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Curt Gaither oral history interview by Andrew Huse, January 26, 2007

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Andrew Huse: Okay, well I guess let’s just start. It’s the 26th of January 2007. I’m here with Curt Gaither in the top level of the Don Quixote [dining room]. And first of all, just tell us a little bit about your background. Where were you born, et cetera?

Curt Gaither: I was born in Miami and we left there at a young age and moved up to Pennsylvania, New York, that area. [I] went to school in Long Island and got into the restaurant part time cooking actually.

AH: Okay.

CG: Full time about two weeks into it, and [I] worked for Marriott, got involved in their training department with the concept they had then, Farrell’s Ice Cream Parlours. And it was great. [I] traveled for probably five or six years opening restaurants with them—

AH: Okay.

CG: —and went through a different change after that. I don’t know how many we want to get into.

AH: Yes.

CG: Most recently, before I came to Florida, I was with Brewmaster’s Steakhouse.

AH: Okay.

CG: And [I] was Director of Operations for a franchisee in Philadelphia and Restaurant Associates in New York behind that.

AH: Okay. All right, so then, what brought you to the Columbia?
CG: Well, I actually had some personal things going on and decided to move to Florida. [I] went to Daytona and spent some time with my parents, went to the beach everyday. And at some point my brother said to me, “There’s an Italian restaurant you’ve really got to see.” And he was referring to Mangiare’s over in Daytona.

AH: Okay.

CG: I had never heard about the Columbia.

AH: Yes.

CG: So, we went over and Mangiare’s had already been closed. But the Columbia was there, Cha Cha Coconuts—

AH: Now was it closed for the day or was it closed down?

CG: It was closed.

AH: Okay.

CG: It was closed.

AH: You mean closed down.

CG: Closed, done, done.

AH: Yes, okay.

CG: At some point, after seeing some ads in the paper for the Columbia, I sent a resume in and was contacted by Richard to interview and was hired on as a GM in Daytona.

AH: Okay. So you were a GM at Daytona?

CG: Yes.

AH: Okay. Now I heard a story and I want to get your version of it I guess. I guess at one point you were talking to Richard and saying that you could run the company. And that he put you through a few loops first? How did that work?

CG: Well, when I came to Florida, you know in my late thirties, I had been in multi-unit positions and wanted to get with a small company that had some growth and potential to grow where I could be in a multi-unit position. Hopefully, find a place where I could land for awhile.

AH: Yes.
CG: We talked about the Columbia and [we were] talking about my goals and his goals for the company and so-forth. We got into that discussion and I said, “You know, I’d like to be running the company in a few years.” And unfortunately, when Daytona closed Richard asked me to go to Sarasota. I spent about a year in Sarasota and from there Clearwater.

AH: Now, is this as GM’s all the time?

CG: No, in Sarasota there was a GM—

AH: Okay.

CG:—and the company was in a lot of transition at that point. I wasn’t—there were a couple of possibilities. I really didn’t know what Richard had in mind at that point.

AH: Yes, what year was this?


AH: Okay, definitely a time of transition.

CG: (laughs) Exactly.

AH: Yes.


CG: And I went to Sarasota. I was there for about eleven months, went to Clearwater as a GM and then opened Celebration as a General Manager.

AH: Okay.

CG: And I guess, in about a year and a half into it, we went through a lot of changes in Celebration in the menu and the service-ware and just a lot of changes in the Columbia in general as far as service procedures and so-forth.

AH: Okay, so this wasn’t unique to Celebration? This was happening all over?

CG: Well, we were actually making the changes for the Celebration opening.

AH: Oh, I see, so then after that, it started being applied to the rest of the system?

CG: Exactly.
AH: Okay.

CG: That’s what happened.

AH: Tell us about some of those changes before we move on.

CG: Well a lot of what was happening was kind of what I refer to sometime as “oaklunder.” You know, we had one set of service-ware, all white. We had a lot of things that had been done over the years and hadn’t changed with the times.

AH: Yeah.

CG: So, we took a look at the presentation of the food, the recipes for the foods. We went through item by item through the menu and really looked at the recipes and decided what was right and what could be made better, what products could be brought in, what food products could be brought in that were better.

AH: Okay.

CG: It needed an upgrade.

AH: Yes.

CG: We changed the uniforms. We changed the service-ware, upgraded the service-ware, the glassware.

AH: Okay.

CG: Really took a look at every aspect of the restaurant when we re-opened it when we opened there.

AH: Okay.

CG: And the goal was then to implement everything a restaurant at a time after that.

AH: Yes.

CG: Probably a year and a half into the opening, Richard made the decision to make me the Director of Operations.

AH: Okay.

CG: And in taking on that position, I started working with the other restaurants implementing those changes.
AH: And that’s your current position.

CG: My current position is Chief Operating Officer.

AH: Okay. So how is that different?

CG: Well, in the day to day it probably doesn’t (laughs), but probably—I don’t know the date, but several years ago Richard and I went out for a breakfast. We many times go out to breakfast to communicate, issues, whatever it might be.

AH: Sure.

CG: Just to kind of get away and talk. And he said, “You know, it’s a family business and I appreciate everything you’re doing. I’m going to make you the Chief Operating Officer.” So it was the next step and it’s, as far as operations go, it’s the highest position I’m going to get in the company. So, the day to day responsibility I don’t know it’s that much different, but—

AH: Okay, but was there a predecessor? Was there a C.O.O. before you?

CG: No.

AH: Okay, and that’s why Melanie says that you gave her life back.

CG: (laughs) Well, I’d like to think so.

AH: Yes—

CG: I try to handle the day to day.

AH: —Okay.

CG: Certainly Richard—Richard is involved in the final approval of menus and those kinds of things, but I do try to take care of the day to day, most of them.

AH: Okay. All right, so Celebration—all right changing uniforms—tell us a little bit—I’m looking for specifics about the food and the presentation. What are a couple major changes there? I talked to Chef Jerry about some of this stuff, but I want to get it from another person’s point of view.

CG: Well, one good example I think is the fact that, just the plates alone, we use two plates, an oval white plate and a round white plate.

AH: Yes.
CG: And everything went on one of those plates. There was no color, no real sense of a presentation.

AH: Okay.

CG: It was, “put it on a plate and get it out.” If it was hot, it was good to go.

AH: Okay.

CG: Where we really took a look at presentation, varied colors, different sized plates. We probably had, I don’t know, eight to ten different pieces of service-ware that the entries go out on.

AH: Okay.

CG: Some are imported from Spain as well as that we use pretty regularly to bake some of the items in.

AH: Yes.

CG: That’s a big difference.

AH: Okay.

CG: Some of the items, which were recreated or taken a look at and revised as far as recipes, the Pompano en Papillot was an item from the forties and the stuffing was basically a rue with very little flour in it—very little seafood in it.

AH: Okay.

CG: Flour, butter and a stuffing. Whereas now it’s made with artichokes, spinach, crab. It’s really a much better filling.

AH: Okay.

CG: So the item is still there and we refer to it as an item revisited from the forties and that’s what we tried to do.

AH: Now, that recipe, that Pompano recipe that you tweaked, the old one. You figure that was revised over time since the forties? Because what you do now sounds a little closer to what, the way it was marketed anyway in the forties. Do you think maybe it was changed a little bit over time and then, you know, your tweak maybe brought it a little bit closer to where it was supposed to be or—?

CG: I think back then, stuffing the fish with a stuffing like that was what was happening. If you went anywhere you got that stuffing. And—
AH: Okay.

CG: –in today’s market it’s just not a quality item.

AH: Yes.

CG: I think we make changes when they’re necessary with the times.

AH: Sure.

CG: Rather than just try to think, because we’ve done it that way forever it’s going to be good.

AH: Yes, okay. I was just curious if the recipe had been downgraded because I know, you know, quality had suffered. Especially it sounds like during the seventies and eighties and then there was a kind of dip in quality. And of course a part of your job and the whole job during the nineties was trying to ration things back up a little bit.

CG: (agrees)

AH: So anyway, I was just curious about that and maybe over time—and you probably wouldn’t know anyway. But I was just curious if you knew because—

CG: Well—

AH: Maybe the amount of crabmeat was downgraded because of course back in the forties we had crabs right here in the Bay so there was no shortage of that sort of thing.

CG: I just think it was a totally different time then.

