very viable part of the agricultural system, because in particular now, small farms doing contract farming for restaurants—where are we moving in all of this?

20-00:02:05

David: Oh, boy oh boy, oh, boy oh boy. First of all, these words like organic and sustainable have become coopted by big business in such a way that in many instances, they hardly resemble what the original ideas were. People seem to think that organic produce means that it was produced with no chemicals and no pesticides. Well, I should tell you, I got from the State of California, a listing of all agricultural pesticides. Each one is coded either approved for organic farming or not approved or conditionally approved. What conditionally approved translates into is, if there's some terrible plague of locusts or something, then for that season, they might approve that one item. I went through and added up the ones that were approved or conditionally approved, and it was like 20 percent of all of the stuff—This thing was ten pages. That's the equivalent of two full pages of pesticides that can be used in organic farming. So the manipulation of these words—Sustainable, perhaps, is the one that really drives me crazy, because organic, at least there is a legal definition. If you want to go to the trouble of finding out which chemicals

they can use, it's easy enough; it's listed. You could look it up online. But what is the definition of sustainable? Now, what is sustainable agriculture? What is sustainable fishing? Some people feel that if the fish is caught in the wild, they call that sustainable. Well, by my definition, that fish is not from a sustainable source unless there are such controls that the population of the fish is able to regenerate itself regularly. I don't know very many fish that we are harvesting these days that you could really honestly call sustainable. Now, farmed fish, if it's done in fresh water—which means in ponds—I believe as long as they don't use any bizarre chemicals, that's something that I would call sustainable and I'd feel very comfortable with. But the most important farmed fish these days seems to be salmon. Wow. That's hardly sustainable. There was one outfit that was calling its farmed salmon organic, because it was being fed fish that were caught in the wild. Well, it turns out that the USDA has never created a definition for organic wild fish, so that was just the creation of some marketing expert. But when you figure that salmon have not been taught to become vegetarians yet, so they have to scoop up enormous amounts of wild fish, which are ground up to make the feed pellets that you feed the salmon—So the net gain is really a minus, because you've destroyed many, many more pounds of other fish to create one pound of the salmon. Secondly, since it's a fish that lives in sea water, in salt water, they simply pen large areas in sort of closed bays and fiords, to hold the fish in. The wasted food that does not get eaten—These pellets are sprinkled on the surface, and as they go dribbling down, the fish eat them. Well, what they don't eat falls to the bottom, where it decomposes and rots. The fish droppings fall to the bottom and decompose and rot. Pretty soon that fiord gets so contaminated that it can't support the life, and they pick up their nets and move to the next fiord over, leaving behind this contaminated mess. Additionally, storms or accidents tear open the nets and some of these fish escape into the wild, where they cross breed with wild fish, which is creating a problem with the wild fish habitat. Secondly, they're squeezed in so tightly that they have to put in various kinds of chemicals and medications to prevent disease. So that's hardly sustainable.

20-00:07:35

Now, we visited a sturgeon farm up in Galt, near Sacramento, Sterling Farms. Wow, that was impressive to me. These people are growing sturgeon in ponds and they have sure learned a lot in the twenty-five or thirty years, or it may be more, that this has been going on. The original tanks were big rectangular, like swimming pools. Well, the problem was that algae started growing in these ponds because the droppings were sort of trapped in the corners and on the bottom of these things. The sturgeon, I remember eating it and always feeling that it had kind of a muddy flavor; and the caviar made from that sturgeon had a muddy flavor. Well, the new ones, they are a round tank and the bottoms are sloped to the center. So there's a constant movement of water. The droppings, whether from of the fish or the pellets, are constantly being swept down to a hole in the center, which is being piped out, run through a filter. Oxygen is put into the water and nitrogen is removed from the water. And some of the

newest things, that are really exciting, is where they're harvesting that nitrogen and using it to fertilize plants.

Geraci: It's a natural fertilizer.

