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Casey Gonzmart oral history interview by Andrew Huse, February 27, 2007

Casey Gonzmart (Interviewee)

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Andrew Huse: —just too grown up and everything and then—

Casey Gonzmart: Okay.

AH: —definitely want to get you out to Sarasota and then talk about that, because I find that especially interesting for the business as a whole.

CG: Okay. If you look at Ybor City in the time when I was growing up, I was raised in the house my grandparents lived in, my grandfather Casimiro and my grandmother Carmen Hernandez. And we used to shop and visit Ybor City. Like all of the neighborhood, our shopping area wasn’t going out to the suburbs, it was where we lived. So we used to shop along Seventh Avenue and whether it was—I remember we shopped for chicken and seafood at places that no longer exist. They were places, Agliano’s Seafood and Demmi’s Market and Batista Chicken and also for clothing, we would go to Buchman’s store, and there was a five-and-ten cent store and that type of thing. I’m talking about the early fifties [1950s]. I was born in 1948.

AH: Okay, Buchman. Is that B-U-C—

CG: B-U-C-H-M-A-N.

AH: Okay.

CG: Roy Buchman had a business for many years and they had all sorts of clothing, along with the Argentar’s [clothing store]. And the building still exists. Some of those buildings even have the family names on them. Our doctors, dentists all used to be in Ybor City. The movies were in English and in Spanish, but for that first period of my life I think that, you know, we didn’t really venture more than maybe a couple of miles from
the house. And I would come to the Columbia Restaurant sometimes, but not that often and we would cook at home. My grandmother was a great cook, and so there would be opportunity for the Columbia Restaurant, but it wasn’t that different than from someone else’s. People would think that we would have food catered to our home everyday and it was just the opposite, you know, whether it be my grandmother or my mother, who was a great cook. We would have typical lunches and dinners and holidays and things like that.

So a lot of the people that lived here in Ybor City were different ethnic backgrounds whether it be Cuban, Spanish, Italian, Jewish and so forth, but they were all friends. And it was pretty much our little neighborhood. And the Columbia Restaurant was a very, very important part of it because this was a place where people who lived and worked—because the neighborhood consisted of families and of the cigar factories. So, thousands of families all made a living by working in the cigar industry, and the Columbia Restaurant of course, was a place that catered to the workers. We were blue collar, if you will. We were the place where the food that was on our menu, which continues to be featured, was what they were accustomed to eating in the old country or at home. Now it seems that we are a Spanish restaurant or a Cuban restaurant, but the truth is, if you look at times gone by, the same majority of the dishes and foods were served here everyday to people that ate the same kind of food everyday. Plus, I remember some Italian dishes, we had an Italian chef at some time and that probably catered to some of the Italians that had immigrated here along with the Spanish and the Cubans.

So we had a great place for people to come and gather and people would come here, some of them would come and have lunch. Some of the people that worked, not just in the factories, but in the pharmacies, clothing stores, and all the other places that were part of the neighborhood, they would come in here and have lunch sometimes five days a week. So, it was a place that people began to discover, I guess, from the beginning, but more so maybe [during] World War II, when a lot of the military trained in Tampa and other places in Florida and I think it was a discovery of the state. And so, I know that we had a tremendous amount of business during that time in the forties [1940s]. That’s before I was born, but I know there was a lot of people that came to Florida and discovered the state and the Columbia Restaurant.

AH: Yes, one thing I want to ask you about is, it almost seems like the Columbia and Florida are synonymous, I mean, how is it that the Columbia has become so closely associated? I mean, I don’t think it’s just that it’s located in Florida, but there’s something about it.

CG: Well I think that it’s the main thing, and if you think about it even though we have beautiful architecture and long history and things about us, but if you really think about it, we’ve been here through generations of families having great events and memorable moments in the Columbia Restaurant. So I think that as well as us being important to Florida, we’re important as a place where people, families, are also able to come and recall and reminisce [about] events that go back for many years. If you think about it, unless it’s a unique business like ours that’s open to the public, that’s available everyday, there are not that many chances to go back home, if you will. People can’t just go back to
the place they lived, because either their houses have been sold to somebody else or demolished. So, I think that one of the reasons we are synonymous is because people carry us in their hearts. They have had weddings, they’ve had anniversaries, they’ve met their wives, they’ve had family reunions; they’ve had all sorts of things in life and death. People come here after funerals to join in a meal. So, I think if you look at the Columbia, I think that that’s part of it. I think that since we have been resilient through all these years and we often say that even though we are the owners, we say we are the caretakers because we’re just one generation. The next generation is already in place. And the hope and the plan is that we continue to be successful and we have a lot of respect for this history. So, for us, the biggest and the most important thing of our success is respecting our customers and their wishes and their memories and fulfilling it everyday. And so, if they come in here—

AH: Oh, okay.

pause in recording

AH: All right, I would like to ask you about your grandparents. First of all, I know you mentioned them, but tell me a little bit about Casimiro. You know, he comes across as kind of a stoic, kind of a stoic individual. I know that he relaxed out of the restaurant, but it seems like he was extremely dedicated. What can you tell me about Casimiro?