AH: Okay.

CG: And, you know, it was the time to use canned vegetables.

AH: Yes.

CG: It wasn’t uncommon to get canned string beans or canned fruit salad or something like that.

AH: Yes.

CG: And we just, no one can really do that now and be successful.

AH: Yes.
CG: So those were the kind of things we needed to change. But there are some of the items on the menu like the chicken and rice. We know that the chicken and rice is best when it comes out of the oven.

AH: Yes.

CG: It’s not going to be any better than that.

AH: Yes.

CG: So, baking in a dinner to order is going to take a little bit longer, but the finished product is just dynamite.

AH: Yes.

CG: And it’s worth explaining to the guest, it may take a little longer, but it’s going to be dynamite when it comes out.

AH: Yes.

CG: So, when they order the chicken and rice, it’s going to be totally different than what they got years ago.

AH: Yes, okay.

CG: Something that was baked in a big batch and sat around and waited.

AH: Yes. Well, it sounds like to Chef Jerry, that was one of the big examples he gave—

CG: Yes.

AH: —was that it was really kind of reinvented.

CG: It was a big deal when we did it.

AH: Yes.

CG: It was a big adjustment for some of the servers that had been here for a long time.

AH: Yes.

CG: Now all of a sudden, they’ve got to wait for an item that was normally just, “pick it up and go.”

AH: Yes.
CG: But [the] response from the guests have been great.

AH: Yes.

CG: And it really is much better. Baking the two side by side, there’s nothing like it.

AH: Yes.

CG: Even the yellow rice itself when it comes out of the oven, that’s when it’s going to— (makes sound of approval).

AH: Yes.

CG: It’s only going to go down from there.

AH: Absolutely. Okay. All right, so the changes made in Celebration, it was kind of a test lab I guess.

CG: (makes sound of agreement)

AH: And what else from there? How long did this tinkering process take? I mean obviously, it never really ends, but if you had to say there was a big initiative, a big push, how long did that last?

CG: You mean with all the restaurants? Are you talking about—

AH: Yes, well I guess, how long did it take to tinker with at Celebration and then the restaurants, about how long did it take to implement it?

CG: In Celebration we really did it through the whole process of the training. Before we opened we took a look at all the service-ware. We used a standard plain, white sugar caddy on the tables. And bringing in a sugar caddy from Spain, you know, upgraded the table; gave it the whole look of the table. We also sell them in the stores. There are a million reasons to do it. It’s a little teeny detail in the restaurant, but it was a big thing as far as the next level.

AH: Yes.

CG: The silver that we used at the time was probably standard in any casual restaurant, a low grade, cheaper silverware. The silverware we use now is a heavy grade, costly, costly silverware. But that was looked at through the whole training process. So it was probably, I don’t know, a couple months we started looking at it a couple months out.

AH: Okay.
CG: And [we were] looking at the menu and changing some of the items and rearranging it. When we opened, I would say 90 percent of it was in.

AH: Okay.

CG: And some of it we went back and forth on. There was a time when we had different uniforms in each restaurant.

AH: Okay.

CG: Here in Ybor City they’ve always worn the black and white, the tuxedo kind of a look.

AH: Yes.

CG: [At] some of the restaurants, they just wore a vest. Some they just wore a black tie—

AH: Yes.

CG: — and so forth. When we opened Celebration the decision was we were going to take it back to the look they had back when it was just a café, of just the white apron and more of a bistro look –

AH: Okay.

CG: —like it would be today. And that’s what we do in all the other restaurants. Being a little bit more casual, being guest friendly in some of those locations. We haven’t changed it in Ybor City because people expect that here. This Ybor City restaurant is always going to be unique. When the others become one hundred and two years old then, they can have that feel. People say to me all the time, I’ll be walking someone around at Celebration and they’ll say, “This doesn’t look like Ybor City.” In a hundred years it will.

AH: Yes, yes.

CG: You know you just don’t recreate that.

AH: Yes.

CG: So, sorry I got off the question.

AH: No, that’s okay.

CG: The process of putting in the other restaurants was kind of a step by step. And I would say it was over a period of between a year and two years.
AH: Okay.

CG: Because we didn’t do it all at once.

AH: Yes.

CG: We wanted to try to get it in and make sure it was consistent. And putting it all in at once in restaurants that had been open for years and years would be a culture shock.

AH: Okay.

CG: So, we took it in stages.

AH: Okay, now when you had arrived, was the union already gone here in Ybor?

CG: Well, when I first came with the company I wasn’t really involved in Ybor City.

AH: Yes, I realize—

CG: And the union was here, but I guess they had—They were here, but they really didn’t have a presence.

AH: Okay.

CG: And by the time I was involved in Ybor City, it was talked about, but we never really paid any attention to anything.

AH: Yes, and by the time you got here, you had women servers probably for the first time too right?

CG: Yes.

AH: Okay.

CG: We still have a union. It’s us.

AH: Okay, yes.

CG: (laughs)

AH: Well, it still amazes me though that this old union survived here up until—and it dictated procedures and stuff often.

CG: Yes.
AH: Those changes that couldn’t be implemented while the union was in place. And like women for example. I mean that’s a crazy thought, you know—

CG: Yes.

AH: —in a way, at least for me, because I’ve studied the unions way back when in the cigar industry and everything realizing that one of those dinosaurs was still around and then how it could impede business. And trying to make the sort of changes that were being made here, so—

CG: I often compare this restaurant to Mama Leone’s. I was at Mama Leone’s in New York for—

AH: Okay.

CG: —you know in the prior life of mine.

AH: Yes.

CG: And by size and the union and a lot of those types of things, in my mind, I compare the two operations. And unfortunately, up there, the union was the thing that put them out of business.

AH: Oh, really?

CG: They just—Well the new location—

AH: Now was it the waiters’ union or—?

CG: You’re familiar with Leone’s right?

AH: Not really.

CG: [It’s an] Italian restaurant, famous in New York.

AH: Yes.

CG: Fifteen hundred seats, old, very typical of Ybor City, [and the] Columbia, but Italian.

AH: Yes.

CG: [It was a] family operation for years, but they moved the location and it was in a hotel. So the hotel union then applied to the restaurant. And the waiters’ wages, everything was totally dictated by that.

AH: Okay.
CG: But different story I guess, sorry I got off track again (laughs).

AH: No, that’s all right. But it reminded you of that and then the union there brought the restaurant down?

CG: Well, they got to a point where the labor cost was just out of control. For a restaurant doing that kind of volume and needing the staff that it did, it really couldn’t support the labor that was required by the union so—

AH: Okay. So the restaurant closed though, is that correct?

CG: Yes.

AH: Yes, okay. And Leone is L-E-O-N-E?

CG: Yes, L-E-O-N-E.’S.

AH: Yes, just wanted to make sure. Okay. Well, this looks great (refers to a dish just brought to him).

CG: I hope it is. (laughs)

AH: We’ll pause it for just a moment so we can—

pause in recording

CG: You know, we put so much on ourselves to get better and get better and Richard presses that as well. And sometimes, we have to stop and look where we came from.

AH: Yes.

CG: Because it’s gotten better and better every day, every year and when you look around the restaurant, even if you go look around Ybor City, it’s the same restaurant, but it’s not the same restaurant.

AH: Oh yes.

CG: It’s come a long way, it really has.

AH: Yes. Well, and what’s so tricky about the Columbia is it’s not just about to modernize and reinvent, but to look back too on the tradition and all these things and what other parts of it that are still viable today, you know? And that seems to me much trickier than running a newer business. You know, if you were running an Outback or something else, you don’t really have to look back so much.
CG: Everything we do, if we do a wine dinner or we do a special event or anything, we’re constantly talking about, you know, Richard, mainly Richard or Melanie or someone will say, “Well, you know, back when my father did this or Adela used to do that—” or whatever. We’ll take those things and try to do them. And it is fun. It is unique. You don’t have a lot of opportunity to do that.

AH: Yes.

CG: And it is important. One of the things Richard always—Richard and Casey both always speak of, is maintaining their tradition and carrying on their traditions and so-forth.

AH: Yes.

CG: And we do truly try to do that.

AH: Yes. Well, I didn’t get this part on tape earlier, but the plates we’re eating on right now are derived from the old ones that you guys found right?

