Andrew Huse: I’m here with Jerry. What’s your last name?

Geraldo Bayona: Bayona?

AH: What’s the first name?

GB: Actually my first name is really Geraldo.

AH: Geraldo.

GB: My middle name is Jerry.

AH: Bayona?

GB: Bayona.

AH: Is that like in the Susan Spicer restaurant in New Orleans?

GB: Yes, actually it’s spelled the same way but we are not related.

AH: Yes

(GB laughs)

AH: Yes, well, uh, that’s a good fine restaurant.

GB: Actually when I was younger, when I was starting out and I—you know, into the cooking business and I realized there was a restaurant I was—I started reading her books and stuff like that. (laughs)
AH: Yes, it’s good stuff. I’ll be there in New Orleans tomorrow.

GB: Yes.

AH: Yes.

GB: That’s good.

AH: One of my favorite places. All right well, first tell us a little bit about your experience before you got here to the Columbia.

GB: Well, I graduated from the Florida Culinary Institute in West Palm Beach, and after that I was—

AH: What year was that, about?

GB: That was probably 1990.

AH: Okay.

GB: No, I’m sorry that was probably 1994.

AH: Okay.

GB: And (coughs), excuse me. And after that, I was working at a couple of restaurants in Vero Beach, and I was a sous chef over there for a small restaurant. And then actually I went to a restaurant and moved to Boca. I started, you know, moving around, you know how chefs usually do to get their experience. I was a sous chef over there in a restaurant, and actually the chef from over there got offered a position over here at the restaurant in Celebration, when they were going to open up and they wanted me to come with him as a sous chef.

AH: Okay.

GB: And that’s why I started to come into the business over here.

AH: Okay, so you started in Celebration then?

GB: I started in Celebration. We actually opened up Celebration and everything, actually two months later, actually like a month later he left and two months later I became the chef there.

AH: Okay.
GB: So, actually Curt Gaither who is the C.O.O. right now, he was the manager there and he took me under his wing and showed me—without his help actually I don’t think, the point where I am right now actually has to do a lot from him actually.

AH: Okay.

GB: From then on, I was there.

AH: Well, let’s back up just a second. What drew you to being a chef in the first place?

GB: What drew me to be a chef? Well, I actually after I high school I went to college to be a computer programmer (laughs). And I just could not stay still in there, (laughs) stay still and—

AH: Just kind of restless?

GB: Restless and everything like that. I was always working in a restaurant before that and I always enjoyed it.

AH: Okay.

GB: Everyone always said you really do, you can tell that I had my heart into that when I was doing it and that is actually what got me started. I worked for Club Med, which was in Port St. Lucie back there, and they had a lot of European chefs there. I was their porter or helper, do what ever they want us to do, that’s what actually inspired me, actually working with these different chefs and learning all these different cuisines from them got me actually inspired to go into culinary school and from that point on it was just—

AH: Okay. Well, I know it’s one of those kinds of things once you’re in—

GB: You’re like hooked then.

AH: Yes. Well, so, is it the frenetic pace in the kitchen that—

GB: It’s that whole pace in the kitchen, you know, the fast pace, you know, thinking on your feet, you know, that’s what makes it. It’s so lively, you know and that’s what makes it so fun actually to me.

AH: Okay.

GB: Cooking and designing products. Working with all these different foods. Learning, you know. You just can’t explain sometimes because it’s just so much enjoyment just from using all these different products and learning and just mixing everything up and all that.

AH: And making people happy, too. (laughs)
GB: And making people happy, of course.

AH: All right, and so then at Celebration you were initially a sous chef there?

GB: Initially a sous chef.

AH: What was the opening like there? What was your first impression? What did you know about the Columbia before this?

GB: What I knew about the Columbia was, that they had a big old restaurant in Tampa, (laughs) and that it was huge, it was a city block long, and actually I remember before I even came there that I had nightmares thinking about how Celebration would be because I was used to working with smaller restaurants. And you hear a restaurant that’s 1500 seats [and] you’re just like “Oh, my God!” (laughs). But I actually, before I went to Celebration they actually had me training, and they didn’t want me training over here because they thought, Oh, I might get too scared or whatever and that’s why I trained in St. Pete (laughs).

AH: Yes, it’s a smaller location. Yes.

GB: With a smaller location you know, and I learned everything over there from Chef David—

AH: Okay.

GB: The chef over there. He trained me on all the products?? over there so that we went open up Celebration.

AH: Okay. So, how does the Columbia differ from places you’ve been before?

GB: Well, the big difference I think is the family orientation it has.

AH: Okay.

GB: You know a lot of restaurants they are so corporate, you know, everything is you know, by this way and stuff like that. Yes, we have our standards, you know, but having family input is and family ambience makes it so much more enjoyable to work here. And joyful.

AH: Okay. And so what year did Celebration open?

GB: Celebration opened, I believe it was in—

AH: [That] you started?

GB: [Nineteen] eighty-seven.
AH: All right so you’ve been with them for a while now.

GB: No, I’m sorry ’97. I don’t know.

AH: So, did you live in Celebration, or—?

GB: Actually, I lived—no not in Celebration. It is too expensive over there.