CG: You have to remember, when I tell you anything about my grandfather, I’m looking through a grandson’s eyes—

AH: Of course.

CG: —of a little boy, you know?

AH: Of course.

CG: So, it begins with the first memories in his house on a Christmas morning. It begins with sitting at a kitchen table and then having a meal with him, and him being the oldest and the most revered person in the house. So, I’m not looking at him so much from a business standpoint from my early days as what now is his legacy, because he did—I more recall when he wasn’t at home, because he was working so much, than of him working.

AH: Okay.

CG: Because I wasn’t here—

AH: Yes.

CG: —in those days, if you follow me. So, to me, it was I remember him getting up and putting on his suit and he would never tie his tie at home. I remember that, he would put
his tie around his collar. He wore a lot of bow ties. I never remember him wearing a long
tie, it was always a bow tie. And then, when he would come to work is when he would
put his tie on. He would wear straw hats. I remember the straw hats. You know, being
Cuban, a lot of his style is of a business person from Cuba. And also here in Ybor City, I
mean, the tradition is carried on so in those days, many men dressed as he did. But he
was very devoted to the restaurant. He was a figure-head of the restaurant, and he was
very important in the community. He belonged to a lot of organizations and a lot of
people counted on him and he helped a lot of people. And many times, not publicly, but
we heard of many occasions after his passing of people coming and telling us of different
occasions where he helped somebody. If somebody needed a handout or a meal, or what
have you. So, I think that was part of his nature and part of the legacy we carry on. So,
when you think about it, he was one of four brothers that came over with their dad, he
started a little coffee shop, the Columbia wasn’t—and when he was a young man—it
wasn’t the famous Columbia restaurant, it was a little café with [a] small kitchen and
people preparing meals for the workers, different shifts. It wasn’t so much tourists
coming in here with American Express credit cards, it was people making wages as
laborers and we prepared foods for them that they could afford and that were well
prepared and delicious. But he was in charge of another time and gave the people of that
day what they needed or wanted, just as we do today now.

So, he was very well respected, I know that. And I recall riding with him in his car,
probably a 1955 Cadillac. I remember that. And it was one of the first cars that had air-
conditioning. I remember him driving slow. I don’t know why it sticks in my mind, but
we only lived a mile away, and it seemed like it took forever to get here. But he would
come and drive, and I would ride with him, which wasn’t that often, but I remember
being with him at that time. And he would come and spend the whole day at work, the
whole day and into the night. And he had a chair, which by the time I saw it, it was well
worn and the arm rests were cracked, and it was a recliner in the office and that’s were I
presume he must have taken his breaks or get some rest rather than leave the restaurant. It
was an office with several people working in it, it wasn’t a private office, or anything
similar to an executive office today, but he had his chair there and there was a sink and a
mirror and this might be were he shaved.

And once again, [as a] very young boy, I’m looking at him as my grandfather. He was
always old when I saw him, always bald-headed when I saw him, and always very
important to me and everybody else when I knew him. So, we have to thank him for
going through some rough times and being able to survive those times through his
strength and I will always love him for that. In fact, there are still people that remember
him, that knew him here in Ybor City. So I hear about him often. And I was named after
him so I am very proud of that. And I remember him and my grandmother Carmen as a
loving couple. And she would take care of him and later in life, you know, he didn’t
have good health and he always knew he could count on her to take of him at home. I
remember going—(coughs) excuse me— to the beach with him one time. [The] doctor
told him to go. We went to Clearwater Beach and he never went on vacation, but it was
for his health to go. And I can’t tell you certainly if it was just for the relaxation or the
salt water or what it was, but I probably remember it because he never used to take time off.

AH: Yes.

CG: And I remember going with him and going to Clearwater Beach for a few weeks.

AH: Okay.

CG: And something different.