CG: This logo, I don’t exactly recall which era it came from, but this logo was used for a period of time on the china, on the glassware. So we had several pieces with this logo with the sea and the ship in the middle. There are probably four different logos that we have that was on china and we’re trying to put bits and pieces of it in. So, this plate is used for any of the specials that we run. We’re looking at a coffee cup, an espresso cup with a different logo on it. So, [we’re] just bringing back some of those pieces.

AH: Yes.

CG: And it gives the servers a lot of—We’ve got a lot of stories and history that they can share at the table. You know when they put the plate down and someone says, “Wow that’s really nice.” They can talk about the plate; they can talk about the logo; they can just tell a story. More times than not, they can tell a story about the dish. If it’s a Filet Chacho and they tell the “Chacho” story or whatever it might be.

AH: Yes, well that’s really something about the Columbia too. I’ve given a couple of talks here before for different groups like the Rotary and stuff and, you know, I’m just speaking on my own research independent of the Columbia. And of course, the Columbia is a big part of my research since I am studying restaurants in Tampa and they tell you truly if walls could talk! But beyond that, everything has a story here and then I think there’s a tendency for us to have so much disconnection to our food here in America, where it comes from, where it’s grown or whatever. But then, also, just the idea that these recipes, you know, it’s living history and some things change undoubtedly. Some things down grade in quality—maybe the dairy or the seafood. Other things go up—we’re not using canned vegetables anymore, et cetera.

CG: (laughs)
AH: But to me, there’s something special about that and how we can remember all these villains from history, but we can’t remember who first made chicken and yellow rice or something like that.

CG: (agrees)

AH: So it really warrants study, I mean, whether it is just reading a cookbook or academically studying it. But for people who question that, you know, “Why is food important?” It’s like, how can you even ask that question, you know?

CG: (laughs) It’s true.

AH: All right so let’s retrace for a second. We started the celebration in Sarasota. Or now wait, it started in Daytona?

CG: It started in Daytona.

AH: Yes.

CG: And then Sarasota, then Clearwater—

AH: Okay.

CG: —and then Celebration.

AH: Okay. Now after Celebration, did you help implement the plans for all the restaurants then?

CG: Yes.

AH: All right, all the changes?

CG: (nods)

AH: All right, so you weren’t acquainted with any of the other restaurants that you hadn’t yet seen. It sounds like you had already been around.

CG: I visited the other restaurants for whatever, whether it was helping out with a function or—

AH: Okay.

CG: —going for some kind of reason.

AH: Sure. All right so what was the next step then in your career here?
CG: I moved back to Tampa. Probably the first big project we took on was standardizing all the recipes and putting them in the recipe book.

AH: Okay, so that didn’t happen at Celebration?

CG: Well, it did, but it was only in Celebration. So then, we wanted to step out and implement it everywhere else.

AH: Okay. So that was part of this whole statewide thing then?

CG: Yes.

AH: Okay.

CG: I mean in some cases—well at that time we had six chefs that would all tell you they made the best Boliche.

AH: Yes.

CG: And in some cases, they were good, but they were very inconsistent.

AH: Yes.

CG: So there was a time that we could ask for a recipe. I know in putting the recipe book together I could ask someone for a recipe and he would reach in his pocket and take out a crumpled piece of paper in Spanish and hand it to me.

AH: (laughs) Yes.

CG: And we really just couldn’t, there was no way we were going to nail down the consistency of the restaurants like that.

AH: Of course.

CG: And Jerry was a big part of that. Jerry and myself worked on implementing the recipes.

AH: All right, so let’s say you had six chefs, you had six different recipes—

CG: (agrees)

AH: —did they all get a chance?

CG: Well, in some cases, the menus were all a little bit different at that point so there were some items that were on some menus and not on others, which we also changed.
But for the most part, we took what was being made in the restaurant say in Ybor City and one thing we constantly did was [we] went back to Adela’s book. If I could get a buck for every time Richard said, “Check my mom’s book.” And we’d go to the book.

AH: Now, this is the published book?

CG: Yes.

AH: Okay.

CG: We would make the recipe and make it in a batch and document what we put in, have a tasting with the family, whoever was to be involved.

AH: Okay.

CG: Richard was always there. Casey, Lauren, Andrea, whoever was there and was going to be involved. And good, bad, different we’d make an adjustment, make it again, make it again. When we finally got what we thought was best, that became the recipe.

AH: Okay.

CG: And at that point, it was implemented in all the restaurants.

AH: Yes.

CG: And an item at a time and that’s where we are today.

AH: Okay.

CG: So when we run a special and it’s a good special, we’ll document the recipe, take some pictures and it’s added to the book.

AH: Okay.

CG: We change the menu with the same process.

AH: Okay.

CG: So where the book was one small binder when we started, it’s now three full books.

AH: Wow. Are those pictures in each edition there too?

CG: Yes.

AH: How it should be plated?
CG: Yes.

AH: Okay. Interesting. All right so, before we leave this stage, do you recall any one dish that underwent the most changes? Or the most fundamental changes?

CG: Well, sorry. (finishing meal)

AH: No, that’s all right, take your time.

CG: Well, some items like the chicken and rice, preparing it to order was a very big change.

AH: Yes.

CG: It was a very big change that drastically changed the result. And I can’t think of any one that stands out. There were changes to most of them as far as tweaking this or tweaking that. Probably the most important part was the consistency side of it. Being able to execute it and being able to take it to all the restaurants. There are some things that we try to do say in Ybor City, but it may not fly out in St. Augustine. So we have to take that into account as well. Any one item—

AH: Well you—

CG: I would probably have to be looking at the menu I guess. I don’t know.

AH: Okay.

CG: Nothing’s coming to mind, sorry.

AH: If something does, let me know. But talking about things that don’t flatter other locations, is that why there’s no Caldo Gallego anywhere else?

CG: Oh, that’s absolutely. The Caldo we put on the menu in all the restaurants and it just didn’t sell. Some of the chefs will run it. They have the recipe in their book and they can run it if they choose.

AH: Okay.

CG: If it’s a cold day like today they can run it.

AH: Yes.

CG: But if it just didn’t sell, it wasn’t worth it. In Sarasota, where it was a featured soup every week it sold very well so it’s on the menu there.

AH: Oh, it is?
CG: Yes.

AH: Okay.

CG: It’s not on anywhere else.

AH: Okay. Well, you know, I wonder why that is? But I imagine first of all it’s just totally unfamiliar. And I don’t know, like the east coast of Florida doesn’t strike me as like turnip green eating territory, you know?

CG: Yes, you’re right.

AH: You know? They see turnip greens and they’re like (makes face).

CG: Well, we’ve also trained people when they go years and years eating the black bean soup and the Spanish bean soup and of course the salad—

AH: Yes.

CG: —and then, it looks like you throw something else in the mix. People are creatures of habits, you know. They’ve got to go to the Columbia for the black beans and rice. They’ve got to go to the Columbia for the 1905 Salad.

AH: Yes, yes.

CG: There are times when some of the customers we have—we have a guest in Celebration, Sonny Buoncervello who’s been there since we opened. The rib eye is named for Sonny. And when he first started coming in the restaurant, he always ate the same thing every time. And we said, “Sonny you’ve got to try something else.” And he said, “Well you know I love it, I love it, I love it.” And he finally did try some other things and he started to find out that he did like them. (laughs)

AH: Yes.

CG: So now he’ll go in and he’ll change it up a little bit. But people are really creatures of habit.

AH: Yes.

CG: They come in, and they come in for what they want.

AH: Absolutely.

CG: It becomes very hard to change our menu.
AH: I’m sure.

CG: Because we have a pretty big menu by anybody’s standards and you know certainly, we’re at a point now where to put anything on, something has to come off. And it’s tough to take anything off.

AH: Yes.

CG: It really is.

AH: So the rib eye was named “Sonny” in all the locations or just the Celebration?

CG: All.

AH: Okay.

CG: There are several items on the menu that are named for guests.

AH: Yes.

CG: The Veal “Leno” is named for Leno here in the Ybor City restaurant. And there are probably a half a dozen items that are named for guests.

AH: So Sonny, it got named for him because he ate that same dish all the time?

CG: You would think it was the first meal he was ever served.

AH: Yes.

CG: He ate that every time he came in and anyone who came in with him had to have it.

AH: Okay. Oh, I see. He’d always make them order it?