GB: (laughs) No, I lived on the outskirts of Orlando.

AH: Okay.

GB: At that time.

AH: All right. And then did you have much experience with Spanish food before?

GB: Well, not this type of Spanish food. I’ve always worked in Caribbean food.

AH: Okay.

GB: The location like when I worked in Vero Beach when I was starting, or in Boca Raton there are more Caribbean style food, so, yes I was familiar with the flavor. And I’m Spanish myself so mom’s cooking is, you know, is actually the most experience I guess I would have would be Spanish cooking.

AH: What area of Spain do you come from?

GB: I’m not from Spain. I’m actually Puerto Rican—

AH: Oh, I see. So, it’s still Caribbean orientation.

GB: Still Caribbean oriented.

AH: And, of course, the Columbia is a Spanish Restaurant but there is a whole lot of influence from Cuba, et cetera, right?

GB: Exactly. Cuba, Spain, and Caribbean, some influence from the Caribbean, and also through the years, I’m sure you know already, they made kind of actually their own cuisine, you can actually say.

AH: Yes.

GB: You know, from all those different locations and all through the years it just developed into what we make.
AH: Yes, because one thing I heard is from someone who has spent a lot of time in Spain themselves is that they don’t eat that much rice there.

GB: No, they don’t. Their portions are a lot smaller.

AH: Yes.

GB: Definitely a lot smaller.

AH: Okay.

GB: Definitely a lot smaller. (laughs)

AH: Well, and it seemed like when you know, this guy was going through the country he found that paella was the main dish that they use for rice, and what other starch would they use? Potatoes?

GB: Potatoes. Actually, you find a lot of potatoes and rice. Those are the two big starches that they use. They do use in some regions a little bit of pasta, that is more in the region closer to Italy, but not much, not much. Mainly rice and potatoes.

AH: Okay.

GB: A lot of dishes do have rice in them.

AH: Yes. Well—

GB: (Inaudible, dishes clanking in the background)

AH: Well, I’ve heard that in the past there was a lot of brown bread.

GB: Brown bread—

AH: Yes, rather than the whole rice stuff, but all right. So, what else about the food here is different? I mean when you talk about that they kind of developed their own cuisine, in a way you know, their own kind of fusion, I mean before they called it fusion. Besides mixing the Spanish and the Cuban elements is there anything else that in your mind kind of sets apart the style of food from other places?

GB: Very rich. Since we are you know, that infusion that we have we do have the richness of the Spaniards and all those regions up there and the freshness of the Caribbean, a lot of the fresh fruits and all the vegetables they use over there. I don’t know, it’s just good.

AH: Yes. And when you say rich, I know with Cuban cuisine there used to be a lot of lard and stuff involved, what is kind of ingredients here that put it over the top that way?
GB: I say the garlic that we use. We use a lot of demi-glace and stocks, and you know that makes it the richer food, and we use cream, butter, you know, very much, how would you say it now, what’s the word? Not old-fashioned but, you know—

AH: Comfort.

GB: Comfort food, exactly—

AH: Yes.

GB: Which makes it all rich, you know.

AH: Okay, so after Celebration, how long did you spend there?

GB: Celebration, I believe was there for eight years and then I was offered a position in the location in West Palm Beach—I went to open up a location in West Palm Beach.

AH: Okay. Just, that’s a couple of years ago right?

GB: Yes, a couple of years.

AH: Okay. To go back to the pier for a second. Obviously, the training went okay, you weren’t overwhelmed—

GB: Yes (laughs), right.

AH: So, at what point did you feel like you know, “This is going to be all right?” I mean, did it take a few days, or—

GB: Actually, when I was first over there, there was a lot of stuff actually (inaudible). Like any chef coming into a new location they are like, “Oh my God, I can’t believe they do that,” or, “I can do that better,” and that type of thing like that. Eventually when we opened up Celebration we actually went through—they were using a lot of base and stuff like that but when we opened up Celebration we actually ended up doing a lot of stocks again, making a lot of demi-glace with beef bones, and doing the process for two days, and we were doing that type of stuff. But then after a point we didn’t have to do that, that much. So, we kind of went back to using the base and stuff like that, which is really good for the type of food I was doing, you know. When we were in Celebration actually, when I was in Celebration, is when we actually started standardizing the recipes for all the locations.

AH: Really. It was that late?

GB: Yes.

AH: Okay.
GB: They had recipes but it was at that point that where we said, “Okay, we need to really to, you know”—Consistency is very important—

AH: Oh yes.

GB: “And we need to standardize all the recipes.” And me and Curt actually, and I believe Brenda helped in organizing all that. We went ahead, we started making recipe books up, writing down all the recipes [organizing] formats, doing that whole process, finally passing out to all the chefs in all the different locations, and that’s when everything started getting more consistent in all the different locations.

AH: Okay. So, and were there any—I know like Luis Diaz, for example, he’ll go around and train people on wine—

GB: He’s great.

AH: And did you have to do anything like that for the other chefs?

GB: Well in the beginning, well we have, Curt was in charge of that, he was the C.O.O or whatever, and we made all the recipes. The first chef’s meeting we had, is actually the first chef’s meeting I think they’ve ever had (laughs)—for a while.

