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Joe Roman oral history interview by Andrew Huse, November 8, 2007

Joe Roman (Interviewee)

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Andrew Huse: It’s Andy Huse here once again for the Columbia Restaurant, and it is November 8, 2006, and I’m here with Joe Roman, the long-time waiter and now ambassador of the Columbia Restaurant. Thanks for being with me today.

Joe Roman: No problem. I’m glad to be with you.

AH: Great. Well, you know, first let’s just start where were you born and when?

JR: I was born here in Tampa [in 1928].

AH: Okay.

JR: My parents came here in 1910, to make cigars.

AH: Where did they come from?

JR: Havana, Cuba. So they came to the United States. There was a ferry from Cuba to Tampa, and it was only five dollars and your birth certificate. My father used to tell me that all the time.

AH: Okay.

JR: And I’ve been in this business since I was sixteen years old. As I told you, I don’t have much schooling. One day I told Dad, “I don’t want to go to school.” He said, “If you don’t want to go to school, you better find yourself a job.” So I did. I found a job at the small restaurant down the street here. The Morro Castle it was called. And I started there by washing dishes and so forth, and I used to go around the kitchen, and then I worked a little bit at the pantry and the kitchen. Then there was a fellow there who knew my father and I told him that what I would like to be was a waiter. He said, “Well I’m going to go talk to the manager; he’s a friend of mine.” And so he did. He said being that his hours
were five in the afternoon to one a.m., he said, “Let Roman come at eleven o’clock, eleven-thirty and I’ll just show him the trade here in the coffee shop.” And that is how I started. I tell you when I was already seventeen and a half, I was a waiter. It was during the war, there were [not many] men here. Everybody was taken to the service. So that is how I started. So, that is how I was able to start so young as a waiter.

AH: Okay, I see. Well, first of all you just lost interest in school, is that right? You just didn’t have the patience for it is that right?

JR: Right. Yes.

AH: And then so what drew you to being a waiter?

JR: What drew me to be a waiter is when I saw the waiters counting the money. (Laughing)

JR: The quarters and the fifty cents—I wanted to be a waiter.

AH: Okay. And of course, being a waiter in Ybor City back then was kind of a different profession than it is today, right?

JR: It sure was. Yes.

AH: Tell me about some of the differences back then?

JR: Well, there were a few restaurants here in Tampa and a lot of Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Spaniards, and Italians, came to Tampa in those years. And there were few restaurants. I worked in about three restaurants. I worked the Valencia Café at Nebraska [Avenue] and Henderson [Boulevard], the Valencia Gardens in Grand Central, and I worked here at the Columbia. I came here when I was twenty-one years old.

AH: Okay.

JR: I always wanted to come to the Columbia. I always wanted to come to the Columbia. But in those days we used to have a union and I used to go to the union hall and ask, “How’s everything I want to go?” He says, “Roman, there’s no opening until there was an opening in the coffee shop.” He says, “You have to start in the coffee shop.” I was a waiter already. Well, I say, “I don’t mind; I’ll start because I want to work at the Columbia.” So, I came to work at the Columbia. I was five years in the coffee shop before I was able to come in to the main rooms.

AH: It was almost like an apprenticeship, right?
JR: That’s right. That’s right, it was. There was only men working, especially Spanish gentlemen who used to be waiters who probably came from Spain, and their families were from Spain.

AH: And why is that, why was it only men as waiters?

JR: I don’t know what to tell you. I can’t answer that. There don’t want any [waitresses] women in the restaurants. Especially the Spanish restaurants.

AH: Well, in general, it seemed to be a rarity back then for women to go into business.

JR: That’s true, too. Well, today Richard and Casey have a system that helps a great lot for the young ones. The young waiters they go to school, a lot of them, and so some of them say, “I can’t come to work, I got a test, Tuesday, I’m sick, and I can’t—” but they still hold them back to have that manager principle. We want to help these young ones to be able to go to school.

AH: Okay, now what are some of the skills and know-how that you had to know as a waiter back then that you didn’t necessarily have to know today?

JR: Well, you had to learn how to set a table, you know, and there just used to be a lot of different things about setting the tables and be sure the knife and fork were always on the right.

AH: Who sets the tables today?

JR: Today, the waiters.

AH: Oh, the waiters still do.

JR: The first setting, the waiters set them like we used to do. Then the busboys, as they clean the tables they do the second setting of the tables.

AH: Didn’t waiters back then used to carve meats table-side or fish or anything?

JR: Yes, we had to have a grilled Pompano that you had to serve in front of the customer there, and you had to take the head off and the tail, and you used to—in the center there always a chef would do two swipes, one in each of the centers. So, you’d cut the tail and you cut the head off, and you just move the filets to the side, lemon, butter, close the fish again and serve it. Take all the spines off it and serve it like that. That was one of the dish. Paella has always been served in front of the table. You present the dish and you serve right there in front of the customer. The salad is the same thing. It’s always been by the table. You put your lemon, your dressing—we use Worcestershire sauce and a special dressing that we make Spanish-style at the kitchen. And the waiters has to serve that facing the customer, showing the customers the things that it takes in a salad, you know, and the dressing and so forth. That’s one thing always number one with Mr. Gonzmart,
his father and Richard and Casey follow, he was always checking the dining room because sometimes the waiters would slip a little bit but no, no, no. He would scold them if he see them like that. And it’s true you know. The dish should come out of the kitchen with a nice presentation. And then with your back to the table you’re going to serve that paella. When you put it on the table, it’s not the same.

AH: No.

JR: It’s not the same. Yes, that’s something we had Pompano en Papillot. It comes in a paper bag and you get your knife and fork and you cut around the seams of it, you turn it around. You turn it and you put some lemon on the side. Because a lot of people won’t care for a lemon or they can’t have one, or whatever, but the lemon is always in the dish and there’s always a little parsley or green, something green in the dish. You know, the things in the dishes, I would say, it’s what you see there, the presentation. That counts a lot. That counts a lot. It’s always been like that. The Columbia has always—that’s one thing. And then Richard and Casey the same thing, has got the managers trained that they have to watch that, you know, being that we get a lot of new waiters and waitresses. They train them in the kitchen at least for two weeks. Then they put them on the floor with a waiter for two or three weeks also until they let them go on to their own, but they have to see all that to be—to do the right thing. The Columbia is known all over the world. People come here from all over. Today is, what is today, Thursday, no Wednesday.

AH: Wednesday.

JR: Wednesday and the whole restaurant is full.

AH: It is packed.

JR: And we’re not in season yet.

AH: No.

JR: Really and truly. This is year-round. Columbia is year round. People come here from all over, all over the world. You meet a lot of German, French people here. It’s beautiful. That’s what I really also enjoy a lot when I was a waiter. I really enjoy that.

AH: So, you got the gig at the Columbia, and you started in the café. So, tell us a little bit how the café would differ back then.

JR: Well supposedly, the people who were going to have a big meal would come to the dining room. Of course we had a few good customers also that used to come to sit in the coffee shop you know, that they would also have dinner but there were a few of—mostly sandwiches and soup and so forth at the coffee shop. It was such a big turnover that I remember when I started here making seven dollars a day. Six, seven, eight dollars a day, that’s was really truly—but we also had a lot of steady customers that would come to the
coffee shop you know and you make a few more dollars, especially if you work at night time.

AH: Okay.

JR: It was nice.

AH: Okay, so what about it, you know, you worked at a couple of other different restaurants, and obviously they have good reputations, Valencia Gardens still today has a good reputation. But what was it about the Columbia that you singled out, that you said, “I just have to work there.”

JR: I don’t know why. I always wanted to work at the Columbia since I started really. I always figure, everybody all you hear is a lot of people say the Columbia. The Columbia has always been number one. The Columbia is the biggest restaurant really in the United States.

AH: Oh, yes, an entire city block.

JR: And it has a city block. It’s really famous all over the world. People, like I explained to you, people come here from all over the world. You meet people here from—

AH: But back then it wasn’t quite—I mean it was famous back then, but it wasn’t quite—I mean, it was after the war, right?

JR: That truly it broke out, yes. So, you know we had a lot of business here. All Seventh Avenue, all this that you see here. There were stores, men’s stores and women’s stores, ten-cent store, which was a Kress [Department Store], and Silver, the [W.T.] Grant [Department Store]. It was ten-cents stores. [Laughs] So, also, I guess they would have the owners of the businesses especially the people that always wanted to come to the Columbia in those days even with the war on we still got people here. I came here at the Columbia in such a year. I was not in the service. Their service men came to the Columbia and they later wanted to come back.

AH: So, was this a traditional place to eat at before you shipped out, or when you came back?

JR: No, while they [the servicemen] were staying. A lot of them stayed here for three months, probably so.

AH: Yes, they were stationed here.

JR: They were stationed here.

AH: Yes. Okay.
JR: Drew Field it was called. It was a big place.

AH: Yes, where Tampa International is today, yes. Okay.

JR: Yes, it was something. So, we would get a lot of service men, and a lot of time a lot of ships of the Navy would stop right here on Thirteenth [Avenue], and when they get off they would come here to Ybor City. (laughing)

AH: Yes, they want to eat good food, yes.

JR: They come to Ybor City.

AH: So, what kind of memories, during the war period and initially after the war, do you have any special things that you remember, or certain customers, or anything like that?

JR: We had a lot of special customers like I tell you people, business people that they would come to the Columbia. They were great people, you meet 99 percent of the people that come to the Columbia, they were great beautiful people. I always enjoy being a waiter because you get to talk to the customer, introduce yourself. A lot them introduce themselves to you, say, “I’m so and so.” That’s beautiful you know, and I always enjoyed it.

AH: Well, you know, being a waiter here you often hit people at the best time because they are happy to be here and they’re out.

JR: Yes sir. The Columbia—

AH: And when it began, I guess it kind of began as a saloon and it really evolved.

JR: It started like a coffee shop.

AH: Yes, then it evolved.

JR: It started off—this must have been a building that was divided into small businesses. As the years went by, they went by. So, we have 1905 to 1920 the coffee shop that has been all remodeled. They have spent here 6.5 million dollars, Richard and Casey. And then you have the small dining room, La Fonda, we use to call it, the small dining room right by the coffee shop. Then the main room where they do the shows there is the Don Quixote, it’s 1930. The courtyard is 1937. The Siboney Room is 1956. So, as the years went by.

AH: So, what’s interesting is that by the time you got here it was really kind of—it still retained a little bit of that male-dominated thing during lunch right?

JR: Oh, yes sir.
AH: But then at night it was a very romantic place.

JR: Yes, it was.

AH: So, that’s what, to me, was especially interesting to me about those years is that it retained some of the old flavor.

JR: That’s true.

AH: Then in the afternoon working in the café, was it mostly men?

JR: Well, mostly, it was both because Harold Wolff from Harold Brothers downtown they used to at least three or four times a day they come.