CG: Oh, yes. He’s definitely one of the top guests in Celebration and he’s a real friend of the house. So he’s warranted that.

AH: Yes. Now, tell me about the “Leno,” you said the Veal “Leno”?

CG: Leno—the Rack of Veal “Leno.” Leno has been coming here now for—I don’t know how long now. Leno’s in his eighties. He’s part of the crew. He’s been on a couple of trips to Spain with Richard and the managers.

AH: Oh wait, so he’s an employee?

CG: No, no, no. He’s a guest here in Ybor City.
AH: Okay. Okay.

CG: Again, a friend of the house who loved the veal rack when it came out.

AH: So he’s actually been taken on some of these trips?

CG: Yes.

AH: Okay.

CG: Richard has, as you know, taken the managers on several trips.

AH: Yes.

CG: And two of the trips he opened up to some of the friends of the house, friends of the family, some of that more intimate group I guess—

AH: Okay.

CG: —that had interest in going and exploring the vineyards and so-forth.

AH: Wow! Neat. Okay, any other names of dishes? I know the “Chacho” story, but—

CG: Well, the stuffed shrimp is named for Jesse Gonzalez which we’ve been buying shrimp from Singleton for years and years and the Singleton shrimp.

AH: Okay. What is he, the owner then of the company?

CG: I want to say owner/president.

AH: Okay.

CG: I don’t know him very well. I would know him if he walked in—

AH: Yes.

CG: —but I don’t know him as well as Richard and Casey do.

AH: Okay.

CG: What else do we have on there that’s named for someone? You’re catching me off guard again.

AH: (laughs) See if there’s a menu nearby.

CG: Yeah, we should have grabbed a menu.
AH: (laughs) That’s all right.

CG: Well, the Steak “Freddy Brown”.

AH: Oh, yes. What is that?

CG: That’s a Churrasco steak, it’s grilled, served with chimichuri sauce.

AH: Yes, it’s very good.

CG: It’s a big mover and Freddy again involved in everything for years with the Columbia. He’s been involved with the Columbia and Richard since before I came with the company.

AH: How so?

CG: He has worked for several of the liquor companies.

AH: Okay.

CG: But I think more importantly than he’s worked for liquor companies or wine companies, he’s been involved in anything we’ve ever done in the way of fundraising and supporting the Columbia, supporting Richard’s programs and so forth. (says “Thank you” to a waiter)

AH: All right. Okay, so that was a favorite dish of his? Is that how that worked?

CG: I believe so. I know when we put it on and we were talking about what do we call it, Richard said, “We’ve got to name this for Fred, Freddy.”

AH: Okay. Cool.

CG: You know we try to spread that word to the servers so even in Sand Key in Clearwater, somebody says, “Why is it Freddy Brown?” They can at least say, “Friend of the family.”

AH: Yes.

CG: Close to the heart.

AH: Okay, interesting. So then the menu is a hall of fame of sorts.

CG: It really is. You know the world famous “George” burger. You know, we kid George about it. And the “Lula Mae” salad.
AH: The George what? The George Burger?

CG: George Burger.

AH: Yes, now how does that—?

CG: We didn’t have a burger on the menu for years. And many days Richard would call over and ask George to make him a burger.

AH: Okay. George Guito, right?

CG: George Guito, yes. And at some point, the decision was we’re going to try a burger on the menu.

AH: Okay.

CG: So it had to be the George Burger.

AH: Okay.

CG: Jerry and I got George and said, “George let’s make this burger.” We put together a recipe for it and put it on the menu.

AH: So is that for especially unadventurous eaters or—?

CG: It’s there for somebody who wants a burger, but it’s a dynamite burger. It’s a meal.

AH: Yes.

CG: You haven’t had the burger yet?

AH: No, I haven’t had one here.

CG: It’s a meal.

AH: Okay.

CG: It’s a meal for sure. The Lula Mae Salad was named for Lula—

AH: Yes.

CG: —after she passed. I can’t think of any others off hand.

AH: Yes, all right. How is that burger served that you say it’s a meal?

CG: Well, it’s a big burger on Cuban bread.
AH: Oh, okay. Cuban bread.

CG: Lettuce, tomato, mayonnaise, mustard—

AH: Okay.

CG: – Ketchup.

AH: Nice.

CG: Everything’s on there and—

AH: Yes.

CG: –it’s a meal.

AH: Okay.

CG: And anything on Cuban bread is good! (laughs)

AH: Yes, I agree! A friend of mine who I brought here and he still says, “Come back with some of that Cuban bread!” Because he’s had Cuban bread elsewhere, but it’s just so warm and crispy and everything here. It’s just perfect.

CG: I don’t know if Jerry had talked about it or Richard—and probably one of the major, major things that we did was—I know when I came on board we baked bread in each of the restaurants. And coming from up North, I had no idea what Cuban bread was.

AH: Yes.

CG: And we did a pretty bad job of it actually.

AH: Okay.

CG: And bringing the bread to the other restaurants from Ybor City was very major. That’s probably one of the biggest accomplishments as far as the food.

AH: Okay.

CG: If you have to name one, I would say getting the Cuban bread to all of the restaurants and being able to serve bread from La Segunda [Central Bakery] in all of our restaurants.

AH: Okay, and so how did that come about? I mean obviously, there was a problem. So did you talk to La Segunda and can we make more and then how do you move it?
CG: Well, I actually didn’t implement that one. I can’t claim it.

AH: Yes.

CG: But Richard approached Segunda’s, a small bakery here in town, and said, “You know, we want to put the bread into all the restaurants.”

AH: Yes.

CG: And they, a small family bakery, were not prepared to do that. They didn’t have the baking facilities, the freezer, the staffing and so-forth. And he encouraged them to get the equipment and do it. [Richard] “If you don’t do it, we’ve got to get somebody else to do it.”

AH: Yes.

CG: And they did it. And I don’t know how their business—I know their business has grown phenomenally.

AH: Yes. (laughs)

CG: Percentage wise I don’t know. But it certainly was the right move for them.

AH: Yes.

CG: And the bread really is, it’s never going to be the same as being delivered here twice a day.

AH: Yes.

CG: But it’s as close as you can get. That’s for sure.

AH: Okay.

CG: And it’s very consistent.

AH: And how is it shipped?

CG: It’s part-baked at the bakery.

AH: Okay.

CG: Frozen and then we finish it at the restaurant.

AH: Got you.
CG: So they truly are getting a fresh baked bread at the restaurant.

AH: Yes. Okay, it’s like the best of both worlds really.

CG: It really is.

AH: Yes. Well, and I don’t know how it’s different and maybe you can tell me, that Subway bread I think is awful. And is it just that their dough is frozen and is it part-baked? It just seems like it’s this bread that just after a little while it just kind of falls apart.

CG: Yes. Well, it is definitely a formula in the baking.

AH: Yes.

CG: You know, we just tell people that the key to the Cuban bread is the lard.

AH: Yes.

CG: People don’t know the lard is there and it’s just—well I know when I came on board, I’m not really sure what we were using for a recipe.

AH: Okay.

CG: But I know it was very inconsistent within the restaurant.

AH: Yes.

CG: Much less—forget about what the other restaurants were doing and it’s definitely the bakery in Tampa.

AH: Yes.

CG: The water, the altitude, the Cuban that slides it in the oven. (laughs)

AH: Yes, yes, yes.

CG: I don’t know exactly what it is—

AH: Yes.

CG: —but even buying it in the grocery store of another brand, it’s different.

AH: Okay.
CG: I don’t know if that makes sense, but—

AH: No, no, it makes complete sense.

CG: Kind of like bagels in New York.

AH: Yes—

CG: (laughs)

AH: –absolutely, pizza and stuff like that. Now, the bread, you said that the restaurant cranked out some inferior bread. Now, you managed to get around to some of the locations before it was changed. Tell me a little bit about that range. I mean I just want to get an idea of, did you go to warm it or—

CG: (laughs) I thought we were going to focus on positive things!

AH: No, no, no, well it is a positive thing. I’m focusing on the change.

CG: Okay.

AH: But I just want to get an idea of—you know what I mean? Like if you went to Daytona and they were making a bread that was nothing like Cuban bread or something. I’m just trying to get an idea so that I can tell people just how major that change was.

CG: Well for me, when I came to work for Columbia, I didn’t know the rice from the beans—

AH: Yes.