AH: Okay.

GB: That’s when we brought out the books and we actually had a little training session about some recipes that you know, some locations which Curt knew because he was traveling to other locations, which ones were—needed more work on, or whatever, stuff like that. And we actually all came over here and he gave us all a bunch of recipes and we all had to present them here the way they were in the recipe book.

AH: Oh, I see.

GB: So, everybody saw what we wanted, what they wanted, and after that we all went back to our locations, did our recipes—

AH: Okay.

GB: And Curt was responsible for—Curt and Kathy Bornick, I don’t know if you’ve talked to her before.

AH: No.

GB: She was like in charge of our purchasing.

AH: Okay.
GB: And sanitation and all type of stuff like that. Food quality. And she would come around the restaurants also, and make sure we were following the recipes. When ever we needed to make changes or new recipes I was actually, when in involved in Celebration, changing new recipes and, you know, making all that up.

AH: So, what recipes have you tinkered with the most? I guess, you know, changing.

GB: Well the staples will never change. The Boliche, the roast pork and chicken yellow rice. Those things will actually never change.

AH: Yes.

GB: We did make the yellow rice more consistent in every location, by making sofrito which we make a mix now. Basically they measure everything out, and all they have to do is add water to it and it makes the rice as good as making it to order.

AH: So, what’s in the sofrito for the rice?

GB: Sofrito, well we put onions, peppers, lots of garlic, white wine, saffron or food coloring that we use into it and bay leaves. All the seasonings that we put in it.

AH: Okay.

GB: And tomatoes. And we just take that mix and it has everything in there. Just add water to it and it comes out to the flavor that we want. So, it’s not—they can’t mess it up.

AH: Yes, okay.

(GB laughs)

GB: Probably, I would say, it’s probably one of our biggest improvements in all the areas food wise. That—

AH: There’ve been some new dishes, too. I mean, Steak Chacho is pretty new. Did you have a hand in helping to develop any of those recipes?

GB: Yes, well what usually happens is Richard comes up with an idea. And I have to translate his idea into the food wise, or he’ll give me a recipe, or he’ll see something in a magazine, “Hey let’s try to do something like that,” and I’ll go ahead and put our—what I think Richard would want, or what I know of at the Columbia into that recipe and try to make it our own.

AH: So, it’s important for you to know Richard pretty well.

GB: Richard's likes, yes.
AH: And his tastes.

GB: And after these years, I’ve known a lot of his tastes.

AH: Okay.

GB: So, I know what—I know he doesn’t like cilantro, I know he doesn’t like cumin so much, so you know sometimes I would use those products when I have to but I would use them sparingly just for his tastes or the family’s tastes.

AH: So, then you mentioned a few things that he doesn’t like, of course, cilantro isn’t really that prominent in Spanish food is it?

GB: No, it is more in the Caribbean area.

AH: Yes, of course, but even with Cuban food you don’t see too much cilantro.

GB: No, they don’t use too much of it but they do use it sparingly.

AH: Ok. So, gauging his tastes were there some early on, some bombs early on where you made something and he was like, “No.”

GB: “No way!” (laughs) There were definitely some things—“I tasted cumin in there, definitely not. Oh, you definitely have to cut down.” But the good thing about it man, when I gave him a dish—“Okay, what didn’t you like in that dish?” [Richard] “Okay, I didn’t like this.” Then that’s when I go back and work on it.

AH: He’s knowledgeable enough to give you specifics.

GB: One thing that I love working about him is he’s so knowledgeable.

AH: Yes, he really is.

GB: I can actually—I learn from him. And there are a lot of things I have learned from him, also. Just from his knowledge and his experience over the years working here. He was a chef before, so, actually I enjoy talking to him every once in a while because he is just so knowledgeable. He actually makes me enthusiastic about working here.

AH: Well, it sounds like it helps make you stretch a bit too.

GB: Right.

AH: You know, kind of you know, challenges you—

GB: Yes, yes, yes.
AH: Because I kind of saw some of this in action. They were planning a wine dinner, and I was sitting there with Andrea, Richard and a couple of other people, and he was like you know, tasting a wine and then imagining the dish he wanted to go with it you know. I was like man this guy is, you know—

GB: Good.

AH: Yes. He was like some mancheño cheese, seafood casserole type of thing or whatever, and then he’ll taste the next wine and say what he wants to go with that. I must say, I was blown away.

GB: He is very knowledgeable. He knows a lot about everything man.

AH: Yes

GB: That’s what makes him such a great, well rounded person to work for and you know, when we need to come up with more items I give him whatever is my take on the dish and then he puts his take on the dish, and it just come[s] into one.

AH: Okay. So, at the end of that process are there any dishes, specific dishes that you are especially proud of, that it’s like, “We really nailed that one?”

GB: Like I said, the rice is really good. The Adelita that we have now which is the Snapper with the artichokes, sun-dried tomatoes, and hearts of palm mix which we make on top of it which is really good.

AH: Okay, and what is it called again—the dish?

GB: Snapper Adelita.