AH: You mean the Wolff Bros.?

JR: The Wolff Brothers. Yes. They would come in. And some of the others were big managers from Maas Brothers [Department Store] in those years. They used to come in also, and they enjoyed coming in to the coffee shop.

AH: Yes.

JR: Now, when they bring guests they will come to the main room but when the manger and Mr. Harold and his wife they used to come to the coffee shop. They enjoyed that especially sitting by the window seeing all the traffic.

AH: This is Harold Wolff?

JR: Harold Wolff. That was the owners.

AH: And I know, obviously, he liked the coffee here. Was there any other dishes you remember that he especially liked?

JR: He used to order a lot of the—we had the Red Snapper Alicante. That was one dish they enjoyed also, and a lot of time they had a nice filet mignon, Columbia style, have a filet steak wrapped in bacon with a nice sauce on it, mushrooms, chopped ham. Very nice. It was good eating. In those years they still had they had good business. I had a card [chuckles] that I could buy over there, and I used to buy. Of course they say, “You pay whatever you can.” That was beautiful.

AH: Oh, is that right?

JR: Yes, that was Mr. Harold. Yep. (laughing)

AH: So, he kind of helped you out.
JR: Yes, that was beautiful.

AH: Okay, so, there were other business men of another kind that like to the Columbia.

JR: That’s true, too.

AH: I mean, there were stories of gangsters eating here and stuff.

JR: Well, they claimed that, but you know that a lot of people came here especially to sit in the coffee shop.

Woman: I’m just using the bathroom, okay?

JR: Oh, okay. So, the idea is that there were some who said, “No, because this guy that belonged to—”, I waited a long time in going to that table.

AH: Oh, sure.

JR: Because they used to come very often. We had a table in the coffee shop, a big table, sit about eight, and they meet there and enjoy coffee and sandwiches.

AH: Oh sure, sure.

JR: And so forth, but they were beautiful people. I never heard them say anything.

AH: No, no and I’m not trying to say that.

JR: I understand.

AH: I’m just saying that it is a fact.

JR: Yes.

AH: And the Trafficantes—

JR: Santo Trafficante used to come, a beautiful person, with his little hat he put—He enjoyed his lunch. Beautiful, very good tipper. You didn’t have no problem with any of those people.

AH: Well, do you have any interesting stories, you know, [Ferdie] Pacheco tells the story about spilling the soup (JR laughing) and you know things like that, that must have been horrifying.

JR: Yes.

AH: Well, any special stories?
JR: Well, one that I remember—I got two good ones.

AH: Good.

JR: I was working in the patio one time, and this lady ordered broiled pompano and this is how the woman had to hold her rice and chicken, I think it was, so I put the rice and chicken and I’m standing here. I put the rice and chicken and I’m showing the pompano, so I’m going to put it in the tray, but I don’t have the pompano on the platter. It fell inside the ladies’ purse.

AH: Oh, my.

JR: That happened to me.

AH: Now, this lady was she with the Trafficantes?

JR: No, no this was another private party.


JR: No, this was another private party. I said, “Lady, I am sorry”, with my hand, that fish was broiled on the grill. It turns into pieces. I got the ladies purse and tried clean. She was a beautiful person, but then she had to wait another twenty-five minutes almost to get her grilled pompano again. Another time that comes (laughing), the maitre de sits—it was full like now and that Siboney [dining] room next door is where there main show used to always be.

AH: Yes.

JR: And the maitre de say, “We can put a table for you here,” and the man says, “That’s the only table you got?” So, we put the table here and the table was—the doors to go to the kitchen and come out were there, and I come out with a tray and I was going to serve soup to another table, and I had Spanish beans and black beans, and when I step out of the door, I trip. So, it went off the tray. So, it fell on the man’s back. That man got up—

AH: On his back?

JR: And he’s got so mad. “I’m sorry.” I got the coat and I took it to the kitchen got a knife and start scraping, and I clean it the best possible. “Where’s my coat? It’ll be here sir, don’t worry.” But that was really something.

AH: That’s rough.

JR: That was really something.

AH: Okay.
JR: And I used to do some tricks a lot of times, I used to—

AH: Yes, tell us about—you do some magic tricks right?

JR: I used to make some magic tricks up. I had a dummy finger you know, I could always had a napkin. Nowadays, the waiter doesn’t use a napkin, but we used to use napkin. So, I got to a table and so forth, and the man order a glass of Sangria or anything, so I say, “You see that Sangria there, what I like is that you order Sangria, so I can get some of the Sangria and put it in my hand here, and show you how I can squeeze it and it will be just as if it was grape juice.” And I had the dummy finger here. And so when I do like that, when I did like that I put the finger. The juice goes into the finger.

AH: Okay.

JR: So, when I do like that I don’t have anything but the finger. So, I say, “I’m going to make a little hole here.” So, when I’m going to make a little hole I’m going to drop the finger, the dummy there. Now, I put a little bit of Sangria and I put my fingers in it and I say, “Is that Sangria?” Well, he says, “Yes.” So, I say, “Now I’m going to disappear.” I do that and put this finger behind that one. Now, I’m going to bring it back. You see now I have it here.

AH: (laughing)

JR: See, I’m going to show that I do have it here. The minute I bow I put the finger, I do like that and it turns.

AH: Okay.

JR: And there comes the Sangria out. Then I do like this and put the finger right there. I have the napkin in my hand and I leave the table. “Come here, no, you got to show me how to do this.”

(laughter)

AH: Yes.

JR: And then I had another one it was a fifty-cents piece. The fifty-cents piece was divided beautifully into three pieces that has a little rubber band around it. So, I would have a good one. I had two, the one that was cut and the one. I would throw the good one on the table, and I have this one. So, you order a bottle of wine, I would get this and say, “You know, I’m glad you order this bottle of wine because Mr. Gonzmart wine you can put a fifty-cents piece in it.” Hit it with a bottle, the fifty-cents piece would go back. I hit it again the fifty-cents piece would go back, but I already got the fifty-cents here in this other hand, and one of those times I had the finger, I hit the bottle but I don’t drop that one. I would do like that. I drop. And the fifty-cents in side the bottle. You can pass the
bottle around if you want to, and they look inside and the fifty-cents is inside the bottle, I mean, perfect.

AH: Yes.

JR: So, I says, “Now, how you want to take that piece. Well, I’m going to try and see but I don’t know how; let’s see if it comes out.” And you had to swish the bottle a little bit like that. So, I used to roll the bottle. I had the fifty-cents here and I threw the other one. (laughing). And the people loved that I had the people, “I’ll give you twenty dollars if you show me that trick.”

AH: I still I don’t understand how you made it look like there was a fifty-cents piece in the bottle?

JR: It was a fifty cents piece.

AH: Yes, but it’s in the bottle?

JR: It’s in the bottle. Because you see there, its cut in three but it’s divided in three, but it has a rubber band around it. It has a little curve.

AH: Yes.

JR: They did a little curve to it. So, you don’t see the rubber band. So, you have the fifty-cents and so, of course, you don’t throw that one. You throw the good one.

AH: Yes.

JR: And that one you got it in your hand, so when you got a chance you turn it into three and the bottle has that neck, and when you open a bottle of wine you just cut the top. So, you leave the metal piece, the aluminum piece or whatever it has around it. So, you throw the fifty cents in, they see the fifty-cents go in and so once you do like that you slap the bottle on the table, “clack” the fifty-cents runs inside the bottle (laughing).

AH: Okay, nice.

JR: I’m going to buy it again. I tell you the truth. I am waiting to go. I’m going to buy the tricks again.

AH: Okay.

JR: Because I had the little handkerchief, you get it with the finger, the dummy finger with silk, a little silk handkerchief. You get it after you’ve got your finger there. You say, “You see that little handkerchief I’m going to put it in here.” So, I’m going to put in here but when I put it in here I am already pulling it out. So, you say, “You see this little
handkerchief, I’m going to put it in there—” (Makes blowing noise for trick) And it disappears, but I’ve got it in my finger. They’re made special. It’s a very light plastic.

AH: Okay, so it’s easy to stuff it in, okay.

JR: It’s easy to put it there.

AH: So, when—

JR: It was a lot of fun. I had a lot of people that called me to the different waiters to the table “Joe, this guy wants you to do the trick.”

AH: When did you start to develop this, how long had you been working?

JR: I started developing that in 1970.

AH: Okay, so you had been here for a while then.

JR: Yes.

AH: Okay.

JR: I came here in 1953.

AH: Okay, and Cesar, you know, was a great showman, so he must have appreciated that.

JR: He was; he was. He was a great showman and he played even around the tables, you know and all that.

AH: Yes, yes.

JR: And that’s where I learned. One time a night in sixty-two, in 1962, who was this guy “I left my heart in San Francisco—?”

AH: Tony Bennett?

JR: Tony Bennett. So, I start singing it in the end “I left my heart” [in San Francisco, 1954] and Cesar says “Joe, go ahead sing it.” So, I can sing. So, I stand there by the table, from then on I learned a few songs and I would sing it. And I made some money with that too, because a lot of waiters would say, “Joe, that table over there want a sing.” I would go over there. “Would you sing something for my girl here?” So, I used to make—

AH: So, did you actually sing along with the band sometimes?

JR: Yes, yes I did.
AH: That must have been exciting.

JR: Yes, it was exciting. I used to enjoy it very much. I would come out with a tray and they were playing something, and I just go on there, right there. It was something very interesting—

AH: Yes, and I want to rewind just a bit and get back to that point but we kind of, we discussed, basically, we kind of discussed the war period. Is there anything there that we didn’t cover? I mean obviously a lot of these guys they are stuck on a ship. They get off the ship and this the first time they get to spend money, so—

JR: They’d ask a cab driver, the cab drivers used to bring people from all over here. Downtown, the hotels, they—

AH: They would just ask a good place to eat.

JR: That’s what I say. They would say, “Where’s a good place to eat?” “Well, the Columbia Restaurant.” So, you know, that was one of things and the hotel people knew also, and the cabs drivers, so believe me they bring—now, I don’t know, but we used to have that side there, we had all that side there, four or five cabs parked all the time there.

AH: Yes.

JR: All the time.

AH: Obviously, there is a lot of dating going on too. These men are trying to, you know you think when their overseas all their thinking about is just getting home, and finding a nice girl, and here they come to the Columbia.

JR: Yes. Yes, and Mr. Gonzmart (snaps fingers). He really made the Columbia, because he brought shows from Havana, Cuba. And I mean beautiful shows.

AH: Well, before we get to that period let’s talk about how—how’s the business itself changed since you first got here?

JR: Well—

AH: I mean, is there tighter controls now on waiters and such?

JR: In those years, there was business but it wasn’t business like this. Like it is today, like ten years ago, it was going on. Today, people—today there is a lot of money in all the countries, I would say especially in the United States, and there is a lot people who come to Tampa who vacation from up north. Meet a lot of people.