20-00:09:16

David: It becomes a natural fertilizer. Down in Half Moon Bay, I visited a plant that's growing lettuces in this water. It's aquaculture for the lettuce. The water is fertilized by simply piping the water and all of that nitrogen from the fish pond into it. So then what's being put back in is freshly-aerated water. The sturgeon don't need all of that other fish to be ground up to feed them. And there are other fish. Carp is being raised this way, several other fresh-water fish. Now, that to me, makes a lot of sense. I could see calling something like that sustainable. But that word sustainable is being splashed around on menus.

Geraci: Well, that's what I mean. That's become the new thing. On your menu, you have to have, it's organic, it's sustainable.

20-00:10:17

David: And more often than not, it's not.

Geraci: Yeah. Even within seasons. Are menus really seasonable?

20-00:10:31

David: Not enough. They're not seasonal enough, for my money. We rely too much on being able to eat persimmons in the summertime and peaches in the dead of winter, that are coming from the Southern Hemisphere. I can't figure that out. That doesn't make any sense to me.

Geraci: The role, I guess, of restaurants in creating or lessening the carbon footprint.

20-00:11:07

David: Well, you see, that's a tough one, too. I was, as you know, on the founding board of the Pacific Coast Farmers' Market Association. I'm very proud of that organization. It has grown to be the largest farmers' market association in the country. The issue of the carbon footprint is something that needs to be looked at closely. If people can go to the farmers' market once a week and buy their produce and take it home, I think that's really marvelous and it really helps. But then there's this community-supported agriculture, CSA, which is an offshoot of the farmers' markets, really, in which they're delivering produce on a weekly basis to your home. I find myself questioning. I have to confess, I'm guilty of getting fresh fruit every week from Frog Hollow Farms. But a truck can drop off a ton of produce at a market almost as easily as it could drop off a ten-pound box at somebody's home. So big is not necessarily bad. There are advantages and some pluses to being big, to being able to deal with the volume.

Geraci: As America gets larger and larger as a nation, the population expanding, it takes a certain amount of large agriculture to feed people, or we'd be a hungry nation.

20-00:13:17

David: All this talk about growing the stuff at home or being within a hundred miles—That's the latest. It used to be it had to be local; now they're saying if it's within a hundred miles. Well, I don't know any orchard within a hundred miles of Berkeley that can produce bananas or mangos or papayas. So am I going to go through life without ever having a mango, banana or papaya, without having to go to the tropics? Well, no. There are some things that are impossible to get and are important enough—spices, vanilla, chocolate—that don't grow in North America.

Geraci: You're definitely not going to give up chocolate.

20-00:14:06

David: [they laugh] I hope not. It's a terrible quandary, Vic. You cannot possibly have lettuce throughout the forty-eight continental United States, without help from places like the Salinas Valley. There's just not enough growing area that's set up for doing it. You have to have these huge farms.

Geraci: And in order for that farm to be successful, it takes herbicides and pesticides.

20-00:14:48

David: Well, yeah, but we are learning to cut it down.

Geraci: How to minimize that.

20-00:15:52

David: How to minimize it. But I don't know anybody that can do it without herbicides or pesticides. Certainly, you can use some pesticides that are less invasive. Those that are on the organic list are not quite as evil as the others. But don't fool ourselves into thinking we can live without pesticides. There's no way you'd feed everybody.

Geraci: I guess as we look at the foodies and the new food laws, there's no such thing as the purity of that, that special little altar place of this little farm that we go to worship. It just doesn't exist.