AH: Adelita, okay. Oh, okay, as in Adela.

GB: Yes, as in Adela.

AH: Okay.

GB: It is really good now. What else? The bread pudding is a thing that we both—he gave me the recipe on, and I said, “Well that definitely needs a lot more chocolate.” I changed it all up. It’s actually one of our number one sellers.

AH: Is it the white chocolate—

GB: White chocolate bread pudding—

AH: Yes. Okay.
GB: He goes, “That would be great with a Bacardi sauce on it.” (Chef Jerry’s response) “Richard you’re right.” And we made our white rum sauce with that.

AH: Okay. See, I had a bourbon dinner, with bourbon on it. It was a killer, yes. It was really good.

GB: That’s one of, actually, probably one of our best desserts ever. The Flan is also. We change it also from how they were doing it.

AH: Okay.

GB: Which was actually kind of my recipe. He liked it so we went with that one. They used to make it with just one milk, and I make it with three milks, three different milks—

AH: Tres leches, yes.

GB: Which makes it a lot more heartier. That’s been on the menu forever it actually was—

AH: Well and there are things that seem new, I’m not sure if it is or not, like there’s the pork chop, and I had never had that until recently, didn’t remember seeing that on the menu, in addition to the steak chops.

GB: Well, actually pork chop isn’t on the menu, you might mean the veal? Veal racks or the rib-eye on the menu—

AH: Okay. Yes, well it’s been a while but it’s been a couple of years since I had it.

GB: We did have a pork chop on the menu. We had two different versions. We had one, which was marinated in achiote, and it had a black bean salsa on top of it. And he wanted to go with—that’s when everything was big was good at that point and then we went to that sixteen ounce pork chop.

AH: And the salt and pepper potatoes.

GB: Salt and pepper mashed potatoes.

AH: Yes. I remember that being pretty good. I’m just a sucker for pork chops anyway, so. But let me see here. What else can you tell us about what it is like to work here? I mean, you get the volume that you deal with now is it just like—

GB: Well, you know, it’s really not that bad. When I first, you know I was at West Palm Beach, and then they offered me the position over here and then I came here. Of course, I was nervous.

AH: Yes.
GB: You know, overwhelmed, because we do a lot of banquets. You know in the other locations we do banquets but not into the capacity of this location here because none of the other locations have the room.

AH: Sure. Well, you could have three or four banquets going on—

GB: At once.

AH: At once.

GB: Like last night. (laughs) I had a wine dinner. I had another function 150 and two other parties.

AH: Okay.

GB: So, it was very jumping all around, but after a while it just—the first, I would say I came here in, I believe it was, September of last year.

AH: Okay.

GB: The first few months, December was crazy (laughs). I was just going with the flow and, but after that it just—

AH: What’s the key when you’re kind of, I mean, what is your position title here? I mean is it head chef?

GB: I’m the executive chef.

AH: Okay. So, you know, what’s the secret to keeping up with that? I mean, obviously teamwork in any kitchen.

GB: Teamwork and keeping calm.

AH: Okay.

GB: Don’t let them see you sweat (laughs).

AH: That’s right. Well the people the participants of “Hell’s Kitchen” should listen—

GB: (laughs)

AH: To that because they never keep their cool, but go ahead—

GB: But you need to keep your calm because the people under you see that they know that you’re under control and that will make them worry less.
AH: Yes.

GB: And make sure you delegate, you have to delegate, make sure you have all your ducks in a row. Know what is going on and everything, and make sure you have all your key people, especially when you have those days when you have those big functions and this one over there, having it all organized. Organization is key, is key to running a big kitchen of this size.

AH: Oh, sure. So basically do you work a split shift then every day?

GB: No, actually I usually come in from—I work like a middle shift you could say. Ten until whenever I get to leave. (laughs)

AH: Okay. So, is that usually when things are calming down that you get to go, or—

GB: Yes, usually when thing are calming down that’s when I usually go.

AH: Okay, what time is that usually would you say?

GB: Might be, depends on the day of the week, depends on what is going on.

AH: Sure.

GB: It could be at nine o’clock at night, it could be at eight o’clock at night, which I love. (laughs)

AH: Yes.

GB: But sometimes it could be at eleven o’clock at night.

AH: Okay.

GB: So, it all depends.

AH: So, what was opening West Palm like, and did that differ at all from Celebration, I mean, because you were already seasoned by that point?

GB: Well, the only difference was organizing everything, you know, from the get go. Actually, I got to design everything by myself. Actually, the kitchen layout was my design.

AH: Oh, yes.

GB: They let me do, which I thank them, for my experiences at the other locations. I help out Curt, like by going to other locations when they have wine dinners or whatever, they need help or he’s having a problem at a different location. I would go to the other
location and help them out. So I’ve been to all the locations, except for Clearwater actually, and worked at all. So, I’ve seen a lot of different perspectives on how everybody does things, how they run their kitchen and I put it all together when I went to West Palm. Which me, myself (laughs) I would say that probably is the ideal kitchen, the way that is set up over there.

AH: Yes. You must have felt pretty proud after that too?

GB: I did feel very proud.