AH: Yes, well and it seems—well, another thing to mention is Pijuan, the chef.
JR: The chef. I didn’t know him, but I knew his son.

AH: Okay.

JR: And he was very good.

AH: Now, is it that you just didn’t cross paths? Or did you work here when he was here?

JR: No, no. He had already left.

AH: Oh, okay.

JR: I came here in 1953.

AH: Oh, 1953, okay.

JR: Yes. I think he left here in forty [1940], forty-nine [1949], I think it was. Or fifty [1950].

AH: Okay, yes.

JR: But everybody knows those waiters. Today, the waiters at the Columbia—I’m still here.

AH: Yes.

JR: I hate to say this, but they’re retired but I think there’s left, let me see, one, two, we are about only five. Five. So, all these waiters are new, five years, ten years. The oldest waiter here is Juan, he’s probably here about twenty years, but all the old—when I got here the waiters were old already, imagine some over sixty years. Yes.

AH: So, then you arrived in the fifties [1950s] and you really saw the beginning of this transition from Casimiro [Hernandez]Jr. to Cesar [Gonzmart].

JR: To Cesar.

AH: Now—

JR: Cesar came here in 1955. He was married in forty-six [1946], and in fifty-five [1955], I understand his father asked him to come into the business, because the business was growing, and he was getting old. So, you know, they got to be the third generation, the owners of the Columbia.

AH: Yes.
JR: And now, we have Richard and Casey, the fourth generation. The fifth generation is also right there. The daughters of Richard and Casey, they are in the business.

AH: Yes.

JR: So, this will stay in the family.

AH: Oh, yes.

JR: And if you see today, like I explained to you, today is Wednesday and the only—

AH: It’s amazing—

JR: The only empty room is this where we sit.

AH: Well, I would have been here sooner, but I couldn’t find a parking space.

JR: I know.

AH: I had to go find a meter.

JR: [laughs]

AH: And there was not a parking space behind, over here, over there, no where.

JR: No, no. We have a great lunch, and we have a fantastic dinner.

AH: You know—

JR: Parties all over the room.

AH: So, is business better now than you have ever seen it?

JR: Oh, yes.

AH: Yes.

JR: Yes, this is a lot better.

AH: Okay. Now that transition when Cesar comes into the restaurant—

JR: Cesar really helped the business.

AH: Yes.

JR: He really built up the business.
AH: Now, before we get into—because obviously, he made a lot of changes that were very important but—

JR: Yes.

AH: It seemed like an unlikely thing to some people, they thought Cesar is a dreamer. He’s an artist, but he is not a business man. And I got the impression from some people that he kind of got—he had a hard time when he first got here because some people thought he couldn’t hack it. And certainly Casimiro, he mentored him, but at the same time he didn’t—you know, he’d say, “Sometimes he has to be reeled in.” Do you remember any of this when he first came in? That he didn’t get as much respect as he should have?

JR: Oh, no, I think he did. He did because he came in as a general manager.

AH: Yes.

JR: And so, you know, we had two or three managers and maitre des, but Cesar was—And I don’t know where did Cesar must have learned the business before he came in to this. Cesar played up north in hotels, and with Liberace, and a few good musicians.

AH: Oh, yes.

JR: And I guess he must have gone to learn also. And he was a business man; he was a great business man.

AH: Yes, and certainly, I’m not taking anything away—

JR: Yes.

AH: I’m just saying that the way people—they misjudged him at first. Thinking, oh you know, he’s this flamboyant type. He plays the violin. But he doesn’t know about the restaurant business, and it turned out that he really did.

JR: That he really did. He really, he really made the restaurant in those years that he came in. You know, he brought people in especially from Havana, Cuba. And we had people here who were number ones in Cuba. They perform at the Columbia in Ybor City.

AH: Now, let’s talk about entertainment before Cesar and after Cesar, because there is a big difference right? The Don Quixote Room used to have a band right?

JR: We had a band. That’s what we had.

AH: Okay. Now, what kind of a band? Was it a big band, a jazz band?

JR: Yes, yes, it was a pretty big band. We had about I want to say four—about eight.
AH: Okay.

JR: Yes.

AH: And that was like the house band?

JR: That was the house band, and they played all types of music.

AH: Yes. And was this Henry Tudela?

JR: Henry Tudela, yes, he was part of the band and they play in the band out there. And then we had Cesar, who played when he came in, he played a violin. He had two violins and an accordion and—

AH: A trumpet?

JR: Sax.

AH: A sax, okay.

AH: And they what? They strolled around?

JR: They strolled around the room. That was something. That was beautiful. People loved that.

AH: And you know, obviously he had entertained all over the world and was well known.

JR: Yes, he had.

AH: Yes, but it’s interesting because I had read that some of the inspiration for all these new shows here came from—he’d gone to Miami and the Cuban exiles there, there some of those restaurants (inaudible).

JR: He had (inaudible) in Miami. He was a good friend of his. He used to come here also. The owners used to come here. So, I guess they got to be good buddies. You handle a show a month, then you send it to me and I’ll send you what I got. And they got beautiful performers. Singers, actors, I mean—

AH: So, between those two restaurants they sort of started sort of a kind of Florida circuit.

JR: Those are the ones who really start the circuit.

AH: Yes, so then it makes much more sense for someone to come up from Havana, because they can stop at a few different places, right?
JR: Yes, yes. That’s right.

AH: Okay, and then Cesar himself was a violin player.

JR: Cesar would play for twenty, twenty-five minutes by himself and people would love it. People would love it.

AH: And then eventually he started getting his own band together, right?

JR: Yes, he got his own band together. Yes. Because Tudela played with him up north.

AH: Yes, oh I see.

JR: Yes.

AH: So, he toured with him.

JR: Yes. Tudela played up North with him, and Liberace, and other guys that—

AH: He had a television show for a little while, right?

JR: He had a little, yes, he had a—

AH: Was there a radio show too?

JR: He had a radio show.

AH: It was a radio show. Okay.

JR: It was a radio show. From what I remember, it was a radio show.

AH: Okay, and then I remember seeing pictures from sort of a television thing, maybe he just made a single appearance and didn’t have a regular show for that?

JR: I don’t remember that. I don’t think he had one.

AH: Okay, okay. So, the Siboney was a big step forward, right.

JR: That’s right. 1956. The Siboney was [previously] a bakery by the name of Bambi—

AH: Okay.

JR: From the Siboney, there first door all the way to the corner. When Cesar bought that in fifty-six [1956], a little before fifty-six [1956], they did that. They started that, complete in fifty-six [1956]. It was complete. And now it’s a gift shop. We have a gift shop. We have the small cigar factories in the corner there, and you have the room that
has the capacity of three hundred and seventy-five. And Richard and Casey have remodeled all that six years ago. Mahogany on the roof. You can divide the room and have two parties, because we need it, we need it. As you see tonight.

AH: Oh, yes.

JR: And we are not even in the season. We’re right in the middle of summer and winter. So, I mean, it’s something all the rooms are taken.

AH: Oh, yes. Tell us about some other memories. Now, I hear—and I think this memory involves Cesar—a woman’s dress catching fire, I guess, because of a drink. Maybe there was drink. I don’t know if it was a Spanish flag on fire?

JR: A Spanish flag.

AH: Okay, tells us about that.

JR: (laughing) I wasn’t at that table.

AH: Oh, you weren’t. Were you there that night though?

JR: Yes, I think it was a Saturday night.

AH: Okay.

JR: And the waiter, he brought the Spanish flag and he put the plates but you had to put a plate on the bottom. And he put one on but the other fell on the ladies dress. And they had to—It don’t burn unless you leave it there, but as soon as that followed you can get a napkin or wet cloth you know—

AH: So, what happened? I hear rumors that her top was taken off. What happened?

JR: I really don’t know and I don’t remember that.

AH: Are you sure you’re not being coy with me?(laughing).

AH: Okay. All right.

JR: I know it happened. I remember—

AH: I heard that Cesar just took the ladies top off and apologized, but that’s just what I’ve heard, so I don’t know.

JR: I wasn’t at that table. That table happened about seven tables away from me. I just know (inaudible) just dropped this Spanish flag on this lady. She probably had a little jacket or something and took the jacket off.
AH: Yes, well, the story I had heard was that she had some sort of a blouse on and it was on fire and Cesar ran over just ripped the blouse off and then she was there with her bra and he complimented her, her bosoms, but—(laughing).

JR: Possible, possible.

AH: That was another matter.

JR: But like I tell you I remember hearing that, but I wasn’t close to that table so, I really couldn’t tell you.

AH: Okay. Well, what are some other stories? I mean, one of the things that I’ve read, I’ve read some of these Paul Wilder pieces. Paul Wilder was a writer for The [Tampa] Tribune and he wrote some of these things in the forties [1940s] about the restaurant and, “Oh, the fountain’s pretty, but it breaks down all the time, or the patio rains and we can’t get the roof closed.” He talks about things that don’t go right, that went wrong. What do you remember when things don’t go right, or—?

JR: No, I really don’t remember that. Especially, like I tell you, I came here in 1953, so if that happened in forty [1940], forty-five [1945], fifty [1950]—

AH: Oh, sure, but things always go wrong.

JR: Yes, no, since I been here, the ceiling on the patio has been closed.

AH: No, I know that I didn’t mean those—those were just examples.

JR: In years back, that was open.

AH: Yes.

JR: They were able to open and close it.

AH: Do you remember your biggest tip ever? Or some of the biggest where you were like “Wow.”

JR: I think one time we got, between two waiters and myself, we got a five hundred dollar tip. It was at Christmas time, and it was a lady that used to come here often from Clearwater and—Mrs. Rome was her name.

AH: Mrs. Rome.

JR: Mrs. Rome. She used to drink a lot, the poor thing. So, I haven’t seen her in years. At least she hasn’t been here, at least for ten years. I don’t know what happened to her. This Christmas, she came with a party of eight. Then she says, “Roman, what could fix your Christmas for you to be happy?” And I says—Cliff was the waiter’s name—I says, “Well
Cliff, well you know, Ms. Rome—”. She was always a good tipper. I says, “Mrs. Rome.” She says, “Tell me, how much, no, no tell me.” She says, “Will five hundred do?” “Oh, yes five hundred dollars. Yes, ma’am.” So, she gave us five hundred dollars.

AH: Wow, for a party of eight.

JR: Yes, five hundred dollars.

AH: Wow, I mean, was her bill even that much money.

JR: Oh, her bill was only, I think, only about three. I think it was about three, three hundred or something and she gave us five hundred. Yes.

AH: Well, that’s one of the nice things about getting in a relationship with a customer, right?

JR: Yes, that’s true too. Yes, that helps a great deal.

AH: And when you’re here for so long, you really get to cultivate the relationships.

JR: You get to know a lot of customers and a lot of them even ask for you a lot of times. The waiter before.