20-00:15:34

David: Well, there's a farm that was in Marin County, called Soul Food or Soul Food Farm, something like that, that just announced last week that they're shutting down. They were producing absolutely wonderful chickens that were truly range fed. They had a little corral situation and they would move it around the farm, so that they were constantly eating the bugs and the seeds and the things. They finally just shut down. It was impossible for them to make it. Now, could that be done on a larger scale? Well, I've got to believe that it'd be possible. We see range beef showing up on the market, where the beef is

actually put out on the range. I think if the demand is strong enough, the producers ought to start taking notice. We spend so much money on finishing off beef with soybeans and grains, in order to get the fat marbled through the muscle, in order to make it juicier and more delicious. I have a good friend who's an avid hunter. He would always bring game in the restaurant. One year I counted thirteen different varieties of game that he brought in. There was venison and elk and wild boar—the list just went endlessly, between fish and the others. There was never one of those critters that was fed on grain. It was just wild, eating wild grasses and running free. Certainly, developing a lot more muscle (if it's a wild elk or deer) than cattle would have. By aging the meat—we'd put it in our thirty-two-degree walk-in box and aged it for a week or two—it was just the most delicious meat you could possibly find. Well, people don't want to age meat anymore; it's expensive. But wait a minute; it's also expensive to feed the animals grain and beans to develop that richness of flavor.

Geraci: Also, feedlots present an environmental hazard.

20-00:18:09

David: Oh, my God! That's a whole separate issue.

Geraci: Just the nitrate in the urine. In North Carolina, with all the hog ranches? They've actually destroyed bodies of water and rivers are so polluted It'll take them years to clean them up. So that's another problem, in and of itself, also. I guess it's not easy to feed a hungry world, is it? [they laugh]

20-00:18:39

David: And this world is getting larger by the minute.

Geraci: Exactly. It's getting larger. One of the things that you had mentioned earlier, in the first tape, a Stars reunion.

20-00:18:50

David: Oh, yes. This was kind of fascinating. They put together a bunch of chefs to do a joint dinner. It revolved around Jeremiah Tower, who now lives in Mexico, and he flew in for the event—he had, of course, Stars; Mark Franz, who worked for him as a chef at Stars and then went on to open Farallon and finally, Waterbar; Emily Luchetti, who was the pastry chef at Stars and went with Mark to Farallon, and then they did this at Waterbar and the next-door restaurant, Epic Roasthouse. Now, Epic Roasthouse, the chef is Jan Birnbaum, who was not connected directly with Stars, but is so closely related to the whole gang, and with Emily and Mark literally next door—It started out Waterbar was the seafood restaurant and Epic Roasthouse was the meat restaurant, but both of them have both meat and fish on the menu now. Cecilia Chiang and I sort of acted as hosts.

Geraci: Cecilia was always very close to Jeremiah.

20-00:20:20

David:

Very close to Jeremiah, yeah. We just had a wonderful evening. The dinner started with hors d'oeuvres at—Let me make sure I don't have it backwards now. The hors d'oeuvres were at Waterbar, and then we went to Epic, across the way for dinner, a progressive dinner. I had thought that this was going to attract a lot of people who had eaten at Stars. Well, it did; but what was fascinating was the large number of former employees of Stars that came in. People flew in from other parts of the country, who had worked at Stars and now have their own restaurants or have gone off into something entirely different. It was just a lot of back slapping and glad handing and old friends meeting, and we had some delicious food. It was just a neat, touchy-feely kind of an evening.

Geraci:

What is Jeremiah doing in Mexico?

20-00:21:30

David:

At the moment, I don't think he's doing much of anything. He had a degree in architecture from Harvard, before he ever came out here and took that job at Chez Panisse. So he was buying some of these old haciendas that had just sort of fallen on hard times and had not been taken care of, and using his architectural skills, revamped them and fixed them up and sold them, and made pretty well. But then when the economy collapsed, obviously, it collapsed all over the world. So he was a little close-mouthed about what's going to happen next; but I just keep wondering, is there a chance that he might be heading back this way?

Geraci:

I know Cecilia, she just had a special place in her heart for Jeremiah. But I think one of the reasons you just mentioned there that's very fascinating to me is that as I look across the nation today, and the Bay Area traditions that we presently have in our restaurants, the Bay Area has played a seminal role in providing the energy, the training and the mentoring that has now been spread all over the entire nation.