AH: Well, one of the things, you know, you mentioned, blue collar lunches, et cetera. It seems like one constant, since Casimiro’s day, has been kind of a dichotomy, I guess, a two-fold mission. One is to provide the quick, you know, cheap lunch. The other is to provide a romantic, you know, kind of opulent dinner atmosphere. And it seems like sometimes that can be difficult to do both. But, do you think that’s true, I mean, is it as true today as it was then?

CG: Well, I think that they had, probably in those days, the opportunity to cater to local people that wanted to have more upscale atmosphere by enlarging the restaurant and creating different ambiance in the different rooms. In the day, even as I became a teenager and worked here, there were several menus. They may have had and shared some of the same items, but in certain rooms, the prices were different. And in certain rooms, they had some of the more luxurious or more exclusive items which were still very value-oriented. But there were items on the menu such as Florida Crawfish and Filet Mignon steaks and items that weren’t typically offered to the blue collar workers, but people would come in, and in the day everyone dressed in suits and ties and ladies wore their best dresses and hats. And they could come in and we did create an ambiance and atmosphere that they felt they were in a very special place and beautiful architecture with music for dancing, live orchestras, first restaurant to be air—conditioned in Tampa and have a feeling of really being in a very high-end restaurant.

But simultaneously, you could still come in the restaurant and be in another room and they would still have the same bentwood chairs and waiters dressed in white shirts with bow ties, serving café con leche at five cents a cup. It was people dressed in shirtsleeves. So, it was just the sign of the times that Florida was growing up. And I think that Casimiro was able to always maintain a very high standard of quality and service. And it was just a natural progression from a cowboy town with mud streets and people on horses with wagons, to a point where it was evolving and the streets were paved and the first automobiles started driving. The Columbia is of an era that a lot of things occurred that we take for granted today, simultaneous to our growth. I mean, the Wright brothers’ first flight for example, [was at the] same time as we opened. People today look at communications and travel as ordinary, in those days it was very unordinary. The interstate system was only developed—

AH: After you were born.
CG: —in the fifties [1950s] and sixties [1960s], yes. So, after I was born. So, people would drive US [Highway] 41 and US [Highway] 19, roads such as that, and there are still placemats and things that we have that show how people would get to the Columbia Restaurant. And I think most of these places on the map started within thirty to forty miles outside of Tampa. It was Winter Haven, Lakeland, and people coming to visit us, but coming in from a distance, but it wasn’t considered that people would be coming in from across the country.

AH: Yes.

CG: Because people at that time weren’t doing that that frequently. It was either train travel or no travel at all.

AH: —Yes, steamboats.

CG: (agrees) Until 1958, fifty-nine [1959], we still had a connection with Cuba before Castro. And we had a lot of—my grandfather did travel to Cuba a lot. We had a lot of opportunity to have a different input from Cuba. So, even though we’re known now as a Spanish restaurant, but the owner of the Columbia Restaurant and the founder is a Cuban.

AH: He is a Cuban citizen of Spanish descent, right?

CG: Correct, yes. His nationality was Cuban, but the lineage of the Hernandez family came from Spain.

AH: Of, course.

CG — And on my father’s side, they immigrated from Spain directly to the United States. They didn’t go through Cuba. So many of the immigrants came in through Ellis Island from different countries, and that’s how my father’s family came here. But my mother’s family came from Havana. So, you have a mixture of people. You have an opportunity to grow and prosper, but you have a lot of social and economic issues to deal with as time goes by.

AH: Oh, yes.

CG: And I think that probably, you know, just as [the restaurant became more] upscale and invested in a high-end dining room and a more improved kitchen, they also had to have the courage to invest that kind of money in the city and the economy and a state that hadn’t still fully blossomed. And so I think that’s where we learned really to respect and cater to our customers and their desires and be certain—and you know as we say today, we are only as good as the last meal we served. And I think that it was a real tribute to them that people would come here, not for special occasions, they’d come here on a routine, regular basis to have wonderful delicious food.
AH: And they still do.

CG: And they still do, exactly, yes. So I think that it begins with the food. It begins with best ingredients. We would, I remember, buy cows at 4H at the state fair.

AH: Yes.

CG: And you know prime, the blue ribbon cows and we would have people here that would butcher the freshest meat in the state. So, even though we are well known for the typical dishes, the paella and the black beans and things like that, people always came to the Columbia for a high quality meal that probably couldn’t be found in many other restaurants. If you talk about the steak dinner, you know, steak and potatoes, this was that kind of place. Besides having the ethnic food, people came in here and had real steak and potatoes dinner, and better than it could be found elsewhere at a great value. So, the Columbia didn’t only—we created our fame with our Spanish food and Cuban food, but it didn’t only exist with that. It always had the very best in meat and fresh seafood. And I think probably the fame of being the Columbia Spanish restaurant overwhelmed the fact that we are a great restaurant.