CG: –to be honest with you. I didn’t. And when I lived in Daytona, I knew a few things—

AH: Yes.

CG: – that what we were baking wasn’t good bread compared to anything I have had anywhere else.

AH: (laughs) Okay, all right.

CG: And it wasn’t that way on Monday, and it was as bad on Tuesday, but different.

AH: Yes.

CG: And it was as bad, which is a harsh word, on Wednesday, but different again.
AH: Yes.

CG: So we really weren’t even serving consistently—

AH: Day to day, yes. Okay.

CG: And baking, it’s not like cooking.

AH: It’s a science.

CG: Yes, you can take a guy and if he can’t bake, he can’t bake.

AH: Yes.

CG: Jerry here will say, “I’m not a baker.”

AH: Yes.

CG: He does come up with desserts for us and he will work with cake recipes and that kind of thing, but he’ll say, “I’m not a baker.”

AH: Yes.

CG: And I think that’s the big, the big difference.

AH: Okay, all right so, now let’s get back to the overall changes—

CG: Did I answer that?

AH: What’s that?

CG: Did I answer that?

AH: Yes, I think you did, yes.

CG: (laughs)

AH: So, all right, so all of these changes are taking place, we just left off I think the last bookmark I guess is the recipes all being made consistent. Now, were you C.O.O. [Chief Operating Officer] by that point that you were coordinating all the recipes?

CG: I was Director of Operations.

AH: Okay. Now, what was the next step then in your career after the recipes were all synchronized?
CG: Well, we took bits and pieces. Certainly some of the changes were pretty expensive. It wasn’t cheap to change the silverware in all the restaurants.

AH: Yes.

CG: So we did it a restaurant at a time.

AH: Okay.

CG: Same with the service-ware. We didn’t change eight plates at once. We put one in and then that one and it was budgeted out and it was planned.

AH: Okay.

CG: We didn’t just shoot from the hip and do everything all at once.

AH: Yes.

CG: It really was handled in a business fashion.

AH: Yes. Well, and it sounds like such were things at the Columbia at a time that you wouldn’t have been able to afford it even if you wanted to change, you know, everything all at once.

CG: That’s definitely true.

AH: Yes, Dennis [Fedorovich] and I had a frank talk earlier in the week, so—

CG: (laughs)

AH:—and of course Richard has pretty much told everything as far as I know, but—

CG: And we’re kind of in a—I didn’t mean to cut you off there—

AH: No, no, that’s okay.

CG: —we’re kind of in a different mode now.

AH: Yes.

CG: The service-ware is all standard. You know, the flatware, the china, you know, the crystal that we use for certain wines in the house glasses and so-forth. Well, the last few years, as you know I’m sure, has been upgrading the dining rooms and kitchens and so-forth.

AH: Yes.
CG: And you know we’ve really come a long way in that as well.

AH: Yes, well I guess that’s the next step we were getting to. So, I know the facility was in trouble in the mid-nineties and you know the roof and all this other stuff. Were you involved in any of those upgrades? Or did you come on later?

CG: I was not involved in that phase in Ybor.

AH: Okay.

CG: I came on when the Quixote room—I was on when the Quixote [dining] room was done.

AH: Okay.

CG: When the kitchen—when the Andalucia [dining room] opened and some those kinds of things.

AH: Okay.

CG: But the initial phase, I was not.

AH: Okay. Now the kitchen, let’s talk a little bit about that. Back in the forties, early fifties Casimiro claimed in one of these ads they had the most compact kitchen in the U.S. (laughs) I know later generations are probably cursing that distinction—

CG: (laughs)

AH: —because it probably was for the amount of business coming out of that kitchen. Give me a little idea then, what was your involvement in the, you know, the changing of the kitchen. And were there changes like that going on in all the restaurants?

CG: Well, it’s pretty amazing that they got the volume of food out that they did in this restaurant from that sized kitchen.

AH: Yes.

CG: That still amazes me to look back at it.

AH: Yes, and no air conditioning!

CG: I’m sure you’ve heard all the stories.

AH: Yes.
CG: It rained more in the kitchen than out of the kitchen, when it rains.

AH: Yes. (laughs)

CG: But in all of the restaurants, I think we’ve taken a different approach. We’ve tried to, when we look at any of the restaurants now and we go in to renovate the kitchen, we look back to Celebration. And again that was part of our prototype sort of speak. A lot of things we did there we tried to carry to the other restaurants, especially the back of the house.

AH: Okay.

CG: And when we renovated the kitchen in Sarasota, Jerry helped put together the line there which he was part of the line in Celebration. We want to make it as standardized as possible so we can easily move people in and out. We can have the same expectation of getting the food out. You know, we’re constantly looking at new equipment and some of those kinds of things, but we really want to look for standardizing as much as possible [when] putting the product out.

AH: Okay. All right, so the kitchen design then, still came from Celebration too.

CG: Well, depending on the facility, as much as it could be.

AH: Okay.

CG: Yes.

AH: Okay.

CG: The square footage is different and it might not be able to be—so, it’s not exactly the same in Sarasota.

AH: Yes, sure.

CG: But basically, the set up behind the line is—

AH: Well, I think Jerry, he was especially fond of his involvement, I guess it was in West Palm. And he said he’s proudest of that kitchen out of all of them. Do you feel the same way?

CG: Well, it’s a new kitchen which is always great.

AH: Yes (laughs)

CG: But it was an existing restaurant and Jerry did take the plan and lay it out. A lot of that process was the Celebration line—
AH: Yes.

CG: —but it works very well.

AH: Okay.

CG: It works very well.

AH: Yes. And let’s talk about expansion. Since Celebration then, what other restaurants have you seen open? West Palm obviously, were there any others?

CG: (shakes head “No”)

AH: Okay, that was it. All right. Well, you know, how much—obviously the President calls the shots, et cetera—but how much input do you have in that whole expansion process? I mean, obviously, you must be someone they look to see is this feasible? Is it a good idea? How do you weigh something like that?

CG: We talk about it all the time and people are constantly approaching us. You know every little town in “hosh-kosh” wants a Columbia there.

AH: Yes.

CG: And has reasons it should be there.

AH: Yes.

CG: Richard gets approached by a lot of folks. Casey gets approached. I get approached. We don’t want to make any mistakes. We want to get the right location, the right demographics, the right guests, certain characteristics of the building. We want to have a high ceiling so we can have this feel. We do want to be able to— I think when we look at a site we want to be able to incorporate some of the things that are right here in this restaurant.

AH: Yes.

CG: Celebration is a beautiful restaurant, but each of the rooms there represents a room that’s here. There is a Quixote room, there is a la Fonda [dining room] and so forth. So we want to be able to carry those things in. And probably one of the biggest things is, are we going be able to open up and be a forever business?

AH: Yes.

CG: Is the rent going to be right? Is the location going to be right? We want to have all the pieces. We don’t want to be an Outback and open a hundred restaurants.
AH: Yes.

CG: A handful of strong ones is more our type.

AH: Absolutely, that’s what Richard—

CG: On occasion, Richard will come across something and he’ll want to look into it and he will or Casey will. Anything I look at or anyone approaches me on, I’ll take a look at it and if it looks like it might fly or could have possibilities of flying then I’ll involve Richard and we’ll take a look at it together.

AH: Okay. Just off the top of your head, if the Columbia were to expand, what would be the area that you would look at the most closely?

CG: Well, that’s a really loaded question.

AH: Yes, I’m sure it is.

CG: (laughs) We’ve talked about a lot of different things.

AH: Yes.

CG: You know, we’ve talked about Atlanta. We’ve talked about D.C. We’ve talked about those things. Personally, I’d like to see a few more in Florida.

AH: Yes.

CG: I think there’s more room for at least three more in Florida.

AH: Yes.

CG: I like the idea of being close to home. Not me, personally, but if we were to open one in Atlanta, I’d want to see us open three in Atlanta. I think that having one up there by itself, consistency, supervision, all of those things that go into being successful, it can be done, but it’s tougher to be done.

AH: Yes.