20-00:22:55

David:

There's no question. No question of that. I think we deservedly get credit in California—and the nexus really is Berkeley—for the creation of what we call now California cuisine. I remember when Caroline Bates first used that phrase in *Gourmet Magazine*. I discussed it with Alice Waters and with Joyce Goldstein, and none of us had any idea what is California cuisine? We were just using the ingredients that we wanted to use. We put together things that were fun. Alice had neighbors and friends growing these little baby lettuces. It's like mesclun became kind of an invention of Alice's, at Chez Panisse. I used to go to the ocean and harvest mussels. Nobody bothered, nobody *thought* to harvest mussels, because they were dangerous. Everybody knew that you could die of paralytic shellfish poisoning. Well, there were a few basic rules that you had to follow to not have a problem, but it was just never done. The degree of open-mindedness and free thinking and free will associated with being in Berkeley—And when it came to California cuisine—

I've probably mentioned this before—I think [it] owes a lot to our location, geographically centered between the greatest wine growing areas in the country. Napa-Sonoma-Mendocino to the north, and Livermore to the east, and let's not forget the Santa Clara Valley and down to Monterey. So there was a real rebirth of interest in wine and the seriousness of wine. Here we were, we'd drive up on the weekends, when we were college students, and taste wine and learn about wine firsthand. So the kind of freedom that gave us and the enthusiasm that developed did, indeed, create a group of chefs that went forth and did similar things around the country. I have a little bit of a worry that some of those have led to yet the next generation of chefs, who are behaving like these—Well, I guess artist is the only word I can use, and I don't mean to use that in a derogatory way. And yet we need to recognize that the difference between what an artist does and what a chef does. An artist makes a painting or a sculpture and it's completed and that's his statement. Well, the chef is preparing something and serving it at the table to feed you at the moment, not for you to sit back and look at. Some of what is being prepared to feed you is getting very, very precious and a little troubling.

Geraci: Both food and wine have suffered from this, when we have the winemaker or the chef as a celebrity or this great artiste. This in turn develops cults or followers.

20-00:26:47

David: Don't overlook the importance of marketing when you're talking about developing a cult. The wines that have become cult wines, they're openly spoken of as cult wines, my gosh! I'll tell you, it is very, very rare, if you were to show me a \$100 bottle of California wine, that I couldn't find a bottle for \$50 that was easily as good. Simple blind tasting; line them up and let's taste them blind. Well, the \$100 one or the \$200 one or the \$500 one sure have the marketing behind them. People associate that name with greatness, and wow, it came from XYZ winery. Oh, wow, did you get your allocation? Did you get your three bottles?

Geraci: Branding —As you said, people that'll pay \$500 for a chef's table dinner; isn't that a form of branding, also?

20-00:27:47

David: Absolutely. Absolutely. That's another kind of a cult.

Geraci: What if I described California cuisine as nothing more than a group of people who pioneered a reeducating of our American food ways?

20-00:28:11

David: Maybe an awakening, as much as a reeducating. Some reeducating.

Geraci: It seems in the fifties, in the early post-war years—You have to realize we went through the Great Depression, then we went through World War II; so

there's a couple of decades where food was just to sustain ourselves; it was what we could get, when we could get it, how we could get it.