AH: You know it says here—I’m going to kind of go down some of this list here.

JR: You can go down some of that, and I think you will—

AH: It says here that you made sure the customers enjoyed the food.

JR: Exactly.

AH: Tell us about that.

JR: The food and the waiter, the food and the waitress, or waiter, whatever, they has to be—you know you hear a lot of times “No, I want so and so, the food was cooked but the waiter delayed so much and this other time, you hear the waiter was good but the food—” and that’s something we—that Richard and Casey are after that, to see that, that don’t happen. And we’ve got great managers here, too, that do a great job. I see them. I don’t have nothing to do here. The only thing I have to do is give tours and I pass by the tables and say, “Good evening. My name is Joe Roman. I wanted to introduce myself. I am the ambassador now at the Columbia but I’ve been with the Columbia now for fifty-one years.” You know, things like that. But, I don’t—

AH: But you don’t wait on tables anymore.
JR: No, I don’t wait on tables anymore or do other things like that. If I see a dirty table, a small table, and lunchtime a lot of times there are people waiting out there, and a busboy doesn’t show up or something, well I just pick it up, and take it to where they keep the trays and throw one of these and help them a little bit. But really, really truly my job here is to give the tour and go by the table, “How was you lunch? How was your dinner? Thank you for coming.” And that is really what I do.

AH: And you talked about the service, “In some cases, carry a child so parents could eat in comfort.” [Reading from a list].

JR: I did that a few times. In those years, you come to enjoy your dinner, you know, and you have the little kids. So, if I was free from all the tables I had, I would carry the little child for a little bit around the tables.

AH: Yes. So, they could just not worry about that.

JR: That’s right.

JR: Today is—and I don’t carry anybody—but the idea is they bring a young kid three years, four years and their table (inaudible) a little bit. I go and bring them three cherries and three pieces of orange here, without no seeds in it. I ask the parents “Can they have that?” “Yes.” So, the kids enjoy that and quiet down and stay that way.

AH: Oh, with the cherry you mean? It mellows them out a little bit.

JR: Yes. It does, it does.

AH: Now, it says, “I learned a lot from two great cooks, Jose and Leo.”

JR: That’s right. They were great cooks.

AH: Yes, tell me about those now. Jose, was that Sarapico?

JR: No, no, no. Sarapico was a good grill man.

AH: Okay.

JR: He was a head of the kitchen, but what he was, to my opinion, he was a great grill man. In those days we used to write everything. I would go Seripico, tell him “I need a specialty,” in Spanish to him, “I need two sirloin, one medium, one medium rare, two filet mignon, one is Creole the other is Columbia. I need two Red Snapper. I need this—” And when you come back around there he say, “Hey—” He had a nickname for me, he say, “Joe, your table is ready” and bam, bam—he was good. He was great going with that grill.

AH: Okay, what was the nickname?
JR: (laughing) The little colored girl. Mulatta.

AH: He called you that?

JR: La mullata.

AH: Why did he call you that?

JR: I don’t know why but it was, “La mulatica, the dinners are ready.”

AH: Mulatica. Okay.

JR: He was great, and Jose and Leo, they were great cooks. They were great. They were—

AH: Now, when were they cooking then?

JR: They used to come in about four-thirty in the afternoon.

AH: Yes, but what years, like was this the sixties [1960s], seventies [1970s], eighties [1980s]?

JR: Yes, they were here. When I came here they were here. So, they were here already.

AH: So, they were here already in the fifties [1950s].

JR: They were here fifties [1950s], sixties [1960s] and part of the seventies [1970s].

AH: Now, did they work together or different nights, or—?

JR: Well, they had their stations. So, one had the station of the paella, the Pompano de Papillot, and all these dishes. And this other gentleman had the Shrimp Creole, Lobster Creole, the Chicken Creole—

AH: The fish station.

JR: Yes, they had two stations. Very close one to the other, but they had their own.

AH: And, what did you learn from them?

JR: I learned how to cook. I’m a hell of a cooker.

AH: Oh, is that right?

JR: You better believe it. Yes.
AH: So, you just learned and what they would pass on tips to you?

JR: Well, a lot of time I would but you know if they say, “I want a Coca-Cola.” I will bring him a Coca-Cola, and while they drank their coke they say “No, Joe, do this, and this.” And I learned it. I learned it. I told you, I belong to a club. It’s a Jolly Seniors, you see, and every Friday, we eat in a different home. I brought you a card, and see, yes, this is when we started a club. My wife put there. We started a club the Jolly Seniors, and I made yellow rice and chicken for twenty, and it came out real good.

AH: Oh, yes.

JR: I know believe me I know how to cook. In fact, I’m the cook at home.

AH: Oh, is that right, okay?

JR: Because my wife worked for ten years, years back and so when I was leaving about five o’clock, I would leave the dinner already made for her.

AH: And is this your wife, the secretary? [Referring to business card].

JR: Yes sir. So, if you want to say something about the Jolly Seniors—

AH: Yes, so when was that, that was founded in 1985?

JR: That was founded in—yes. And I retired and we formed the club. We still go to the dance every Saturday to the Post 111 on Florida Avenue. Every Saturday. Because I tell my wife—Saturday was a big day for me for so many years I worked Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. You know, so, I say when I retire we go every Saturday to the dance. And up to now, we’ve been able to do it.

AH: Okay, good.

JR: And we formed this club and we all go to the dance unless we got sick, “Today I can’t make it,” but usually we are at least at the table, fourteen.

AH: And these are people from a variety of different professions?

JR: From Tampa. They work different professions. Cigar makers, some.

AH: So, were you just friends before and made a club or—?

JR: Well now, I knew these people before we started going to the dance. That’s when we really started meeting them really and truly, sitting close by and we decided to make a club. Between the president here, myself, and another gentleman that he’s already passed away, Manuel Fernandez. We said “Punya, let’s form a club,” so we started with twenty-eight, but what happens is if a couple, one dies the other one you know stays out of the
club. Even though we tell them, “No, no, you can still belong to the club.” It’s not the same because you go dancing and everybody goes with a couple and so they quit, you know. But now we are, let’s see we are eight couples. Nine couples, nine couples.

AH: All right, that’s still respectable.

JR: Very nice.

AH: Now, Melanie [Gonzmart] asked me to ask you about the strike in the early fifties [1950s]. Adela [Gonzmart] waited on tables and everything—

JR: Waited on tables.

AH: So, tell us about this, and you were part of the waiter’s union, right? I mean, that’s how you got the gig at the Columbia in the first place.

JR: Yes.

AH: So, you participated in the strike I take it?

JR: Yes, yes.

AH: So, just tell us about the issues.

JR: Well, I don’t know. Really and truly the thing is you know, the waiters were making very little, they didn’t have no insurance, they didn’t have nothing, so the thing is they were fighting to make a quarter more an hour, or whatever, and that was the thing. So I think, one time, one of the last strikes was thirty-five cents and they wanted to give twenty, and we had a discussion between the president and the vice president, and so forth, and they had their own. Today, we had to have several restaurants belong to their union, you see, so it was like that.

AH: Now, these were several restaurants. Did the whole union go on strike?

JR: Yes. Yes.

AH: And so, the Columbia, they wouldn’t pay more and other restaurants didn’t, so you all walked out?

JR: Yes, so they all walked out. It lasted about a month, or three or four weeks and then it got straightened out.

AH: And what happened in the end?

JR: Well, what happened in the end is probably they gave them instead of fifteen or twenty, thirty-five, instead of thirty-five thirty—
AH: Give the thirty—

JR: Or give the whole thirty-five—

AH: So, what you don’t remember the exact thing?

JR: I don’t remember the exact. I was just a member, really.

AH: Sure, sure.

JR: They were the ones who had the discussion with Cesar.

AH: But I’m sure you were happy to come back when it was over.

JR: Oh, oh yes, sure. No, no it was something. It was something that you want to come back.

AH: Well, you know, it’s interesting because Tampa—you know, Florida is not a union state really. There’s not a lot of unions.

JR: It’s open shop, they call it.

AH: Yes. Now, Tampa, though, was very unusual though in that there was so much union activity here.

JR: There was.

AH: And you know, the cigar workers—

JR: The cigar workers belonged to a union. The bakeries—

AH: Very strong unions, and they would go on strike and they would often go hungry.

JR: Yes. My father was a cigar maker.

AH: Okay.

JR: And hell, in those three weeks, a month, a month and a half without work, that was hard.

AH: So, do you remember strikes growing up at all?

JR: Yes, I do. Sure, my father and—you know what they used to make a week was only seven—my father, after he brought it home, it was seven dollars and my mother, six. You could buy two cigarettes for a penny. You could buy a nickel, a dime, a nickel sugar. Ten cents, a pound of ground beef was twelve cents. I remember those days. Yes, I remember.
AH: So, it was interesting really that the unions lasted into fifties [1950s] like that, and the waiters’ unions, right?

JR: Around sixty-seven [1967]. Then what happens is, you can’t blame them, we got a lot of people from Puerto Rico, from different places, Guatemala, all those places. They come in and they don’t want to join the union. And you can’t do nothing about it, it’s open shop, as I explained to you.

AH: Yes.

JR: And the thing is that you have to let them work but really truly those days, twelve dollars, twelve dollars with twelve dollars his family will eat all month in Puerto Rico and Guatemala. So, the union started going down. The members of the union died out, died out, died out and we [makes snapping sound] completely finish.

AH: So, when was that just over?

JR: Over? About, I would say about fifteen years ago.

AH: Oh, wow.

JR: It really died out.

AH: Okay, but it lasted that long?

JR: It lasted that long. Yes.

AH: That’s pretty amazing. Okay.

JR: It lasted that long.

AH: Was that the last time you went on strike?

JR: I can’t remember that very clear. I don’t know if it’s 19—I think it was sixty [1960], fifty-nine [1959], sixty [1960].

AH: Oh, was the last strike?

JR: It was one of those years. That was the last strike. Then they got better, I think, we used to make eight dollars, and eighteen dollars a week, and twenty something and you know. So, but now we were making, what is it? $2.13 an hour. Now they’ve raised now and I think they are making $3.10.

AH: Okay.
JR: But it’s okay because the waiters today, they can make $200 a day. So, they don’t mind you know, and then the house also has made something if they put so much, the house puts so much, they give them a chance to put into. There’s also insurance.

AH: Oh, good.

JR: The house pays so much and they pay so much. So, they’re well protected today, but in my days, it wasn’t like that.

AH: No.

JR: I’m going to tell you something, if it wasn’t because of Richard and Casey I would have to probably sell my house.

AH: Is that right?

JR: Sure, because my wife makes about three-hundred and fifty a month, and I never thought I would get to over sixty-five, so what happened is if I used to make $90, I put I made forty-five. So, now all I get is $800 a month. Richard and Casey they give me $800 a month. My house insurance come to insurance, $1900.