AH: Yes. I think I know what you mean. It seems like Casimiro took pains to not intimidate people. And of course, it helps that you had so many locals here who knew Spanish food, they knew what Spanish bean soup was, they knew what Cuban bread was, you didn’t have to explain things to them. But when he was promoting the restaurant it was never coming off as this highfalutin’ place like, oh you can’t comprehend what this is.

It’s like it, oh no it’s very simple and instead of calling in Caldo Gallego, he called it white bean soup with greens or something. So, there was always you know this sense that he didn’t want to overwhelm people with the ethnicity of it. And then also, still provide alternatives like Carne con Papas, you know, the beef stew was here all the time. And everyone, you know, knows what that is even if you’re from the Midwest. So—

CG: Right, right. Well, yes. Yes, I think that was probably one of the elements that helps us stay in the restaurant that it wasn’t a menu that was purely ethnic and intimidating for the people that weren’t familiar with that type of cuisine. And that continues today, you can come here with a mixed group of people, some that have never been to a Spanish or Cuban restaurant, and then others that are already savoring, before they get here, the black beans and things that they’re familiar with. And they can all sit at the same table and all share a meal, and have totally different flavors on their plates and all be satisfied at the same time. It’s hard to promote or market that because people will see us as they wish. And if they wish to see us as being the largest and oldest Spanish restaurant in America or the world, that’s fine with me. But they’ll come in here and order a filet mignon steak and not think twice about it.

AH: Yes.
CG: So, I think that that’s the greatest thing that everybody can satisfy their own appetite, if you will, without having to only focus on our type of cuisine. Many great cuisines in the world, but typically a restaurant that features a cuisine or a type of restaurant, that’s what you get period, most of the time. If you go to a Chinese restaurant, Chinese food. I think that there is some Italian restaurants that have been able to still give you the great Italian food, but you can still have a great steak. And that, I think, is what people want. That is the key to success. You want to be able to go to a place where you’re familiar with, that people know you, people know your name, and they take special attention with their regular customers. But you might not want to eat Caldo Gallego every day, you might want to have something different and we certainly have it here. We continue to do that. We know that our favorites are our customers’ favorites, but we also travel and try things, new types of cuisine; even new types of Spanish cuisine which didn’t exist in the day. And we introduce them in the menu so that people have an opportunity to explore. But the truth is, I believe that most people when they drive out their driveway already have decided what they are going to eat. I don’t think they need to see a menu if they’re familiar with the Columbia—

AH: Yes.

CG: —they’re going to order the same thing every time.

AH: Yes.

CG: And we are just happy to satisfy that. In fact that is probably the biggest challenge is to make it as good as it was the last time—

AH: Yes.

CG —and taste the same as the last time.

AH: Yes.

CG: We have certainly respected the recipes and maintain the same quality as in the beginning, but as times change and tastes change, you have to do that which is—how am I going to phrase this? You want to do things with your recipe that is going to be the most authentic of recipes and at the same time, deliver to the customer that which is going to be possibly an item that you can upgrade or improve on. You can never sit still, you can never just say that you’ve developed anything, whether it be a mechanical product, a car or even a food, without saying that you can’t continue to review it and look at it. And sometimes for us, improving a product doesn’t necessary mean—or improving a recipe—it doesn’t necessarily mean going forward and doing something that’s never been done before. Sometimes it’s by looking back. Sometimes things have evolved over the decades and when you look at it, you look at it and you research things that were done years prior and believe it or not, there are occasions where we have taken a current recipe for an item and improved it or changed it by going back to what it was. And if you don’t continuously look at your menu and look at your recipes, that evolution or erosion
through the times—because there were times—people are always interested and captivated by progress and by new things.

AH: Convenience.

CG: All kinds of things, all kinds. There are always things that you feel that because you’ve been around a long time you may be old-fashioned. And sometimes with the intent of improving something, they actually have not.

AH: Yes.

CG: Something has happened.

AH: Yes.

CG: So, now in the current times, I would say as much as we go forward, we go back. And it’s a constant balancing between keeping the traditional recipes and being certain that they are true to what they are supposed to be, as it is to discovering new cuisines or new types of Spanish cuisine, and introducing them as the opportunity for people to have a different experience. But I don’t think we’ve ever sit still. I think that’s probably another reason why we’re here.