AH: Yes, kind of taking all those bits and pieces of things that you had accumulated knowledge over the years, and everything, and it’s something great for your resume too.

GB: Yes, yes.

AH: And then what about the kitchen, the new kitchen here, you know—

GB: I knew you were going to ask me that.

(both laugh)

AH: Well, why is it a touchy subject?

GB: Well, there is just some things that I think—when I came here they do a lot, a lot of great things. A lot of great things that I learned also to do but there are just some things that I think could have been done better, and actually we’re working on that. We’re working on redesigning the line a little bit.

AH: Okay.

GB: So maybe the only thing that I can say maybe the volume has changed much more since they have the new kitchen. So, maybe they need to reorganize the kitchen a little bit more differently. The equipment is getting old, you know, like that.

(both laugh)

GB: We need to reorganize the kitchen a little bit better just so there’s not so much crisscrossing. Because I see that they run around a lot and cross each other.

AH: I see.

GB: That’s what (inaudible). Coming from West Palm seeing that everything was right up front, the cook is right here, everything you need is right in front of you. No one is bumping into each other.

AH: No one is bumping into anyone.
GB: No one had to do anything like that, and coming here I see that a lot. That’s one of the main things that I’ve been pushing lately to try to change.

AH: Yes, so, before you came here you were over in West Palm. So, you’d already designed a kitchen by that point, so when you came in here you—

GB: Actually, when I came here I went, “Oh, my god this hard blah, blah, blah.” Make a design. Basically I took West Palm’s idea and put it over here. Changed some stuff because of the volume, and I say well, “I want this, please.” But eventually, you know, things will happen. We’re changing piece by piece, bit by bit. There’s no way we are going to be able to swap everything out in one shot.

AH: Yes, such a huge kitchen yes.

GB: As it gets older, you know, usually life of equipment is like five years. It’s about at that point now for the kitchen here.

AH: Definitely.

GB: The new kitchen. When we need to change a new piece, we change a new piece and put it in its proper area and stuff like that. Eventually, hopefully by next year, you know, I think we’ll be. Like actually when I came here I said, “How long do you think until everything will be good?” And I’m like, “Sir, I would love to say two to three months but I will definitely have to say a year, a year and a half.” To get everything how I think I would like it to be.

AH: Okay.

GB: And it is going to be a lot of work. We’re getting to that point.

AH: Well, it’s interesting, if you had come here a little earlier, say the nineties, when they had the old, old kitchen—

GB: Oh, I came here and did a couple of functions. I did his daughter’s wedding and stuff like that—

AH: Which wedding was that? Lauren’s?

GB: Lauren’s.

AH: Yes, okay.

GB: Actually we did her wedding at some place I forgot. I don’t know what the area is called.

AH: Okay.
GB: But we did her, what do you call that, the party before?

AH: The reception.

GB: The reception, and we did it over here and—(laughs).

AH: And you were appalled?

GB: (Inaudible) appalled, but hey—

AH: So, take her in the kitchen. Now one of the things that I find interesting about the Columbia too, is it has adapted a lot over the years and everything. You know, each generation has really had to rise to new challenges, and you know under Cesar, you know, he made it a haven for tourists, and you know made it a destination restaurant people went out of the way for, even more so with the entertainment but the food suffered by all accounts. Richard definitely admitted that that was the case, and I guess that’s why his experience with the culinary school, etc. was so important, but now you’re starting to garner awards like The Golden Spoon Award. Hadn’t seen that in like thirty years.

GB: Right.

AH: And even then it was nominated by the readers. It wasn’t done by restaurant critics which it is now. So, did you have a hand in that? I mean you certainly came about the right time?

GB: I think when the recipes started to be standardized—

AH: Yes.

GB: I think at that point is when a lot of stuff probably started changing and making this place more consistent. You know, that’s what people, the regular customer like. You say, a tourist might come once a year something like that. They don’t know how it really should taste, or how something should really taste. So, for them actually it’s probably good but it wasn’t at its best or something like that. But a regular customer who comes here day in and day out, or twice a week, or once a month, or whatever, they want to come back and have the same product they had the other time.

AH: Yes.

GB: And that consistency part of it, probably I think helped out a lot at that point.

AH: Okay. Yes, well, even right here in the Tampa Bay area there’s four Colombias.

GB: (Inaudible)
AH: So, I might find myself on the other side of the bay and go eat at St. Pete, and the only one I haven’t been at is Sarasota, so I mean it’s really important for locals.

GB: Yes, because if you have the boliche over here and you go, “Hey I’m in St. Pete, I want some of that boliche.” It’s important for it to be the same as you had it over here.

AH: Ok.

GB: This way you don’t say, “Hey, what’s up with that, man? Well, I don’t want to go to that location I’m going to go to this location.” I really don’t want to hear that. I really think it’s important for it to be the same in all locations.

AH: Absolutely. So, what about the new generation? Casey’s got his children, Richard has his children. I know Andrea is taking an interest in the food aspect, right? And the quality control, et cetera?

GB: Correct, yes.

AH: So, do you find yourself working with her on things?