CG: I think there are locations in Florida, people know us here—

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

CG: All the things that work in Florida, there’s still room for it. We’re not saturated.
AH: Yes, yes, and well, I guess that brings up a really good point I think. The Columbia’s identity and identifying with Florida, I mean it seems to me a very important connection. There aren’t any outside of Florida, and you know Florida, of course, it’s all about tourism, but it’s also about regulars too. I mean that keeps you afloat in the summer and everything else. In your mind, how does that connection work? I mean, besides the fact that the Spanish Conquistadors came here so long ago and everything. But how does that market fit? It seems like it really works well for the Columbia. So, what insight do you have there?

CG: Well, I’ve always said that we can’t survive anywhere on one chunk of business.

AH: Yes.

CG: We can’t survive just on the tourists or just on the convention business or just the locals. We need all of them.

AH: Yes.

CG: And I think we’ve been successful. Where we’re successful, we are because we’ve done that. And I think that, you know, we don’t go up against mom and pop Cuban family and not only can we not compete price wise, the gringos won’t go there.

AH: Yes.

CG: And we need the gringos.

AH: Yes.

CG: So I think it’s very friendly for people to come in here and appreciate the atmosphere and when they try the food, they realize that Spanish and Cuban food is not a taco.

AH: Yes.

CG: And it’s not that kind of thing so it is friendly to come in here. So, I don’t think, I don’t think it’s just having that Spanish guest or that Latin guest. We get them, but it’s definitely not our mainstay.

AH: Oh, yes. Okay.

CG: I feel like I didn’t answer that one either, (laughs)

AH: Well, yeah, I don’t know. I guess how does Florida, the market here, how has it maybe shaped the Columbia? Or how does it seem to fit so well?

CG: Everyone’s got a story about the Columbia.
AH: Yes.

CG: You know, my grandfather used to come there, my parents took us, even ones who have kind of come more recently someone has told them. When Sarasota was closed for renovation we just constantly had people coming—and it wasn’t just people that were coming and saying, “When are you reopening? I need my 1905 Salad.”

AH: Yes, yes.

CG: They were people that would show up and say, “We’re here and you’re closed.” And they weren’t upset that they couldn’t eat, but they were meeting their friends there.

AH: Yes.

CG: You know, people that come to Florida to visit, they’re meeting at the Columbia.

AH: Yes.

CG: And I think it’s just one of those places that people have come to know they can go and get their 1905 Salad. They can get all of the things they want when they go out.

AH: Yes. Okay, well, we’ll start, you know, sort of wrapping up.

CG: Okay.

AH: But, say after the new kitchen, what were some of the big things you know in the operations then. You’ve obviously got West Palm Beach. What else?

CG: Well, we talked about standardizing the menus, but that came more from the kitchen.

AH: Okay.

Waitress: Coffee anyone?

CG: Would you like coffee?

AH: I’m fine.

CG: (says to the waitress) We’re good.

Waitress – Okay.

CG: Thank you.

AH: Thanks. Yes this is the 2000s. Were there any things, any landmarks for you?
CG: Well, I think aside from the plant itself, the restaurant, the kitchen, the chairs and the tables. I think we’ve really tried to take a focus on the management, the training and really putting the focus on the level of service, the attention to detail. It’s really where our focus is now. I think every year, we’ve gotten better and better and the expectation becomes more and more.

AH: Yes.

CG: The prices are higher. The guest’s expectation is so much higher. So we are trying to take that—carry that through in our managers, in our servers, and everyone who deals with the guests. I think, probably that’s our biggest challenge now.

AH: Yes.

CG: Because a lot of restaurants out there, everyone needs help. Getting them, retaining them, training them, that’s probably our big focus right now.

AH: Okay and then what about the future? What do you see on the horizon short and long term?

CG: I think that I would definitely like to see us open a couple more restaurants. Not three at once, but I wouldn’t mind seeing one in the next year or two.

AH: Okay.

CG: I wouldn’t mind seeing another one a year or two behind that. I think it then brings us to a different level as a company—

AH: Yes.

CG: –as far as our infrastructure, as far as operating the company and so forth. We have some folks who have been with us for awhile who are looking for some growth. And I think that opens up opportunities for them. I think the family likes to see that. I think that they want growth of the company for the future generations as well as some of the folks that are that extended family.

AH: Yes.

CG: I’d like to see some of that happen.

AH: Yes.

CG: We have some folks that are happy right where they are. You know George being here as many years as he is—

AH: Yes.
CG: —and some of the folks we have in some of the other restaurants, they’re happy right where they are. But we have other people who would like to move a little bit.

AH: Well, yes it sounds kind of like the second son syndrome. In Spain the reason why there were so many conquistadors was there were so many people who couldn’t inherit the family farm.

CG: There you go.

AH: And they had to go someplace else and try something new. So, it sounds like you’re getting kind of the same thing once you get someone who’s got a lot of experience and has really mastered what they do here or wherever they are.

CG: We definitely have some good people that are looking for a challenge, are looking for more and that kind of thing. And we can do that.

AH: Okay.

CG: We can do that.

AH: Yes.

CG: My feelings are when we grow and certainly, we talk about a lot of things when we get ready to open a restaurant and what concerns are and that kind of thing. I don’t think we ever want to do anything that’s going to jeopardize the stability of what we have.

AH: Yes.

CG: My feeling when we opened West Palm was not a concern of opening West Palm, we can do that.

AH: Yes.

CG: I want to make sure we’re maintaining everything else while we’re doing that. We can’t let our focus get off of what we do.

AH: That’s right.

CG: And I think that’s part of what happened back in the day.

AH: Yes.

CG: And I don’t think we ever want to let that happen again.
AH: Yes. That’s actually a really good point. Now how is West Palm doing? I hear it’s doing quite well.

CG: It’s doing very well. (laughs)

AH: Yes?

CG: It’s coming along.

AH: Yes.

CG: The center there is having some issues.

AH: What’s that again?

CG: City Place.

AH: Okay.

CG: The center that we’re in is having some issues so we don’t have the foot traffic that we’d like.

AH: I see.

CG: Where in St. Armand’s Circle, there are thousands of people walking by the front door and you know, they’re there looking for us. If they’re not walking by the front door it’s tougher to get them in.

AH: Oh, yes.

CG: It’s a beautiful—have you seen it, West Palm?

AH: St. Armand’s?

CG: West Palm.

AH: No, I haven’t.

CG: It’s a beautiful restaurant and the food is outstanding. The service is great. And as we get people in, they’re happy.

AH: Yes.

CG: We just need to continually build that base.
AH: I see. Okay, you know we’ve covered a lot of ground here. What haven’t we covered? What are some important things we haven’t talked about? I’m sure we’re skipping over all kinds of stuff.

CG: I’m sure there’s a ton of it.

AH: (laughs)

CG: I should have gone through questions in my mind beforehand. I have no idea what you were going to ask so I really wasn’t prepared with anything in particular.

AH: Oh, okay, no its fine.

CG: You know, I think about my job and I didn’t know what you were going to ask me, but I really gave a lot of thought to my job and what I do day in and day out.

AH: Yes.

CG: And I think, in a lot of companies or businesses or whatever, it’s very easy to become complacent and accept things as they are.

AH: Yes.

CG: And I don’t think that we as a company do that. I don’t think Richard does that. And I don’t want to do that. I feel that I have to challenge myself and also set up challenges for the management team, everyone in the operations of every day because we can’t become complacent. And in other companies, I see folks in my level or similar positions come and go. Those positions turn over every year, every couple of years and so forth. And I think it’s because they become complacent.

AH: Yes.

CG: Very accepting, things are fine. I don’t think we do that.

AH: Okay.

CG: I don’t think we do that in any of the restaurants. I think we constantly try to make it better.

AH: Yes. Well, and we talked about the challenges between the future and the past, but so many other things that such a big operation that does a real bustling lunch trade and then does have the kind of finer dining at night and everything. All of those things seem to be real challenges especially because the competition never lets up.

CG: Well, I know and we talk about this constantly to our assistant managers and everyone in the management staff. We can be sitting here and having a 1905 Salad and
an iced tea and the table next to us can have a two hundred dollar bottle of wine and four courses.

AH: Yes.

CG: And it’s tough to pull that off.

AH: Yes.

CG: If you go into a steakhouse, you know what to expect and everyone around is getting the same thing.

AH: Yes.

CG: You go into a casual restaurant, same thing, but in a different environment. We have to be able to pull both off.

AH: Exactly.

CG: It’s that way in all of our restaurants. In Saint Augustine, where a big, big, big, big percentage of our business is tourists, there’s also that person who’s had five courses and a two hundred dollar bottle of wine in Ybor City.