AH: Oh, the insurance cost for your—

JR: The insurance. It went up $900, about a $1000.

AH: Oh, for your house you mean?

JR: For my house.

AH: Oh, yes it’s terrible.

JR: And the taxes. They also went up almost nine hundred, almost $3000.

AH: It’s out of control.

JR: I can’t save no $3000. A good thing I have a few dollars. I could probably stay like this five years but after a while, I have to sell my house. Yep. You have to sell your house. You can’t afford to own your own home. It’s hard.

AH: It is, definitely.

JR: I appreciate that very much of Richard and Casey have done for me.

AH: Yes. Absolutely, and well you know—
JR: They are beautiful. All his family, from the old man to Casimiro Jr., beautiful people. Very good.

AH: Now, tell me about some of your memories about Casimiro Jr.

JR: Casimiro Jr.—

AH: He seemed to be a serious man.

JR: He was very serious but he didn’t bother nobody. He and the managers and Cesar. He would come in but now, before the years that I worked, they tell me he even used to sleep up here in the office. I heard that. But when I worked here, Casimiro used to come here about four in the afternoon with his straw hat. There was a package store right there by the coffee shop he would put his hat up and sit there a while or stand at the door of the coffee shop. He knew a lot of the people that come to the coffee shop. You know. That’s all Casimiro would do, but he was already old.

AH: And you got here to late to meet Lawrence. He had already passed away right?

JR: Yes. He already passed away.

AH: Okay.

JR: I met his wife, Gloria, beautiful person too, and her two sons.

AH: It sounds like Lawrence was one of a kind, too.

JR: Yes. He was also very—

AH: Well, he was the more jovial and “Hey,” you know.

JR: Yes, he was very good.

AH: And Casimiro was the more straight—

JR: Yes.

AH: And always checking on quality.

JR: That’s one thing, that’s one thing that I forgot to tell you. He go to the kitchen, when he use to come and put his hat and all that, and stand there by the door or the wall and then he goes to the kitchen. I guess to try this and try that and check this and check that.

AH: I’d hear that—
JR: Today, Richard is the one that does that. Richard comes in the morning, and he sees that the line back there is running the way it should. Which that’s good.

AH: Well, and I know, I’d heard stories about Casimiro tasting a big pot of soup and if something’s not right, he’d throw the whole thing out.

JR: No, no, no, he’d form hell.

AH: Yes.

JR: Yes.

AH: Yes, okay.

JR: Great. Columbia has been always number one really. Good olive oil, good food that’s prepared the proper way.

AH: Now, one thing that I’ve heard from a lot of different people was that the Siboney was great for entertaining and everything but around the same time, say starting in the sixties [1960s] and seventies [1970s], the quality of the food started to suffer a little bit, and now, we see the Columbia starting to win prizes that they haven’t won for thirty plus years.

JR: Well, there were a few years here where the thing, the quality did go down. And thank god, it went up again. Yes. It went up again.

AH: Because I mean even during the time that I’ve—you know, my father loved this place, and we’d come here—

JR: Yes.

AH: And between then, that was probably fifteen almost twenty years ago, and now the food is head and shoulders above.

JR: It has, it has.

AH: Yes, much, much better.

JR: Yes, much better.

AH: I mean—

JR: But we did have a little time here that the thing wasn’t very good.

AH: Now, as a waiter that must be tough, because you want the people to enjoy the food, and you’re identifying yourself with the food.
JR: Yes.

AH: So, I mean, does that make it more difficult for you as a waiter when you bring something out and you’re not sure if it is the best that you have?

JR: Sometimes you would bring a dish out and you know the customer would say, “You know, this dish doesn’t taste—” You know, what can you do.

AH: So, what would you do?

JR: Take the dish and try and serve them something else. Serve them something. And in those years the things were bad, and then the freezers and the coolers, they weren’t proper freezing the right way, and they didn’t have the money to buy the new—

AH: Sure.

JR: Now today everything is new.

AH: Oh, yes.

JR: Our kitchen is a two and half million dollar kitchen.

AH: Well, and the kitchen that it replaced was the one that was put in during the 30s, right?

JR: That’s right.

AH: I mean that’s—

JR: That’s something—

AH: I mean, you can’t expect to run a modern restaurant with that kind of equipment.

JR: Yes.

AH: That’s a huge investment—

JR: It was.

AH: For the future. And then, you know, it sounded like that some of the magic and the singing and stuff was coming along during this period when entertainment was big. So that may have helped.

JR: That may have helped also. And Cesar helped a great deal.

AH: Yes.
JR: With his band and his music around the tables and a lot of people you hear “Oh, (inaudible), let’s go the Columbia.” A lot of people.

AH: Now, are there any performers that came in that you remember as just like “This is the best singer or the best dancer that I’ve ever seen.”

JR: I don’t remember the names but I do remember seeing that. I remember seeing that. We had a couple that used sing on the balcony right here, she would stand on one side and he would stand on the other. And they would start singing (inaudible). They would walk both together and they would meet in the middle. Conjo, that was beautiful. And we had another one that he used to stand down there; he used to stand above the door there to the Siboney. [JR gets up and is showing AH] The guy would stand right here. The band would start and he would start. [JR starts singing in Spanish, the singing echoes on the ceiling] Can you hear that coming into the room?

AH: Yes.

JR: Conjo, that was beautiful.

AH: All the heads would turn, right?

JR: Oh, my god, that man gets to the door and starts singing and going to the stage. [claps] Conjo, I’ll never forget that to tell you the truth.

AH: Yes, yes.

JR: And that couple that—and you know the guy that used to stand at the balcony, he used to sing, he came from Cuba and he had a little boy, his wife, and I saw him he used to bring a little bottle of brandy and he would drink it like that. And, but he started getting a little mentally ill and he started coming to sing with black glasses, sunglasses and Cesar said, “Conjo, I can’t have you singing like that.”

AH: Okay.

JR: But he was a beautiful person and but he could sing. What a voice. Wonderful! I never forget that man.

AH: Yes.

JR: I learned that song myself.

AH: Oh, is that right.

JR: Marta. Conjo, that was beautiful. (laughing) And then he brought another man, a Mexican that would play around the table and then on the stage. We even had image—I
don’t know how—Cesar had a ball like this, the Chavales from Spain played hear in the Columbia twice. And the day wasn’t that good—

AH: Which guy from Spain?

JR: The Chavales. The Chavales de España, si.

AH: So, now what is that?

JR: It was a band that formed. They called themselves that. About twelve. Beautiful, beautiful blue jackets, white pants. Oh, beautiful. They could sing and play. A lot bands—

AH: Now, did you always sing—

JR: No, I started singing in sixty-two [1962].

AH: Okay, and what prompted you to start singing?

JR: Well, like I tell you, the band used to sing that song and I used to hear it at home too and I start singing it. And one day it so happened that I was there, standing there and Cesar was coming to the bar and they came out to play, you know, [starts singing] “I left my heart—,” [stops singing] . “Right, Joe, sing it” [starts singing] “I left my heart in San Francisco, high on a hill, it calls to me. To be where little cable cars, climb half way to the stars! The morning fog may chill the air, I don’t care!” In a big room with that voice (laughing).

AH: Oh, yes, yes.

JR: Listen, tell them to come over here, if you want to sing something.

AH: Yes.

JR: [Starts singing] “Strangers in the night, exchanging glances—” That’s a song for a couple you know.

AH: Oh yes.

JR: Then I learned the words for [starts singing] “Some enchanted evening, you may see a stranger, you may see a stranger across a crowded room.” That’s a hell of a thing in the room.

AH: Yes, yes. That is great.
JR: So, I made myself very famous. I used to make some money from that. They would call me over to the table, “Would you sing us a song?” Sometimes give me a dollar, or five, or ten, or twenty dollars.

AH: Yes, nice. Well, let’s see here.

JR: So, I put other words that I know were wrong. I told my wife to write the correct words for me and she did.

AH: Now, you met Pijuan’s son—

JR: Sí.

AH: Now, did he work here too?

JR: Sí, and he was a great cook too.

AH: Okay.

JR: He was very good.

AH: Yes.

JR: I think he went to California after four years of working here—

AH: Okay.

JR: Because I guess he could make more money out there, but he was a great cook. And he was [makes a zipping sound] the line there. To me, Sarapico was a grill man.

AH: Yes, he wasn’t a chef—

JR: He was a great chef of the grill—

AH: Yes.

JR: But these other ones I tell you, Jose—they were great.

AH: Okay, and then learning how to cook, and learning from Jose and Leo—it says here you learned the ingredients, so you were better able to explain it to the customers, right?

JR: Yes, because then I could tell them, you know, this dish here was prepared—It has burgundy wine, the sauce is made with onion, green pepper, garlic, all the explanations, mushrooms, if it did take—

AH: Okay.
JR: You know.

AH: Yes.

JR: But I learned how to cook. I tell you, I cook for—I used to cook for about thirty with the club you know. But when it is my turn, I cook for about twenty.

AH: As a waiter, “I learned I was to always to stand at my station.”

JR: That’s another thing.

AH: “And be neat and clean.”

JR: You had to be always neat and clean, and your station—you had to be right there at your station. Because I can serve you but you decide you want something else, a cup of coffee or, “Bring another—” You have to be there. Today, you go to dining room, and half the waiters are in the kitchen.

AH: Yes, I’m sorry do you have to get going?

JR: No, no, no. I just—

AH: Good, good, All right good. Let me see. And how you present yourself—and you always took your orders clockwise, why is that?

JR: Well, that’s because like that you know where you start.

AH: Yes.

JR: You see. You start here you go around the table, when you come with your paper you have number one, number two, number three, number four, number five—

AH: Oh, yes, so you know exactly what to serve.

JR: See here waste a lot of time, “Red Snapper?” [as if asking customers]

AH: And then you put it in the wrong place.

JR: And the jump—

AH: Yes.

JR: You know, you supposed to go around the table.

AH: Okay, So, would you start with the most distinguished lady at the table?
JR: That’s right, usually you try to start if there is a lady at the table, and you say (inaudible), you know, go around after that.

AH: Okay, got you. Let me see, always make sure the dish belongs to customer— All right, and you say here when you first were employed by Richard’s grandfather it was Casimiro Jr., you said that Richard was about three or four riding his tricycle around here.

JR: That’s right. His mother used to come to have lunch here, about after lunch about two o’clock and would bring Richard and his tricycle. Richard was, I guess, no higher than this table. And Casey, Casey was already a young man, already. But when I came here Richard was like that.

AH: Okay. Any other memories of them when they were young? Any funny things you remember seeing?

JR: No, like I tell you, Richard was usually the one who came with his mother. At lunchtime, she used to come about two o’clock after lunch, or a little over. And he would travel all over the room there with his tricycle.

AH: Yes.

JR: Casey, I saw a lot also, but not as much as Richard. Casey was a little bigger.