GB: Yes. We work with the recipes whenever we get a new recipe she might ask you a question like, “What’s that yield?” or she’ll end up putting it in the system, “What is the best way to put it in the system: quarts, or gallons, or pounds?” And stuff like that. So I do help her in that situation—

AH: Okay, and then—

GB: Pricing and stuff like that.

AH: Yes, well that’s an interesting thing too, is that it seemed like the food, the quality suffered yet prices were still up there, and now like the quality has been ratcheted up but the prices really haven’t risen a lot. How do you explain that, is it just the efficiency?

GB: Mostly it’s probably because of the efficiency. The way we do things. Before they had a lot more waste in product, just by having like now we get our steaks portioned for us.

AH: Okay.

GB: Which is nothing bad but it’s controlled more, you know what I mean? We don’t have anybody doing that product anymore. Something that expensive, that’s a center of the plate item, that’s a part you don’t want to play around with (laughs).

AH: Yes.

GB: You know for the money, and just having those items controlled helps out a lot.
AH: Sure, because if you were cutting it yourself—

GB: We have that error—

AH: Exactly.

GB: Of us doing it, the waste, and you’ll have the other parts, the waste on it. “What are we going to do with that now?” It’s less issues that we have.

AH: Okay. And the wine aspect is really risen a lot too. I know Luis Diaz has a lot to do with scouting, and having been in the wine business for so long. And of course the Columbia now is known to have the best, you know, really the best Spanish wine list probably in the world. At least that’s what Diaz says.

GB: Yes. (laughs)

AH: And—

GB: Well, a lot of restaurant magazines say that too.

AH: Yes, yes I have seen that as well. So, how does that change things? I mean obviously before you had wine but now it’s much more intense.

GB: I think it makes it a lot more elegant for those other people like those locals that are here, they may want to come out for a special occasion, and also for those business meetings also that want to impress people—

AH: Yes.

GB: And let us have that beautiful wines that we have here. Thanks to Richard. Richard is the connoisseur of wine (laughs). He loves wine and he does pick some great selections here.

AH: Oh yes. So the wine dinners, tell us a little bit about that. How did that get started? I know it’s really popular and it’s a great deal. Tell us a little bit about that.

GB: Well, usually it’s last minute. No I’m just kidding.

AH: (laughs) well no, I mean at the meeting he just imagined a dish that was for a wine dinner—

GB: It all depends, you know, it depends how involved he wants to get. Sometimes he just says, “Hey Jerry make up a menu.” Like the one we had yesterday was whatever I made up.

AH: Okay.
GB: He’s actually trusting us, other people more—

AH: Yes.

GB: I guess to do those other [things] like that. So he can do what he needs to do. He’s actually trusting us more to do those type of things which I appreciate that.

AH: Yes, it’s a compliment.

GB: It’s a great compliment from him actually. And even the best part is when after the wine dinner he takes me in there and congratulates me and tells me everything was really good and blah, blah. It really makes me feel good about myself.

AH: Yes.

GB: It makes me feel happy that he’s happy too. Especially on the little wine dinners because that’s the one point us chefs get to be creative. (laughs)

AH: Yes, yes.

GB: Especially if he lets us. (laughs)

AH: Yes, rather than be a factory.

GB: But to his standards also. And that’s the other thing, we still have to keep it (inaudible) Columbia manner.

AH: Yes.

GB: Not too ornate and stuff like that, you know, very good and elegant.

AH: Okay. Yes, the presentation usually is very simple. It’s not this tower stuff, and all this other stuff.

GB: Right, right.

AH: So, it sounds like you really enjoy the wine dinners a lot.

GB: I do enjoy the wine dinners.

AH: What about, you know, you have done bourbon dinners, any other themes besides that?

(Music playing in background)
GB: Bourbon dinners. We did a flight with wine…dinners. When we do wine dinners a lot of the owners of the companies [bring] wines, and [they] will be here, and he’ll say the people from…were here…wines were here yesterday.

AH: Okay.

GB: So that makes it interesting too, to hear their comments on the food—

AH: Yes, so what are the challenges of pairing foods with wines?

GB: The challenges on that type of stuff—

AH: I mean or is it just something that just is instinctual at this point?

GB: A lot of times it is just instinctual and usually a lot of times if Richard isn’t involved, Curt Gaither’s involved and me and him will, you know, make up menus. I will come up with some ideas, whatever I have in my head and will say, “Okay, that might be good with this course that might not be.” And we just, it’s all just a process.

AH: Sure. Has Richard ever surprised you by saying, “I want this,” and you’re like, “That doesn’t sound quite right.” And then it works out all right?

GB: Yes, yes. I think he has in the past.

AH: Anything specific that you can remember?

GB: I think with the oxtail. I was like, “Ugh, oxtail.” But actually after I made up a recipe for it and it was actually one of the best dishes. Not that I had never eaten it before but I didn’t like it before (laughs).

AH: Okay.

GB: And I made it and it was actually excellent. They actually raved about it.

AH: Okay, so it all really came together.

GB: It actually all came together.

AH: So was it that he gave you an assignment, like, “I want you to develop an oxtail recipe,” or was it collaboration—

GB: Yes, a lot of times like you said, he tastes the wines and he says like, “This is really good with this.”