AH: Yes.

CG: And they’ve got to be in there and taken care of appropriately.

AH: Yes.

CG: So it’s not an easy task.

AH: Yes.

CG: Everyone, everyone has an expectation wherever they go. But any comment I hear from anyone good or bad is, they’ve had an expectation and we’ve met it or they had an expectation and we didn’t meet it. It’s never, “Well it wasn’t good or it wasn’t bad.” It’s always relative to an expectation—

AH: Yes.

CG: —that they’ve had from someone that’s been in the Columbia.

AH: Well and compare it to the Ruth’s Chris, in a way a super operation because once again you’re catering to a very specific clientele.

CG: Right.
AH: Kind of a specific—maybe not demographic, but you know, that whole—it’s much less diverse I guess.

CG: You know what you’re going for.

AH: Yes.

CG: You know what’s going to be an arm and a leg to pay for it.

AH: Yes.

CG: And you go in and hopefully you get that.

AH: Yes.

CG: Here, it can be a whole different expectation.

AH: Yes.

CG: We’ve got to deliver it if we’re going to be around.

AH: Yes, and well, I mean, Casimiro mentioned in those old Wilder articles one of them, “Eat like a millionaire.” And it says, “Whether you’re a millionaire or you’re just kind of splurging for a night, you’re going to get treated the same way.” It doesn’t matter how much money we think you’re going to spend, you’re going to get the same service and it’s always a positive thing. If you’re not a millionaire, you’re going to get treated the same way.

CG: And it’s tougher and tougher every day to execute that.

AH: I’m sure it is.

CG: That’s what we work on.

AH: Okay. Well, let me see. Well, I guess I usually have a couple of questions that I ask towards the end.

CG: Okay.

AH: First of all, I usually ask people the roughest time since you’ve arrived at the Columbia. And that could mean—it could be in a number of different ways. Maybe you were really busy or maybe you were thinking “Maybe I’m in over my head!” Or you “Can I deliver in time?” You know, or something. And also, you’re proudest, best time.
CG: Well, it’s probably one that I would have to think about to give you the right answer. But I think that—aside from when Daytona closed because that was pretty trying. I didn’t know it was going to happen. But as far as in this job, I think the toughest part for me that is sometimes when we want to put something in and we want to try and put a system in and make it consistent and so forth, Richard is very protective and is—and wants to be aware of what’s going on and is very passionate about it. And I think that it’s taken time. From day one in the job to now, it’s taken a lot of time for him to let loose of a lot of things. And I think that was the toughest thing for me.

AH: Yes.

CG: You know, I felt that I knew I could do it from day one, but I think he believed it, but wanted to see it.

AH: Yes.

CG: And I think, as he saw it, he let loose.

AH: Okay.

CG: So that was probably my biggest challenge.

AH: Yes.

CG: I think my biggest success or when I feel the best about the job is when my managers do well and they can stand up and tell their success story. I’ve got several managers that I like to think—a couple of them I think maybe have mentored me. And I think that their success and letting them be able to stand up and say, “We’ve done this and we’ve accomplished that and sales are up” and whether they can totally appreciate where they’ve taken the restaurant for my success, I feel it. I know it when I go in the restaurant. I know where they came from and where they are. And I feel a great deal of success in that.

AH: Okay.

CG: Did I answer that? (laughs)

AH: Yes, yes you did. I can understand. All right, and then I always ask people this, your favorite meal at the Columbia? I guess let’s think of it, you know, you’re having a couple guests and you’re ordering and maybe you want people to try different things, but tell me your personal preference if you had a couple of guests and you ordered an extra entrée or appetizer, et cetera.

CG: Okay.

AH: And then beverages too.
CG: Okay.

AH: The whole nine yards.

CG: Well, it’s another one of those things that—I cannot tell you there is anything on our menu that is not good.

AH: Sure.

CG: I think when it is prepared properly, everything on our menu bar none is good.

AH: Yes, this is totally about personal preference.

CG: And I think I do some of the obvious ones when I have guests. I had some folks in Celebration about two weeks ago. And we just did an assortment of tapas and I don’t think it really matters what it is because again they’re all good. As long as it can be shared and that’s what tapas are all about.

AH: Yes.

CG: They got to have a 1905 Salad. Bring us a bowl of 1905 Salad and split it around the table. And for anyone who’s had it, they’re anticipating it. For anyone who hasn’t had it, they’re going to wow it. So it’s always a safe bet. As far as the main courses go, I think the Snapper Alicante is one of the best items we serve. Signature dish, I always suggest it. It’s funny, I sat next to a guest in Clearwater once and he didn’t realize I worked with the restaurant and he was talking to his family and he said, “This must be one of the best items on the menu because it has the longest description.” But you’re not going to get fish prepared like that anywhere.

AH: Yes.

CG: And some people will say, “Brown sauce on fish?” When you eat it, it’s outstanding.

AH: It is.

CG: I always recommend that. The Chicken and Shrimp Barcelona I think is unique. I will recommend that. And I did the other night to the table that I was sitting with. If I was going to share a plate around the table, I would order one of the combination plates which are very popular for that reason. You try a little bit of pork, a little bit of Boliche and so forth. And for these folks who were from Philadelphia, again, wouldn’t know the rice from the beans. So, to be able to have all of those flavors and talk about them and experience it, one of the things that is very unique about the Columbia is we can deliver so much of the experience at the table.

AH: Yes.
CG: You know, when I have guests, we’ll always get a sangria. Personally, sangria is too sweet for me.

AH: Yes.

CG: But I’m always going to have a glass with them because I want them to see it made at the table and I want them to experience all of that. We’ll order the Tapeo because when they set that mixed tapas down on the table with the stand, it’s a part of the experience. We were in a heavy conversation when dessert came, but when the server said, “I’m going to flambé the Brazo Gitano for you,” everyone stopped. So I think continuing to deliver that experience at the table is going to be a part of our success in the future.

AH: Okay. We haven’t finished your meal, dessert.

CG: Dessert. Well dessert—

AH: It doesn’t sound like you have too much of a sweet-tooth, but if you wanted to go all out one night.

CG: Well, I’d like to go all out, but what I want is some of each.

AH: Okay.

CG: I always enjoy the flan. But that is kind of a standard answer. I’m not a key lime pie person. People like the key lime pie. The number one right now is the bread pudding. It can’t be beat.

AH: It’s really good.

CG: It’s just dynamite. It’s a big plate of food. I’ve never had a complaint on it.

AH: Yes.

CG: It’s just, it’s dynamite. A lot of places do bread pudding, but I’ve had some that are worse. I don’t think I have had any that are better.

AH: Yes. Well, Richard feels the same way.

CG: Does he? (laughs)

AH: Yeah, I was talking with him about it. And then, you wouldn’t have the sangria unless it was with a guest. What would you have if you were by your lonesome—

CG: Well—
AH: —any signature Columbia—?

CG: I normally drink bourbon. But if I’m not going to drink a Jack Daniels lately I’ve been ordering the Mojito. I think, in the right setting, relaxing, enjoying, a Mojito is dynamite.

AH: Yes.

CG: Refreshing. I would order a Mojito for sure.

AH: Yes.

CG: I enjoy wine with dinner.

AH: Well, of course I was able to attend the Bourbon Dinner a couple of years ago.

CG: Oh, okay (laughs)

AH: Oh, I love bourbon too. You know bourbon and scotch for me and wow, you know. I was blown away.

CG: He was a character.

AH: Yes.

CG: What a character he is.

AH: Oh, yes. And then just incorporating the bourbon in all the different dishes, into the guava lamb ribs and everything. I think I had food up to here, you know?

CG: (laughs)

AH: It was amazing though, truly.

CG: Nobody goes hungry from those things, that’s for sure.

AH: No, and what a deal! And you know, usually they’re fifty bucks right?

CG: (agrees)

AH: Whether it’s a wine dinner or bourbon or anything else, that’s an incredible deal. And you know I guess as we’re winding down here. One of the roles the Columbia’s always played, I can see it in those old ads and everything is to some extent an educational institution. I mean Americans are not usually that well versed in food and international food, especially back in the forties. So, those columns would often run,
“What Makes the Rice Yellow?” You know different things like that. I found a dish that used truffles, “What’s Truffles?” And back then, as now and much more intensely, wine and other overseas drinks. Back in the forties those cordials from Cuba. There were different Cordials from France and things like this. Today it’s all about the Spanish wines and that’s a huge success. And I guess that’s one thing we haven’t talked about much is the wine. So I guess we’ve got the wine dinners and I guess that’s kind of educational too, whether it’s the wine dinner or the bourbon dinner.