20-00:28:38

David:

Well, the first restaurant in the East Bay that I call the beginnings of the food revolution, the restaurant revolution, has to date back to the Pot Luck, and the Pot Luck opened in 1954, so it wasn't that long after the war. It was just a very simple little restaurant, down at the foot of University Avenue, created by Ed Brown, who called it Pot Luck because you quite literally took pot luck. What he happened to make that day is what you got to eat. It was like a little, tiny neighborhood bistro in France. Then in 1958, it moved to Channing and San Pablo. Hank Rubin came in as a partner, provided the funding, bought a liquor license, and developed a complete menu. The meal started with soup, served in a large tureen at the table, where you helped yourself. Followed by a wooden salad bowl of mixed greens and a little lazy Susan kind of thing that had a blue cheese dressing, a simple—it was called French dressing; it was one that had tomato in it, so one of those red French dressings—also marinated kidney beans and garbanzos. Then the main course, served with a rice pilaf and vegetable—a frozen vegetable, I have to tell you—and a piece of fruit and cheese for dessert. Then Hank Rubin started the Monday night dinners, from different countries. I left in 1970. I should say I managed the Pot Luck from 1959 to 1970. Then I left, started doing some catering, and in 1972, opened Narsai's. I carried forward the idea of the Monday night dinners, but all of my dinners were five-course dinners from the beginning. Alice opened Chez Panisse six months before we opened Narsai's. Hers, from the beginning, was what she made each day. So there was some serious creativity going on, doing things that we just felt like doing. There were plenty of fancy restaurants in San Francisco—L'Etoile, La Bourgogne and Le Trianon, for French food. Magnificent food, but all in a very structured, very formal French style. Ernie's, pretty much the same. Doro's, pretty much the same, except that it was Italian. We were doing things that didn't belong to any rulebook. We did things that we felt like doing.

Geraci:

Wasn't that the spirit of Berkeley in that period?

20-00:32:08

David:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Geraci:

I think we can talk where about the perfect geographic location, always; but there was also a culture here of new, different, experimental, and playful.

20-00:32:25

David:

Playful, as it has to be, a real key there. Playful.

Geraci:

Very playful.

20-00:32:29

David:

We had fun with what we were doing. I've said time and again that the thing that we had most going for ourselves was that we were not locked into any serious traditions. In France, to this day, you'd have a hard time finding a French chef using fresh ginger in cooking his vegetables. Well, we learned that, with our Pacific exposure, from the Chinese and the Japanese, and we've treated fresh ginger sort of almost like a vegetable. The young ginger, in fact, we use as a vegetable. But a French chef learned, from the days of Carême and Escoffier, that ginger is a dried, powdered spice that comes from the Orient, and it's used for spice cakes and cookies and things of that ilk.

Geraci:

There were rules you followed.

20-00:33:32

David:

We didn't have any rules, because we didn't have any of that formal education. And with the exposure to the Pacific, to the Asian cuisines and the Island cuisines, we were able to just absorb these things and use them, because we weren't locked into those traditions, that I think, hampered the evolution in Europe.

Geraci:

It goes back to Berkeley being in the perfect location and because it had that spirit.

20-00:34:10

David:

Well, it was the Free Speech movement.

Geraci:

There was energy here.

20-00:34:17

David

It was just exploding with energy. Now we sit back and watch the—what?—the dissolution of this great university system. I'm stunned at reading that the California State Universities have just announced that they don't want to accept any California residents in the graduate program for the next semester, because they can charge more for foreigners coming in. Yet, it says California State University; it was built for the State of California. The top one-third of students in California are guaranteed a place at Cal State, and the top 12 or 12.5 percent are guaranteed a place in the University of California. Well, that's another subject for another day.

Geraci:

It has become very problematic for their own survival. Two last questions, more out of fun and fancy than anything else. What are the things that Narsai David would like to be remembered by? We've had almost twenty hours together, talking about your life and food and all these things that you've done. I'm not asking you to write your own epitaph.

20-00:36:01

David:

I'm not ready. I'm not ready.

Geraci: You're not ready for that.