AH: Okay.
GB: And I’m like, “What!” I’ll be like, “Okay, I never made that before but let me see what I can do.” And I’ll make something up and that’s how it usually works out.

AH: Okay, let me see, I guess we’ll just start wrapping up here. One of the things we’re interested in doing for the cookbook is—of course, the last cookbook had lots of family history. This one is going to have lots of family history too, and stories and everything but we’re going to try and make it even more food oriented by having theme menus, and things like this, maybe some of the wine dinner menus things like that. I guess I was curious about certain things like, you know, we wanted to have other themes like Noche Buena, Christmas, Christmas Eve dinner you know. If someone were coming to the Columbia for the first time and saying, “I really haven’t had Spanish food or Tampa style cuisine,” or whatever, what would you map out for them?

GB: What would I map out as a menu?

AH: As a menu.

GB: I would definitely have to say have the Shrimp Al Ajillo. That’s definitely an authentic dish from Spain and start from there, and you have to have the 1905 salad. That’s what we are known for. It’s been around for over a hundred years, you know. The dishes I can even say maybe the La Completa Cubana, which has a variety of our Spanish items. It has our roast pork. It has a lot different things that you can try that are very ethnic.

AH: Yes, it’s good when I can’t make a decision that’s what I go for. (laughs)

GB: Yes, it’s a great plate. And of course you would have to have the flan, or the bread pudding.

AH: Yes.

GB: The bread pudding is more nontraditional but the flan is very traditional and very good.

AH: Okay.

GB: You can’t go wrong either.

AH: So what sets the bread pudding apart from say something in New Orleans?

GB: The white chocolate that we put in it. It’s more custardy than their bread pudding you would say.

AH: A little more eggy, or—

GB: A little more eggy and the rum sauce on top of it actually stands it out.
AH: Yes. What else, I know like seafood you really can’t go wrong with seafood here, what are some of the dishes that stand out for you whether it be an appetizer or entrée.

GB: I would have to say the Alicante.

AH: Okay.

GB: Actually that’s one of the first dishes that I’d never tried because I never though a beef sauce with a fish would be any good. I’d never tried it actually, until when I was in West Palm. One came back from a customer and he said that it was cold or whatever and I said (acts as if tasting it), “Wow, that’s good.” (laughs) And actually I have one of those every once, like, maybe once a month or so.

AH: Now, is that Snapper?

GB: Yes, it’s a piece of Snapper. It’s baked in a casserole with some onions and green peppers. It’s topped with a brown sauce. It’s baked in the oven and it’s topped with some almonds, and shrimp supreme, and some fried eggplant.

AH: Okay. How does that work, you’d think it wouldn’t work but does it help mask the fishiness.

GB: Yes it does. It helps mask the fishiness.

AH: So that’s the big thing for that.

GB: The helping with—the beef sauce with the fish. And I was like…I just couldn’t get that, and that’s one of the dishes Richard created I believe. I was like, “All right, I’m not trying it,” you know. That goes against all my colors, beliefs, [that] type of thing you know.

AH: Yes, yes. What other ones, you know, dishes were you impressed with coming to the Columbia and over the years? I mean just you personally.

GB: The chicken and yellow rice I think is really good.

AH: Okay.

GB: My mom makes it better but—(laughs).

AH: Well maybe you’ll have to bring some of her secrets.

GB: But no, I think it is really good here. Our steaks are phenomenal. We got great quality meats here and they are just phenomenal with the sauce or without the sauce it’s great. What else? I’m trying to think. The lamb ribs, the lamb ribs.
AH: Yes, yes. [The] ones with the guava?

GB: With the guava barbecue sauce. That’s something I created.

AH: Okay, well good work, strong work. It’s very good.

GB: And I think those are an excellent little appetizer.

AH: Yes, and so the tapas have been a big craze and everything, and of course the Columbia’s got lots of great appetizers. Has that been something that’s been discussed at all, doing tapas type of thing or is it kind of just too trendy and you don’t want to go there?

GB: Well, actually at Celebration we actually have a tapas bar over there. And when we first opened up we had it all decked out. We had a special menu for there, and only tapas were served in that one room. It had its own special menu. It was all creative and everybody thought it was really good but it just—I think we caught it at the end of the tail end and it didn’t go as well, but you know the appetizers are small portions. Our appetizers are really not that large also so. That’s why on our menu we call it tapas anyway.

AH: Okay.

GB: So—

AH: So you just kind of have it covered there. Yes, okay. Well, it’s interesting that you mentioned the 1905 Salad, and that’s been very influential. You can go a lot of places here in Tampa; I know the Sea Breeze has the Sea Breeze salad, the Tony’s Restaurant—

GB: [Has] Tony’s salad.

AH: Yes, that was a big deal but, you know, the ham, the cheese, etc. And then of course having the presentation, you know, tableside, making the salad right there.

GB: That’s one thing that I think makes it special. A lot of the dishes that we do here what makes it special is the presentation we do table side. You know pouring the olives on there and actually the dedication of Richard also getting special product from Spain imported. You know, he goes not hand picks but picks you know our olives now that we get now, especially imported for us. The olive oil is specially imported for us…. Actually that makes our product stand out a lot more than any other location.