CG: (agrees)

AH: Tell us a little bit about I guess that role of the Columbia and work wine into it.

CG: Well, I remember when I was talking with Richard, we were sitting in Cha Cha Coconuts in Daytona. And through the whole process, you know, I was a bit mesmerized with Richard because certainly meeting him on the first occasion is an experience.

AH: Yes.

CG: He said, “Well, what are your feelings on Spanish wines?” And we didn’t even have anywhere near the wine list we have now.

AH: Yes.

CG: I had never seen the wine list. And I remember my response being, Spanish wines are kind of scary. I said, “I don’t think that people are prepared for Spanish wines and I don’t even know if I had drank a Spanish wine at that point in my life.”

AH: Okay.

CG: And he kind of laughed. And I know—everyone knows—that Richard has a passion for the wine.

AH: Yes.

CG: He’s much more a wine guru than I am. I don’t think I will ever have the knowledge of wine that he has.

AH: Okay.

CG: I think it’s an important part of the experience again.

AH: Yes.

CG: And I think that it’s important that we train our staff to be prepared. We don’t want them to go sell a hundred dollar bottle at every table. A couple of folks who want to have a twenty-five, thirty-dollar bottle, that’s okay. And that guest who would like to have a
six hundred dollar bottle, that’s okay too. But we have to be able to sort them out. Otherwise we’re going to turn them off or we’re going to make the experience for them.

AH: Yes.

CG: The fact that we have the inventory that we have and we have the number of bottles that we have, it’s just incredible. It’s another one of those factors that just wows people.

AH: Oh, yes.

CG: They can’t believe we have a list of a thousand wines.

AH: Sure.

CG: And it’s something that makes us stand out.

AH: Yes, and well, it’s unique. I mean Bern’s isn’t doing this, you know? And that’s just it—in the U.S. perhaps the best Spanish wine list right?

CG: Oh, absolutely, absolutely! And in the last ten years, ten to twelve years, the whole education and acceptance of the Spanish wines has totally changed.

AH: Yes.

CG: Totally changed. It’s not scary anymore. Not because they’re out there everywhere, but people have become accustomed to drinking them, appreciating them and so forth. That was not the case.

AH: Okay.

CG: And I think the same thing with Chilean wines and being able to educate people and have those things available, it just really makes us stand out.

AH: Yes, well, one other thing and this will probably be the last question.

CG: Okay.

AH: These trips overseas with management and things like this, what role do you have in planning that? Is that, you know, one of your babies or do you collaborate with Richard? And then, what are the goals for the managers, et cetera.?

CG: Well, the goals vary. The first year it was a combination of sales and wine.

AH: Okay.
CG: We had some criteria for the wine and a sales goal for the end of the year and it came out in the middle of a meeting, and Richard said, “If we hit this goal we’re going to go.” And that year, we beat the goal by about a million and a half dollars.

AH: Okay, so is the goal for the whole company?

CG: Yes—

AH: Okay.

CG: –yes. Richard and the family, they very much want to give back which is a big selling point to employees coming on board, managers coming on board and so forth. He constantly wants to—he would have a trip every other month if he could.

AH: Yes.

CG: He will ask me, “What are we going to do for the next trip?” In other words what program are we going to have so we can have the next trip?

AH: Okay.

CG: He wants to take them and so forth. The trips to Spain, I couldn’t plan a trip like he does.

AH: Yes.

CG: I can enjoy it, I can appreciate it, but I couldn’t plan it.

AH: Okay.

CG: And having a tour with him is an experience that I could not give the managers. If I took them to Spain, we would not see the things we saw, we would not have the contacts, have everything that goes along with it. So, and I’m okay with that.

AH: Yes.

CG: I like my part of it and I can like and appreciate his part of it. One of the things that I think happens sometimes—if I’m getting too off the wall, tell me.

AH: No, that’s okay.

CG: One of the things that happens in my job is if an ego gets too big then it doesn’t work. I don’t care to take away any of the things that Richard does. I want to do what I do.

AH: Yes.
CG: And I try to do the best that I can with what I do and I think he does what he does very well. And I think that’s part of what makes my relationship in this job and the longevity and so forth work.

AH: Okay. So I mean what are those roles then? The things that he does that he does well.

CG: Well, Richard is constantly coming up with, “Let’s try this, let’s do that, let’s do this.” And there’s many times where I’ll say to him, “Damn this pisses me off! I wanted to—I should have thought of that!”

AH: (laughs) Okay.

CG: You know? And I think that certainly, I can come up with some things and I’d like to think that I have.

AH: Yes.

CG: But he will come up with some things that we can do and some things that we can’t do. And I think that’s where I come in.

AH: Yes.

CG: Sometimes I have to say, “Richard that’s great, but we can’t do it.”

AH: Yes.

CG: And we’ll talk about it and we won’t do it. Or we’ll say that’s great and we’ll do it.

AH: Okay.

CG: And we run into that every day.

AH: Yes.

CG: Every day. It’s just a constant thing.

AH: Okay. So then, you’re the day to day operations and figure out what you can and can’t do, knowing the limitations of the company.

CG: (agrees)

AH: Okay. And then, what are the goals—I mean you set the goals to get you to Spain, but once they’re on the trip, I mean is it a morale booster? Obviously, it’s educational too. What are the different outcomes?
CG: It definitely helps the camaraderie. We have a lot of programs in our company that are very much for the benefit. I was speaking to someone today, a recruiter for our managers, and we were talking about a bonus program for our managers. There are some companies that have a very good program and never pay out. And there are some that pay out, but it’s a horrible program so they can’t make anything. Our program is a win-win. It’s a good program and it pays.

AH: Yes.

CG: And it’s the same thing with this trip. I think that when the managers go on that trip, they know they’re getting a trip that if they went to book it themselves they couldn’t do that.

AH: Yes.

CG: It is a perk. It’s truly a perk. And it does generate a lot of thought and ideas and seeing other things and you know, I never had paella in Spain. Well, as many paellas that I have had in Spain now, I haven’t had one as good as ours.

AH: Okay.

CG: And I can say that, you know? Or when Richard says to me, “Well, you know, when I was over in Spain and I saw the—” You can’t really relate to it until you see it.

AH: Yes.

CG: So, when the managers are there and they can see why the croquettes to be that size, and we want them to look like this and be creamy inside because it’s authentic to Spain.

AH: Yes.

CG: And seeing all that just really helps give them the insight, the desire, that passion to want to do it.

AH: Yes, well it kind of re-engages them in what they’re doing.

CG: Absolutely.

AH: At the same time, that they’re stepping away from their regular jobs, you know, they’re appreciating from the other side of the table I guess.

CG: Yes.

AH: Okay.
CG: A few of the places we went to—you know when you go to Madrid and you go to all of the tapas restaurants and you see how it’s served and why it’s served and people eating it, it’s the other half.

AH: Yes.

CG: It puts it together.

AH: Well, and in the late nineties, we went through this huge tapas craze. You know little places popping up all over the place. Did that have an effect on the business? Obviously you’ve been kind of doing the same thing for a long time. But did you reorient the menu at all and put “tapas” there where “appetizers” was before?

CG: I think it’s—I’m not even sure. I think it’s always said “tapas.”

AH: Okay.

CG: I think people are educated more about what [a] tapa is at this point.

AH: Yes.

CG: It makes it a lot easier to talk about tapas and make them comfortable with it and a good server—we give the servers all the tools that they need to approach the table.

AH: Yes.

CG: So, when the guest goes in and says, “What are we going to have tonight?” And he can say, “Well let me set you up with an assortment of tapas.” There’s a confidence level there and he can deliver that.

AH: Yes, okay. Well, we covered a lot of ground. Anything else to add?

CG: I hope I said something in there that mattered! (laughs)

AH: Plenty, plenty. I really appreciate it—

CG: My pleasure.


CG: Thank you.

AH: Thanks a lot.

CG: I enjoyed it too.
end of interview