AH: Yes, he didn’t have to be looked after as much. Let me see, two years part-time, that was starting in 2004?

JR: Yes.

AH: Yes, now, the ambassador position, you talked a little bit about how much they helped you out, Richard and Casey, and was it your knees, I though I remember hearing—

JR: Now, I have my both knees to knee surgery.

AH: Oh, for like replacement?

JR: Yes.

AH: Yes.

JR: I went to the doctor a month ago and he put shots in both of the knees, and—

[Cassette Tape, Side 1 ends, Side 2 begins]

AH: It happens to everybody these days and you know, once again over the recovery—
JR: He says it will take a month. He says in a month you’ll be perfectly—he says it takes one hour for each knee, and you know the exercises and so forth.

AH: Yes.

JR: He says in a months time you will be [makes a clicking]. And I tell you we got people in our club that we introduce them to this same doctor, that is my doctor and he did this to a lady of 85 years old and she’s dancing with us.

AH: Oh, wow that’s great.

JR: She’s dancing with us. He’s a good doctor.

AH: Yes. So, is that initially how it came about the ambassador, you just couldn’t do what you did—

JR: Well, it—

AH: Or were you thinking of retiring but you couldn’t really afford to. How—?

JR: No, no, I retired. I retired.

AH: You did retire.


AH: Okay.

JR: And then I did a little part-time, and then I had start trouble with the knees and then I stopped. And then I came here in 2004, and I’ve been with Richard—“Well, we want to make you the ambassador.”

AH: How did that come about? Obviously, they knew—

JR: I used to come once in a while around here.

AH: But they knew about your knees, right?

JR: Yes.

AH: They knew that was a big problem.

JR: Yes, they knew.

AH: So, you’d just come around from time to time.
JR: Just a couple from time to time, and one day I came in Richard says, “Joe, I want to see you, come to the office.” He says, “First I want to pay you a vacation,” and he gave us a week, for the wife and I, first class, a cruise.

AH: Oh, wow, where did you go?

JR: And he— (laughing) We went all the way out to Mexico. What was that—

AH: Belize.

JR: Belize.

AH: Belize.

JR: All the way around Mexico for a whole week. And he even gave us money to spend, and he said, “When you come back, you come and see me, and we’ll see how we start this.”

[Patron enter the room.]

JR: Hi, come right in.

Patron: Oh, you’re tape recording.

JR: Yes, ma’am. You come right in.

JR: So, then they say, “We going to make you ambassador.”

AH: Now, was that cruise a surprise for you, I mean, were you expecting anything?

JR: It sure was. No, no, no. I wasn’t expecting anything.

AH: What was the occasion?

JR: No, it was just one of those things.

AH: Yes.

JR: One of those things.

AH: Well, because you were basically retired at that point, right?

JR: Oh, yes, I was retired at that point; yes, it’d been over a year that I didn’t do anything.

AH: So, he just out of the blue just—
JR: Out of the blue. He say, “Roman, come and see me.” He says, “You know we are want to make you the ambassador of the Columbia, and you know all the corners of the building here, so you can come and give tours of the building and service some of the customers.” We still get some of the old customers that come into the Columbia from years back.

AH: Now, when you got back from the cruise then, describe to me then, you had—

JR: When I came back from the cruise—

AH: He wanted to meet with you, right?

JR: Yes, and—

AH: Oh wait, actually before we go there, just tell me a little bit more about the cruise, because I think this would be a great little thing.

JR: It was a beautiful thing.

AH: Is it a romantic—

JR: It is a very romantic cruise. It was something that I didn’t expect. It was the first cruise for us like that. A week. It was something.

AH: What, you had never been on a cruise before?

JR: I had never been on a cruise before.

AH: Okay and your wife had never been before either, right?

JR: No. We’ve been married for fifty-seven years.

AH: And it was a first for you.

JR: Yes, yes.

AH: So, you had a great vacation.

JR: We had a great vacation. Beautiful.

AH: Is there any defining memory from that trip, was there a certain sunset or a certain dinner, or—?

JR: Well, it was every night was something to do. Every night is something. They got a show, plus they got a casino, you go to the pool and there’s a band playing at day time,
the drummers, you know, those guy that play the drums and it’s fun all day, believe me. It’s fun, I really enjoyed it.

AH: Yes.

JR: We really enjoyed it.

AH: Okay.

JR: And we had good weather because that’s something, if you don’t have good weather—

AH: Well yes, true.

JR: The weather was beautiful, the food was beautiful. It was a beautiful trip.

AH: Yes, okay. Then you get back and Richard makes it known that he wants to see you, right.

JR: I came back and Richard says, “Roman, we’re going to wait just a few more weeks, and we going to name you the ambassador soon.” They did.

AH: Now, this was just Richard’s idea altogether?

JR: His idea.

AH: You had never thought of this?

JR: No, I never thought of this.

AH: So, you pretty much thought your career was over.

JR: That’s right. That’s right.

AH: And then they said—

JR: I had been in St. Pete Times, and I had the Spanish papers, the Times, the Tribune—

AH: Oh, when the story broke and you were in all the papers?

JR: I got in all papers and everybody wanted to have an interview with me. Even the mayor of the city—

AH: Yes, Pam [Iorio]or Dick [Greco]—

JR: Pam. Yes, even big ones like that—
AH: So, you’re more well known as the ambassador than ever before, right?

JR: (laughing). That’s right.

AH: And, well an ambassador should be well known, right?

JR: Yes, it is. Really. Yes, and I introduce myself a lot of times for all the tables at lunch, and everything. And I give them my card, and we have two shows nightly, you know, we have two shows nightly. Any time you call in we’ll have your table ready, so you know and then I also have here a book from last year and we have a new restaurant. Last year we opened—

AH: Yes, West Palm Beach.

JR: West Palm Beach. They already got it here [shows brochure to AH] and last year a lot of the story of the Columbia and last year. So, I gave one of these books to the customer with a card and tell them that we have two shows nightly, the Spanish Flamencos; we would enjoy it if they come to the show. And even if they want to come to lunch, if you call ahead, we would be glad to have your table ready. So that counts a lot, too.

AH: Oh, yes absolutely. So, well it helps personalize the experience for them, too—

JR: Exactly.

AH: Even more.

JR: And you know, I usually if I’m around I check around and go to the door, “Good morning, Good evening,” you know, “Good Afternoon,” “Welcome to the Columbia,” “How was you lunch?” And you know people see that they are being cared for.

AH: Yes.

JR: So, that counts a lot I would think, too. And we want the best for the Columbia.

AH: And with all your experience caring for customers, it must just come natural to you.

JR: Yes, it’s true. It’s natural. It’s true, yes.

AH: So, well that’s an amazing story. It’s no wonder that there is so much press come out of it, and it really shows that it’s a family business but it goes beyond the family, you know.

JR: And this will stay in the family because Richard and Casey—Richard has two daughters and Casey has two sons and I think three daughters. He’s been married three times. And his father—this is the king’s room, because of Cesar Gonzmart.
AH: Yes.

JR: He opened the of the—we have the Gasparilla downtown, he says “We got to have a parade in Ybor City. So these gentlemen that you see here, the kings, are the ones that really helped him—

AH: Yes, [The Krewe of the Knights of] Sant’ Yago.

JR: To build the club.

AH: Yes.

JR: There’s the daughters of Richard.

AH: Yes, I recognize them.

JR: You recognize them.

AH: Oh, yes. Well I know them both too, so—Let me see here. And you feel like this is your second home here?

JR: You believe it. I love to be here but I am sorry because my wife, you know. I leave her alone at nighttime at least five nights a week.

AH: Yes.

JR: I had a stroke a year ago, and it was a light stroke and I was able to get perfect again. But then I told Richard, “Look Richard, I’m going to come just in the morning and you don’t have to give me, you know, you don’t give me what you’re giving me. Give me a hundred dollars and I will be glad to if you ever need me at night, I’ll be glad to come,” but you know, I had this problem and leaving my wife alone. My wife has heart trouble now. So, you know, I says, “I want to be home.” He says, “No, no you come when ever you can. You come whenever you can.” So, you know, I try to come—like tomorrow we have a dinner and wine. I’ll be here.

AH: Oh, so it’s a wine dinner.

JR: Yes.

AH: Yes, those are great, too.

JR: So, I come. And like any occasion like yours and ours here, I come, you know. Or if they have a party of ten or twenty, they say, “Well, this people coming at six o’clock, but they wanted a tour.” I come. Otherwise, I don’t.

AH: Yes.
JR: If there is something going I come.

AH: Well, you just mentioned the wine dinner too, and the wine has really been emphasized much more than before.

JR: You know, when we have that salad with—we have at the house here three thousand, five hundred bottles of wine. And Richard and Casey they don’t drink scotch or bourbon. They drink wine and the wine seller they come here very often from Spain, France, England. We get a lot of them, and it’s something. I don’t know who would come here tomorrow but the last dinner, wine dinner, we had here from Spain, a big representative, his son, one of the sons of the owner and two other big representatives of wine with their wives and everything. Richard, Casey, and all their families.

AH: Well, that must be great for the waiters, too.

JR: It is.

AH: I hear that it is one of the best Spanish wine lists in the world, if not the best.

JR: It is. I would say.

AH: As far as all the different kinds of wine brought under one roof. And as a waiter, that’s definitely something else you can market to make the meal even more special. You can make suggestions on a good wine paring.

JR: Yes, yes, you can make suggestions.

AH: On which wine for them?

JR: Yes, yes, they bring the menu—the wine menu today is [gestures], it used to be like this [AH laughing] Richard’s got a wine menu this big [JR laughing].

AH: Yes.

JR: So when you serve the table, “Would you like a bottle of wine? We have a Spanish this or that—,” or Sanio Coro or we have a wine from Spain made for Cesar, we have one for Casimiro which is very good, and Adela. And they sell a lot of that wine special.

AH: Okay, and it’s especially nice, that they’re all Spanish wines these days too. You know—

JR: We’ve got them from all over, but you see the brand mostly is from Spain.

AH: Yes, and Spanish wine, of course, has just gotten better and better throughout the last hundred years.
JR: There’s a lot of different wines, but I guess Spain stays in good shape with wines.

AH: Certainly.

JR: And a lot of people ask “What you got in a Spanish wine,” so that’s something. And wine, so then I’ve got to bring them the menu. Otherwise you try to sell them an Adela, Casimiro, or—

AH: Now, tell me too about discerning customers, I mean you’d have customers during the war, for example, or after the war that—

JR: After the war—

AH: They might not know very much about food at all, and it seems with the Food Network [television network] these days and you know, it seems like food is a fad that’s never going to go out of fashion.

JR: It will never go out of fashion.

AH: I mean, we could never go back to the days of the fifties [1950s] and sixties [1960s] when people thought that canned food was better than fresh food—

JR: Yes, yes, that’s true.

AH: Or frozen food. So, then people know quality better right?