20-00:36:02

David: I'm not ready for that. Well, that's a fascinating question. I would like to be remembered as somebody who believes in community. Someone who gave. I think the efforts that I've given to community organizations—gosh, way back to the early days of the Arts and Crafts Co-op in Berkeley. I was one of the earliest presidents of that. I was just a wee child, I think. The Berkeley Repertory Theater, the Berkeley Community Fund, the Pacific Coast Farmers' Market Association, the Assyrian Aid Society. I'm proud of the fact that Narsai's was the kind of success it was, that it was called one of the founding areas of California cuisine, that we had a great wine list. But I think most of all, my willingness to give to the community. I would like to see more of that. I would like to see more people, more ready and more willing to give. Geez, I didn't even mention Alameda County Meals on Wheels.

Geraci: Oh, you had, in a previous interview.

20-00:37:59

David: No, but I mean in these comments now.

Geraci: In these conversations, right.

20-00:38:04

David: They serve such a critical, important function.

Geraci: But I think in the Bay Area, along this line, it's obviously the community part, the community spirit you have helped nurture and left behind. There still is a great tradition of the food industry, food service, helping within the community.

20-00:38:34

David: Oh, yeah. Oh, yes, the restaurants that provide the backdrop for all these big fundraisers. For the Alameda County Meals on Wheels dinner, we have sixteen or seventeen restaurants that come together. The Eukel Teachers Trust—E-U-K-E-L—in Contra Costa County, I get seven different restaurants each year to participate, and they donate their time. We pay for the cost of the ingredients they use, but they donate their time. That's the case for all these events.

Geraci: In an election year, with accusations and harsh words on both sides of the political spectrum, I think sometimes we tend to forget that Americans really do care, as a people.

20-00:39:39

David: Let's not forget that. Let's make sure that we pass that to another generation.

Geraci: Right. As I look at our interviews and the time we have spent together, to me, that's something that you very much take pride in, all that that you've been

involved in. You've left something. You didn't just enter something and use it. You were there, you worked, and you tried to leave it in better shape than when you entered it.

20-00:40:09

David: Well, I appreciate that. That feels good.

Geraci: That seems to me to be a spirit that came out in this interview, as an underlying factor. Then the last thing—and I guess I really am asking you to just book-it-in on this one—what would Narsai's last meal be? [David laughs] I always like to end an interview with a fun question. What would your last meal be?

20-00:40:40

David: Well, my mother's rice pilaf would be at the top of the list. There were two varieties of rice that came from Iran. One was called Domsia, D-O-M-S-I-A, and the other was—my mind will go blank now—sadiri, S-A-D-I-R-I, or sadri, S-A-D-R-I; I've seen it spelled both ways. They're really the precursors to basmati rice, a very aromatic rice. She would blanch it. She would first soak it in salted water, and then blanch it in boiling water for just so many minutes. She knew when to take it out. She knew al dente. She didn't have to be taught any Italian, to know what al dente meant. It had to be just the right texture. Then she would line one of these large oval roasting pans. She'd cover the bottom with raw potato, sliced about a quarter-inch thick; and then she'd put this steamed rice over it, a bed of maybe three inches thick—well, two inches thick; and then dot it with huge amounts, untold amounts of butter; and then cover it and bake it in a slow oven. Baking isn't really the word, because it was steamed, really; but it just happens to be in the oven, because you get more uniform heat on this pot. She was proud of the fact that you could never find two grains stuck together. Well, believe me, if you've blanched it, you've washed away a lot of the starch. And with three tons of butter put on top of it's not going to stick. But the bottom of those potatoes would be brown and crisp and the rest of the potato just soft, like a baked potato; and of course, just saturated with butter, because the butter melted and fell to the bottom of the pan. Everybody put this stew on top of the rice. I always wanted the rice by itself, because it was so delicious by itself I wanted to appreciate it.

Geraci: Amazing texture, too.