AH: And that is a good point you bring up and of course it extends to the wine too, the fact that the Columbia is so much more associated with Spain now. I mean just the ingredients and everything else, and then of course you’ve got a lot of people from those Spanish companies and everything coming over here and seeing how their product[s] are used here in the U.S. and everything.
GB: Right.

AH: Have you had a chance to go to Spain? I know that he does cruises and things like that.

GB: Yes, actually one thing he did that was a great thing, my wife’s brother went to Spain studying Spanish, and he was going to (inaudible), he wanted us to go there. And I happened to tell Curt that, “Hey, we are going to be going to Spain,” and all that. He went and told Richard, and out of his good heart he went and he got us our plane ticket and a hotel, our hotel, stayed at his favorite hotel and—

AH: That must be nice.

GB: And—yes—(laughs). And he says, “Well, when you go there of course spend time with your family, see everything and go out to some restaurants. They’ve got good cuisine over there. Make sure you bring back the receipts and we’ll take care of it all.”

AH: Okay, wow.

GB: And I was like—that was one of the great things that he did for me. I really appreciate that.

AH: When was that about? What year?

GB: I was in Celebration; I don’t recall what year it was.

AH: Okay, maybe late eighties, early nineties or something?

GB: Yes, early nineties.

AH: Okay. So, tell me a little bit about that trip. I mean that was the first time you had been to Spain?

GB: That was the first time I had ever been to Spain.

AH: And it was the first time you kind of had a blank check, so to speak, to just to go and explore.

GB: Yes.

AH: What was that like for you as a chef to be able to—

GB: That was wonderful. That was great

AH: Get out of the kitchen and sit down and eat.
GB: That was great. And seeing how they do things over there. Seeing all the tapas bars and how they present all their food and all that.

AH: Okay.

GB: Seeing the different sandwiches that they make. The different meats. How it is over there and compared to what we do over here.

AH: Yes.

GB: I maybe understand more the little changes we had to do here to make it more Americanized. It made me understand a lot of things more, you know what I mean? Yes, but it was worth it.

AH: Yes, and have you been back since?

GB: No, I haven’t been back yet.

AH: Okay.

GB: But hopefully—

AH: I know that a lot of times he takes his managers and stuff—

GB: Yes, he takes his managers, and some of the house people. Managers—what about the chefs? (laughter)

AH: Yes.

GB: But actually we’re going to be talking to him about, for the chefs. I’m actually working on a program because a lot of the (inaudible) in California they do a big Spanish conference. A lot of the big Spain chefs go to California.

AH: Oh, I see.

GB: I’m going to try to talk him into [helping] the chefs go over there. Hopefully by next year we might have a little program for that.

AH: You know part of the problem is that it may be easier to go without a manager for a week but you chefs if you put them all in a boat you know.

GB: Yes, for that length of a time you know (laughs).

AH: Yes, exactly.

GB: I just want to be closer you know (laughs).
AH: Yes. So, anything else in Spain that you really, that you picked up? Any surprises there?

GB: Well, the main thing that I saw there was the earthiness of the foods there. A lot more natural compared to, you know American cuisine.

AH: Yes.

GB: A lot fresher. The bacon’s a lot more (inaudible). The taste of everything is so delicious.

AH: Okay.

GB: That’s one thing that I noticed compared to here.

AH: Yes, interesting. And you know some of the different ingredients too, like rabbit. Did you see a lot of rabbit over Spain?

GB: Actually, they did have a lot of [different meats].

AH: Like what were some of the other meats?

GB: Rabbit—

AH: Goat?

GB: Goat, baby pig. They actually do that at (inaudible) per person (inaudible). Small pigs in this one are is what they were known for. The different grains that they use, the different beans.

AH: Okay.

GB: They have these huge beans (inaudible)—soup that this one area is famous for. Which is excellent and I wanted to try to bring it over here also. I’ve got to try to find a vendor to bring—

AH: A distributor, yes.

GB: But it was really good. Just some of those types of products, the types of cheeses that they have. You can only get a couple of cheeses over here but I’m going to try to some other—see what we can do, or what he can do to get some of the different cheeses over here so we can do more, more different items.

AH: Yes, because right now it is what Manchego?

GB: Manchego and Cabrales? (laughs)
AH: And that’s pretty—

GB: And actually Tetilla. We finally got Tetilla over here. I want to get some Mahon cheese, which is like their type of goat cheese. Creamier cheeses like that I want to get. Some hardier cheeses.

AH: Ok. What about were you inspired to want to try the other meats at all? Or is it too much for the American. I mean Americans have a very narrow—

GB: Not that it is too much but we are getting more into that. We do a veal rack (inaudible) on the menu. Little by little you know but not—we just can’t. We’re known for so many items and—

AH: Oh, sure.

GB: And there’s only a little bit, so much we can play with on the menu.

AH: Yes.

GB: And we do try little items that we just transfer around. If they do good then they do good and we keep them on there, if they don’t we change them but that’s up to Richard too.

_Tape 1, side 1 ends_

_End of interview_