AH: Yes.

CG: Because we’ve never taken it for granted. We’ve never just said this is as good as it gets.

AH: Is there an example you can give us of a recipe where you went back?

CG: Sure. Yes. Our flan is the best it’s ever been, and over time, our chefs—it’s the number one dessert, always has been the number one dessert, and always will be the number one dessert. And our chefs prepare thousands of flans every week.

AH: I saw a lot back there this morning.

CG: They’re everywhere. But we now prepare flan based on a recipe that my mom would use at home, rather than one that they adopted here for larger recipes. Sometimes when you get a recipe and you prepare an item for home, for a few people, family, or you get the recipe and you prepare it for a large commercial restaurant where you are preparing for thousands of people, there’s definitely, definitely a chemical and physical change in proportion. It isn’t one and one is two. You cannot begin to take a multiple of a small recipe and make a large portion. We’ve done it many times and every time we’ve proved that you have to develop a recipe for the size portion. And I think some of the time that’s probably been one of the accidents that might have occurred through time. So we now have a situation where we prepare things—
(woman says hello)

AH: Hey, how you doing?

(woman talking)

AH: Okay.

CG: So, like the flan and going back and looking at the ingredients that we’ve made at home, we’ve gone back and created the flan here in the restaurant that tastes like my mother would make it at home. There are other items incredibly, that were on the menu, very popular, and as time went by we began to create a menu that was so large and unmanageable, twenty-eight pages at one time—

AH: Yes.

CG: —that somebody had to put the breaks on and say well now we have to edit the menu. So, incredibly some of the items that were once upon a time offered were removed from the menu. So, aside from just going back and adjusting a recipe, in some cases, it was reviving a popular menu item that has not been offered for decades. And people wouldn’t imagine it, you wouldn’t believe it unless you saw it, but if you looked at the menus from the years gone by and looked at current menu, you look back and you won’t see things that are top sellers today, but they were on the menu prior to that time. It happens all the time. So, as we bring things back, we have the opportunity to test them again, try them again, and generally speaking, I think, the flavor and the quality is as good or better than it was at that time. But there are items that just went off the menu.

AH: Okay.

CG: And so I think that that’s what’s great about us and our history, that we are able to have a restaurant that we don’t have to go look at other people’s cookbooks we just look at ourselves—

AH: Yes, right.

CG —and we get great ideas of things that we have done in the past. The Cuban sandwich, the Cuban sandwich has evolved, the constant and most important thing is the bread, we’ve had the same baker for nearly a century making bread by hand the way they did in my grandfather’s time, and we have fresh bread delivered to the restaurant twice a day. I think if you start with that and then you look at the ingredients, sometimes convenience was a factor, sometimes it was just, like I said, trying to become more modernized and not doing it the old way, but now this is the thing that we are looking at and the Cuban sandwich is a unique product, even though the word Cuban is involved, a unique product the way we prepare it in Tampa—

AH: Oh, yes.
CG: —as it is in other communities. You don’t find the same mix of meats in Miami and you don’t find it in Key West and you don’t find it in Cuba. But because we had mixed ethnic people, backgrounds here when you look at our sandwich, there are things involved in that sandwich that have to do possibly with Italians or other ethnic backgrounds than just the Cubans. You know, so our sandwich has Genoa salami in it, always will, but you don’t find that in the sandwich when you eat it outside of Tampa.

AH: Sure.

CG: And you only find the Cuban bread that is made in Tampa that tastes like it’s made in Tampa from Tampa. If you find Cuban bread everywhere else it doesn’t taste the same, it isn’t prepared—so you begin with the bread, then the ingredients and we stay true to that, but we are always looking for the best ham, the best pork, the best cheese, and the best salami. There is no short cut to that—and the right proportions of it. And we even have a blueprint or a diagram of Cuban sandwich.

AH: Okay, yes.

CG: What goes on the bottom, what’s the next layer, and what’s the next layer. It always has to be in the same proportion. It always has to be in the same order.

AH: Yes.

CG: It can’t be different.

AH: Yes.

CG: And that’s what we try to do every day. And that is what we succeed in everyday, and the way we cut it is also different. We cut it in half, but we don’t cut it in half right down the middle, we cut it diagonally.

AH: Yes.

CG: Big deal. It’s just one of those funny things that we do.

AH: Well, one thing I wanted to ask about is Sarasota. I know this was the first expansion, right? Because Orlando didn’t come until after Sarasota, right?

CG: No, that’s not true.

AH: Oh, really?