JR: That’s right. That’s true.

AH: Which makes it all the more vital that the food quality has really bounced back, because these days people, they don’t tolerate that as much, do they?

JR: That’s true.

AH: Especially at place, you know, places like this—

JR: When they come they want a—

AH: If they want throw away food they go to TGI Friday’s [restaurant chain].

JR: They want the best dishes there around. “What is the best dishes that you recommend?” And there are some that just care for fish, on the fish, the Red Snapper Alicante or the Grouper such and such.

AH: And Richard and Casey really played a big role in that. They went to culinary school in Europe.
JR: Yes, sir. They know their kitchen.

AH: So, they know their stuff.

JR: That’s the number one, the kitchen.

AH: Absolutely.

JR: Absolutely.

AH: And everything else comes after.

JR: After that comes the managers are the ones who run the dining rooms and you know, but Richard and Casey, their business is the kitchen.

JR: Well, it seems that the waiters when they’re beginning to be trained today—I know someone who was a waiter here for a while, and the training is very food-intensive at the beginning.

JR: That’s right.

AH: I mean before you even wait on anybody you learn about the food.

JR: No, no, no. You got to be three or four weeks in the kitchen before you go to the dining room.

AH: Tell me about that. How do they train new people these days?

JR: Well, let’s say a waiter comes and orders two Red Snapper Alicante and one Filet de Columbia, one steak such and such and such. When they put them up there they’re there. They got the menu there. So, the guy there (inaudible) says, “This is the Red Snapper Alicante, here it is, that’s the Red Snapper Alicante, it has this, it has that.” They train them at least three weeks or four.

AH: Well, I hear they’re also tasting too. They have to know—

JR: A lot of time, what they do is a lot of the gravy sauces, especially the lunchtime, the chef brings two or three of the different dishes and put them there for them to try out. “This sauce is such and such and this sauce is—” Which is something very interesting and it is important.

AH: Yes. And it was different from when you first came here. Is it? Is it different?

JR: Well, that’s right. It is in a way. When I came here, I was a waiter already and there was all the Spaniard waiters, but also the menu has what the dish would take, you know, to make, ingredients and so forth. And then you go to the kitchen a lot of times and
something that you didn’t know, you ask. A lot of the waiters, Que lo que— Usually it was Spanish, you know, Que esta llevan? What does this take? Que lo que eso? Que lo que? What’s this? See.

AH: So, it was just a little more informal.

JR: That’s right.

AH: Today it is a formalized process.

JR: Today it is a formal thing, and they have to be there to learn all these gravies and the dishes.

AH: So, then by the time they are out there waiting tables they’re not worried about people asking questions.

JR: That’s right. That’s right. They have the right answer because they have already been trained the proper way. And that counts a lot because a lot of customers say, What about the Red Snapper Alicante, does that have mushrooms? “No, no that don’t have mushroom; that has a little bit of onion, green pepper, this and that.”

AH: Yes, you don’t want to have to say, “I’ll be right back I have to go ask the kitchen.”

JR: Or, I don’t know—

AH: Yes, that’s no good.

JR: I don’t know.

AH: And that kind of training process is really, what it is doing is it is bringing them not even half way to where waiters were in your day, where they were so well educated about you know, carving, doing all these other things.

JR: Yes.

AH: And, so today it’s just trying to bring them somewhere close to where you guys were way back when.

JR: Yes, that’s true. And the only dish today that they have to take out of the dishes is the paella. Everything else comes served.

AH: And the 1905 salad, right?

JR Oh, well the 1905 salad.

AH: They make some of the Sangria table side too, right?
JR: Yes, that’s true. They make the Spanish Sangria and they make it at the table.

AH: Okay.

JR: They give them the juice and all that all ready.

AH: Yes.

JR: And they put the brandy and they mix it.

AH: Mix it, let me see, “I love people and I want to give a taste of the Ybor City I grew up in and at the most famous restaurant.”

JR: That’s right.

AH: Okay. Well, what’s interesting too is that Cuban food hasn’t changed that much.

JR: No, it hasn’t. That’s the truth.

AH: And a lot of that has to do with the nostalgia and you’ve got an exile community here from Cuba, and they want to remember what Cuba tasted like…

JR: What Cuba tasted like.

AH: When they were there, right?

JR: Yes, that’s true.

AH: And you feel blessed for having worked at the Columbia for so long.

JR: I really do, I really and truly, I really and truly have all my life enjoyed here at the Columbia.

AH: I mean lets just think for a second how your life might be different if you had just worked at another restaurant, any other restaurant.

JR: Yes—

AH: It would probably much different right?

JR: Oh, yes.

AH: You wouldn’t be an ambassador today, right?

[JR laughing] [AH then laughing]
JR: That’s true. Yes, I think it would have been much different, yes.

AH: Well, I think the Columbia is also blessed to have you, and I think they know that. And that’s….

JR: I think they really appreciate me too.

AH: Well, there’s nothing better than being appreciated just for who you are, you know? You “worked in the number one restaurant.” You raised “my family while working here.”

[Taken from notes]

JR: That’s true.

AH: How many children?

JR: I got two sons.

AH: Two sons, okay.

JR: I have a son that is fifty-five—

AH: Okay.

JR: And a son that is fifty.

AH: Okay.

JR: My oldest son is in real estate and my young son is with the telephone company.

AH: Okay.

JR: In fact he is about to retire now this coming month.

AH: Oh, good for him.

JR: Yes, he made twenty-five years.

AH: Okay, well I hope you get to see some more of each other.

JR: Yes.

AH: “When I first stepped in the Columbia I said to myself this is the place I would like to work in for the rest of my life and I have.”

JR: That’s true. When I—
AH: You said that the first time you walked in?

JR: When I came here, yes, but real and truly when I worked here, then at the beginning I was the last one to come in, you know, and you have to go through the—And I said, “Concha! __________ I don’t know” because I was the last one but after I got the trick to it, I said “This is really what I want.” This is what I want.

AH: Okay, and then you close with, “We certainly know the Gonzmarts have been exceptionally good to me and I love them.

JR: Exceptionally, that’s right. They all. Even from the old man when I started here. Casimiro Jr. was also great but I did not know his brother.

AH: Yes. Now, we’re going to start wrapping things up here but I just wanted to ask you a few more questions. Was there ever a—let’s take each one of the…let’s take Cesar and we’ll take Richard and Casey. Is there a defining memory something that you remember about each of them that just, something that you just saw the way they reacted to something or the way they acted in a certain situation, and you thought, I kind of know what this guy is made of now. You know or something that especially impressed you about each of them? Do you have—

JR: Well, Cesar impressed me because he was such a show man, you know. And it was great for the business.

AH: Yes.

JR: And you know, I really enjoy with Cesar. He was number one.

AH: Well, in many ways he was a showman that his reputation went far beyond the Columbia too. He was kind of a celebrity for Tampa.

JR: He was known—a celebrity too, that’s right. Yes, he was.

AH: And in a place where people most often got fame for doing bad things, not good things, right?

JR: That’s true.

AH: Yes.

JR: Yes. Cesar was a very bright person. Very bright man and he learned the business, and like I tell you, he got to know the business before he came here. Because when he got here he knew what’s what.

AH: Okay.
JR: And you could see, conjo, I thought it would be—and he wasn’t.

AH: So, you were expecting him to be a little shaky, right?

JR: Yes, and he just got on to it. Just got on to it. And Richard and Casey worked in that kitchen when they were young (laughing) a hell of a lot of years and time. Richard used to take care of a lot of things there and the machine—I don’t think it was this one but the other dish washing machine there (laughing)—Richard and the general manager of today are the ones who installed the machine. That was something. At one o’clock in the morning.

AH: Wow. George and Richard?

JR: George and Richard. George been here for forty-five years. The chandelier, it came here in 1970 from the Eden Rock Hotel. George was the one that installed it, put it up there with some help see. Yes, George has done a great here.

AH: Well, I’m interviewing him too.

JR: Yes, interview George. He can give you a lot of it. Yes, he can give you a lot of the restaurant because he started very young also. And his thing was first in the kitchen. So he build up. He knows from the bottom. He knows from the bottom.

AH: But was there ever a certain moment, I guess the story you told about Richard installing the dishwasher himself that’s—

JR: That’s something.

AH: I mean he doesn’t think he is better than anybody.

JR: No, no, no, no, no. Richard is—they’re both very down low to earth. They’re very good people. They’ve got good characters and—

AH: And it would be easy for someone, it seems, someone to get a little carried away with themselves and they don’t.

JR: That’s true. You know, if Casey has to tell you something, they will call you to the side. I remember one time that I was working and I think that they’d ordered, it was something in the salad, I don’t remember now what it was and he comes and says, “Roman, don’t you know that their salad is suppose to have—”

“I’m sorry I didn’t hear that one.”

“Yes.”

So, you know. So they knew how to take care of employees.
AH: Well, they respect you.

JR: No, you know they could say, Listen, come here don’t you know—, like that in front of the customer.

AH: Yes, in front of the customer, that’s no good. Well, and that’s not good customer relations either, right?

JR: No, that’s true too. Yes, they got quality. They got quality.

AH: What about Casey? I’m looking for a little story about Casey too.

JR: Casey so mild, you know, Casey is a piece of bread with butter. He don’t—

[AH laughing]

AH: He’s just smooth?

JR: So smooth. Richard, he acts some time—you see him in the kitchen raising a little hell but Casey he is so smooth.

AH: Yes.

JR: Casey has another character.

AH: Yes certainly, well is there a certain story you remember, something that he handled especially well when you thought—

JR: Not really.

AH: Okay.

JR: I don’t, from Casey, I don’t know who could tell you anything about him really.

AH: Yes.

JR: He’s always been mild and such a person. Very, very, very nice guy. They both are but I tell you Richard sometime I seen him in the kitchen a little bit ___ because, you know, this is wrong or whatever and it has to be corrected. “George, come here.” And there he goes. [JR laughing]

AH: What, George, he was here?

JR: No, no, but that’s what he does—“Aye, aye, George, come here [whistles] to the kitchen.” [JR laughing]
AH: And, then any memories of Melanie? She’s been a real driving force behind this whole. She wanted interviews and everything else.

JR: Yes, she’s beautiful. Really there is nothing you can really say about her. She’s so lovable.

AH: Yes, absolutely.

JR: She’s so lovable. Any time she say, “Joe!” And she kiss you. She’s very lovable.

AH: Yes, absolutely. Well is there anything we missed here? We certainly covered a lot of ground here. Is there anything we missed or anything that you wanted to share that we didn’t get around too?

JR: Not really. I think that we have covered all the territory that I can.

AH: Sure.

JR: Yes.

AH: Any customers, any really famous customers that you remember waiting on? Any politicians or celebrities?

JR: Well—

AH: Were you here when Kennedy came?

JR: Yes, I was.