20-00:43:13

David: Oh, gosh. Just amazing, wonderful. That would have to be in that meal. Let's see. The meat would have to be lamb, and it could either be her lamb stew or the marinated rack of lamb. There'd have to be two desserts. There would have to be something with chocolate, like the chocolate decadence that we created at Narsai's Restaurant, and then something with fruit. So depending on the season. This time of year, maybe peaches or cherries. Well, it's too late for cherries, but again, depending the season, cherries or peaches. If it's a

really hot summer day in the fall, a huge slice of casaba or crenshaw melon. The later in the season it would be, the more likely it would be casaba. But just a large wedge, with a soup spoon to eat it with—no cutting it up. I just can't think of anything more lovely than that. Of course, if we just happen to have some caviar in the refrigerator, I wouldn't mind starting with that. For an appetizer, it has to have fish. And in season, there's nothing to compare with king salmon. And if king salmon is not available, then I would settle for black cod. Those are the kinds of things. Obviously, there could be variations on that.

Geraci: Of course, there'd have to be some wine.

20-00:45:13

David: Oh, my God, plenty of wine, for sure. In the spring time, asparagus would be the primary vegetable, of course. This time of year, the vegetable would probably be Romano beans. Although I made some awfully good succotash with fresh corn, a little bit of red onion, and favas. You know we grow favas at home and I have a freezer full of them, for the rest of the year. They happen to freeze very, very well. Corn is something that people overcook, for some reason. I can never figure it out. We love corn on the cob. It's in that pot of boiling water for—it can't be more than two or three or four minutes. It's to warm it through. You got to parties where people have a barbecue and they have corn on the cob, and there's a pot of boiling water sitting there with the corn in it for hours. The flavor is gone.

Geraci: All the sugars leave.

20-00:46:29

David: Yeah. I sauté the chopped red onion in a little bit of butter—don't use olive oil on the corn—and sauté it just until the onion is tender. Then when we're ready to eat, the corn, which I scraped off the cob—Oh, and that's another thing. People use a knife to cut the corn off the cob and then throw away the cob, but forgetting that the little nub that's left on there, you turn the knife backwards and using the back of the knife, scrape that off. That's where all that nice, sweet, creamy stuff is.

Geraci: I don't even do that. What I do is I take the cob with the nubs on it and I just suck the juice out.

20-00:47:15

David: Oh, yeah? Oh, God.

Geraci: It's the sweetest part.

20-00:47:19

David: Wonderful, wonderful, right. So that goes into the pan, along with the favas that I've peeled. And just as soon as it's heated through, it goes to the table;

that's it. No more cooking needed for that. So those are some of my favorite things that would ask for.

Geraci: I think what's interesting, in talking about your favorite type of food is that we go back to your mom and your culture.

20-00:47:50

David: Yeah. Yeah.

Geraci: There's comfort food.

20-00:47:52

David: Childhood memories, comfort food.

Geraci: There's definitely a comfort food.

20-00:47:56

David: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

Geraci: I think we don't really realize that, until we start to get older and we've experienced more different food ways, how we always go back to comfort food.

20-00:48:08

David: In fact, it's funny. Last night we had my mother's Assyrian lamb stew. Or a variant of it. I asked Veni the night before, if she had any thought of what she'd like to eat. She said, "Geez, we haven't had lamb for a while. Is there any lamb?" In the freezer, I found the neck of the lamb that we barbecued— We do a whole lamb on a spit for Easter. So I hacked it up into some chunks and slowly braised it with these wonderful—Finally, we've got some tomatoes that taste like tomatoes. Damn, it's been a long, slow season. They're only now beginning to taste like tomatoes. Yeah.

Geraci: Well, given that, unless there's something that has come to your mind, I think we have pretty completed our interview.

20-00:49:05

David: I'm sure that when I flip through this, I'll find things that we've repeated three times—

Geraci: And there's ways that we can handle those, too.

20-00:49:12

David: —and I'll find things that I've completely forgotten, but—

Geraci: Narsai, thank you very much.

20-00:49:18

David: Thank you.

Geraci: This has been a fun.

20-00:49:21

David: I'll tell you, it's been an amazing experience for me, Vic. thank you.