AH: John F. Kennedy.

JR: When Kennedy came I was here. And I went to see him also. One other fellow, Mr. Cow, belonged to a big union here, and he came to lunch two, three days before and—

AH: What was the man’s name?

JR: Mr. Cow. It’s Cow.

AH: Mr. Cow?

JR: Yes.

AH: Okay.

JR: And he says, “Joe, you—” He gave me some tickets. So we went to the hotel. Now when I heard Mr. Kennedy say, “If he thinks like this, with oil making oil machines,
money, they’re going to have to help the people that don’t have any.” I told my wife “this man is good.” I could not believe they killed him. Why they kill him I don’t know.

AH: Yes, I even heard rumors that he was supposed to be killed here but that’s just a rumor.

JR: He was a great, great president and a great man.

AH: So, in the speech he said “The people that make the machines—”

JR: In the speech he said “The people that make the machines. They’re making so many machines and the people making money, they’re are going to have to help the people that don’t.”

AH: Yes.

JR: This guy is frank. It’s a shame because he was a beautiful person, and when he came here, concha! It was something and we really thought he was so enjoyable.

AH: Well, and you know, there’s that photograph in the cookbook and it’s the only picture I’ve ever seen where Cesar isn’t the center of attention. He’s standing off to the side with a big smile on his face and all eyes are on Kennedy, right?

JR: Yes.

AH: So I mean, you know, he must have had some charisma if Cesar steps aside.

JR: I guess so.

AH: Yes.

JR: But that was something; that was something. Man, we had secret service people, men working, who came over here all over the place.

AH: Now, when Kennedy came though he was dead a week later, right? I mean like in Dallas, right?

JR: He was killed in Dallas. I think about a week.

AH: I mean, he came here and then he flew to Miami and then Dallas, right?

JR: Yes, sir. Yes.

AH: Just making sure.
JR: About a week. Yes. What a thing. That was something. People got—oh, everybody was so hurt what happened to him.

AH: Oh, yes. And any other customers you remember? Any memorable visits?

JR: No.

AH: One thing I wanted to ask about, okay, Richard and Melanie gave their papers to the library, all the different things about the Columbia, and things like this, and there was one thing I found all these letters and all these pictures having to do with the Holiday magazine award dinner of 1968.

JR: Oh, 196—Yes.

AH: And it seemed to be a really big deal and they got letters from all over the country saying, Thank you, you did an amazing job.

JR: Amazing.

AH: Now, were you a part of that?

JR: That was true. I was here yes.

AH: So, what was it all about?

JR: Cesar was a hell of a promoter, you know, he was always working toward the restaurant and everything. And it’s a shame that Cesar passed away and he didn’t really see it really and truly because this was all—the city bought everything here and this was just the Columbia, the back of the Columbia Restaurant, the rest of the thing was all closed. The business started going down. And he was always trying to promote people from up north. I saw blue prints and everything that trying to bring people from up north to build something here, you know. And, concha, he passed away and then the thing start coming up.

AH: Yes. You know that dinner though, the Holiday magazine, the award’s dinner, these were restaurateurs from all over the country, right?

JR: From all over the country.

AH: I mean, because I remember they included, you know, it was on business stationary some fancy restaurant in New York or Chicago or Michigan—

JR: New York, Chicago, New Orleans people—

AH: Yes, California—
JR: Number one, California.

AH: Yes, so these were people who were getting awards from Holiday magazine, is that it?

JR: That’s what it was.

AH: And they had their big party at the Columbia.

JR: They had their big party at the Columbia.

AH: Well, it sounds like it went on for several days, right?

JR: Yes, I think it did.

AH: There was a big dinner and maybe a lunch, and—

JR: Yes, there was a big luncheon and the big dinner. And I think it was about three days, I think it was.

AH: Do you remember about how many people there were?

JR: No.

AH: Okay, I remember there was quite a few though.

JR: It was a quite a few.

AH: Was it twenty or thirty, maybe.

JR: Yes. Yes, it was. Seats about twenty or thirty. Yes, that was a big promotion also, like I explained to you, Cesar was always rolling around to Ybor City—

AH: Yes, Yes.

JR: Columbia but for Ybor City also.

AH: Especially during that period because Urban Renewal really hit kind of hard, right?

JR: It hit real hard. Yes it did.

AH: And do you remember any of these plans he had for the ‘Spanish walled city’ and the ‘bloodless bullfighting’ and all this?

JR: I remember he said, “we’re not going to kill the bull.” They was planning to do a ____ in the back because they owned the property up to the railroad track, also.
AH: Okay, yes.

JR: But they were going to have a big party there and this was going to turn into the bullfight, but it didn’t go. He tried but—

AH: That was another big thing for Cesar because he bought out Las Novedades, right?

JR: Yes.

AH: And that was the only real—I mean, that and Spanish Park, they were the only competition in Ybor City, right?

JR: That’s true. That was the only competition other ____ They were really a number one restaurant. ______ was also a very good, fine restaurant.

AH: That’s what I heard, yes.

JR: Without the Columbia—Spanish Park they had a good business but—

AH: But the food wasn’t quite so good?

JR: But it wasn’t comparison to the Columbia or Novedades.

AH: Yes, okay, so once Las Novedades was out of the picture the Columbia stood alone, right?

JR: Yes, then Cesar bought the Las Novedades and he tried to bring it up but it didn’t work.

AH: Well, their just so close together too, right?

JR: Yes, I guess he figured that he could. I guess then he says “the best to just stay with the Columbia” because it would divide some of the business, and a lot of the friends of Cesar would go over there.

AH: Yes, yes.

JR: So, I guess they figure they better sell it and let it go so—

AH: Well, two more questions and then we’re done. What was the most challenging time for you in your life, or here at the Columbia? What was the toughest time?

JR: The toughest time?
AH: Yes. Not necessarily bad but just tough? I mean, was there ever a certain era where say, during Urban Renewal, when maybe things aren’t going so well? Or when was there a certain time that you were starting to think—

JR: That’s when really, truly, I don’t even think about it. Being that what happened and everything was gone, all the stores and everything, and the thing went down and it hurt the Columbia a lot.

AH: And poor people are moving in and they’ve got public housing right down the street here. That seemed to be terrible place to put public housing—

JR: Yes, that’s right.

AH: Right next to what could be a tourist attraction.

JR: That’s true.

AH: So, that was the roughest—

JR: That was the roughest time.

AH: And then what would you say is the best time for you at the Columbia? I mean, when things were going the greatest or you were the happiest or whatever?

JR: I start this really start picking up about ’75 around there—

AH: What things started to improve in ’75?

JR: Started to improve in ’75. It’s when things started picking up again and we were able to make some money.

AH: Well, and the ambassador position, too. It sounded like that was, I mean a blessing in many ways for you. You just explained that you would have to sell your house.

JR: Believe me. I’m telling you the truth.

AH: Yes, and well it’s so nice to know that, that happened and that business is also doing better then ever. I mean, we can still hear all the people downstairs.

JR: It’s jam packed. In the lunch time, it’s jam packed. We had a great lunch today.

AH: And I am sorry I mislead you. I do have another question for you. Your favorite dishes at the Columbia?

JR: The favorite dishes—
AH: What are your favorite, personal?

JR: Personal.

AH: Yes.

JR: Personal is the Red Snapper Alicante.

AH: Okay.

JR: It's the number one. If it say “Columbia” you can’t beat it also. And the paella. Those are—

AH: Those are your favorites? Like if you came here to eat that’s what you would order?

JR: If I came here to eat I would eat the Red Snapper Alicante or another day I would eat the paella—

[AH laughing]

AH: The next day you’d have the steak. What’s your favorite soup here? I have a hard time deciding between them.

JR: Really.

AH: There’s not a lot of them but—

JR: There’s three soups here. There’s black beans, there’s Spanish beans, and the Caldo Gallego and the cold soup.

AH: Well, the gazpacho.

JR: And the cold soup is gazpacho.

AH: So, what’s your favorite? If you were to pick one?

JR: I would say the Caldo Gallego.

AH: Yes, that’s a good one.

JR: That’s a good one. And you know the ham bones and everything—the Spanish bean also—but Caldo Gallego I like better.

AH: Okay. And obviously the Columbia you like, what about the salads? There’s some new salads now, too. There’s the beefsteak tomato and the—
JR: Yes, yes.

AH: What is your favorite?

JR: That beefsteak tomato, you can’t beat it.

AH: You like that—

JR: With the cheese on top. I love it.

AH: That’s good huh?

JR: And they put red onions on it and tomatoes. That’s the number one. And it’s real good with the dressing that we serve.

AH: And I noticed there are a lot of new appetizers too. What are you favorite appetizers?

JR: The appetizer to me always is the shrimp al aijillo. You can’t beat that. The fried calamari, here it’s done here very good also. And they have two or three more. They have one with scallops and scallops, I think, and shrimps in a cream sauce, also.

AH: What about cocktails, libations, or?

JR: No, all we have that is a cocktail, is the shrimp cocktail.

AH: No, I meant drinks.

JR: Oh, drinks.

AH: Do you have any favorites?

JR: They have the Mango Tango that they developed and it’s real good. Mango Tango. It’s real good. The others are regular cocktails—

AH: Your favorites though, what would you order?

JR: I would order a Mango Tango.

AH: Okay, yes, that’s your favorite.

JR: That’s very good. That is.

AH: And what about just a couple of your wife’s favorites. What is—?

JR: My wife is not a drinker. She might drink a glass of wine.
AH: Oh, I meant the food, too.

JR: And the food—

AH: Like what would she order if you were take her here and it would be her favorite meal. Do you think?

JR: She would order the Red Snapper Alicante.

AH: Okay. She loves that.

JR: That’s what she usually order all the time. She don’t go for much beef.

AH: Okay. Well, I want to thank you very much for taking the time ______

JR: Well, well it’s been a pleasure. Sorry that I delay so many days before—

AH: No, no, I’m sorry. I had to reschedule too, so—

JR: But I be glad to any time. I’m here for that also.

AH: Thank you very much it’s really been a pleasure to get to know you better.

JR: It’s been a pleasure.

AH: Thanks.

JR: It’s really been a pleasure.

AH: Yes.

Remaining Questions for Interviewee/Interviewer:

At times it can be difficult for the Transcriber/Audit Editor to understand what is being said. Areas where speech was inaudible are indicated by empty underline.
Page 1 Mojacesta (spelling?)
Page 8 Traficante (spelling?)
Page 13 Pijuan (spelling?)
Page 14 knows those (unsure if this is what was said)
Page 17 Tudela (spelling?)
Page 22 Seripico (spelling?)
Page 26 after he brought it home it was seven (unsure if this is what was said)
Page 30 form (unsure if this is what was said)
Page 32 Gonio (spelling?)
Page 32 mentally (spelling?)
Page 32 Mata (spelling?)
Page 33 Chavales (spelling?)