CG: Yes.

AH: Okay.
CG: Yes.

AH: Do tell.

CG: We opened in Orlando in the mid-fifties [1950s].

AH: Yes maybe fifty-six [1956]?

CG: —Maybe, maybe sooner.

AH: Okay.

CG: And Sarasota opened in 1959.

AH: Okay.

CG: I have a picture of my grandfather—do you have it? Of my father and my grandfather signing the lease in Sarasota.

AH: Oh, wow, I would love to have it!

CG: From the Sarasota Herald Tribune.

AH: Okay.

CG: I have it.

AH: Okay, I can scan it and give it back to you.

CG: Yes, yes, yes, it’s probably a copy of the picture, maybe you can even keep it. I’ll try and find it.

AH: All right.

CG: But we had been in Orlando, at the airport. We had opened the Columbia Restaurant, I was a child and we were very successful. And I don’t know the sequence of how it came about, but then legend has it, that afterwards the local politicians had an out—of—city restaurateur operating at the airport and the local people of Orlando wanted, you know, to be an Orlando thing and so after several years, we no longer operated there.

AH: Okay.

CG: But we had been there long before Disney and long before anything else—

AH: Yes.
CG: —in a time when Orlando was a landlocked orange grove city that had no connection really with tourism if you will, compared to many of our coastal cities and other famous places like Cypress Gardens and so forth. So, we were there first. In 1959, a gentleman that worked for the Schlitz beer distributor who was from Tampa and had Sarasota as one of the distributing locations.

AH: Okay.

CG: He was a good friend of my grandfather’s. His name was Jerry Cigarran, C-I-G-A-R-R-A-N, Cigarran.

AH: Okay.

CG: And Jerry had been servicing a location in Sarasota on St. Armand’s Key that was opened by a gentleman from Alabama as a private club for his friends, and found that he couldn’t afford his friend’s taste and subsequently closed his place. In Florida and in general and in Sarasota at the time, it’s extremely seasonal. [The] highway system was just coming in to play; air-conditioning was still a new phenomenon, jet air craft had just begun to fly to shortened distances. There was nothing to do in many cities of Florida. In small cities like Sarasota, unless you went there in the winter season when there might be some shows or performances or activities, there were no social opportunities beyond that. After Easter, as the few residents went back up North, so did all the activity. So, you really only had a short span. There were many businesses—not ours—but many businesses that only operated during the winter months.

AH: Yes.

CG: They would cater to these wealthy people, and after that, the local people had nowhere to go, because many of the restaurants and even the retail clothing stores would board themselves up for the entire summer.

AH: Okay.

CG: So, we went down with a different philosophy and a different attitude and signed a long lease.

AH: Yes, Luis Diaz describes it as something like a mistake that paid for itself two thousand times over or something like that, because it was slow at the beginning right?

CG: Yes, the restaurant was not successful in the beginning, because of the seasonal fluctuation.

AH: Yes.

CG: And even though today it seems it’s only an hour away, but at the time not only physically, but also ethnically and psychologically it was another world from Ybor City.
AH: Oh, yes.

CG: So, people would have remembrances of us, Columbia Restaurant, our family, loading our flatbed truck with very ethnic, weird products like Garbanzo beans and black beans and Spanish sausage and things and transporting them down there, because you couldn’t buy them down there.

AH: Oh, yes.

CG: You couldn’t even order them and have somebody deliver them down there. Nobody knew what those things were so we had to supply ourselves with our ethnic stuff—

AH: Yes.

CG: —from Ybor City—

_Tape 1, side 1 ends; side 2 begins._

CG: —by ourselves and ship it down. One gentleman you talked to, drove that truck many times, Mr. George Guito, if you haven’t interviewed him yet—

AH: Yes, I have—

CG: —ask him about Sarasota—

AH: Yes.

CG: —he’ll tell you.

AH: Okay.

CG: He’ll tell you. I remember the truck was blue actually. The flatbed truck with wooden panels, open air, and they would get in this truck and they would go down U.S. 41 which wasn’t that developed in those days and drive down there, and supply the restaurant as if it were an outpost somewhere out west. And they were waiting for the truck always.

AH: There was no Skyway [Bridge] either. You had to get on [Highway] 41. It was the only way there.

CG: No, no, no, one way to go and you went through Ruskin, and you went through Rubonia and Gibsonton.

AH: Yes.
CG: And if you took the donkey trail and if it was in the winter season, you probably took forever—

AH: Yes.

CG: —to come and go.

AH: Okay.

CG: And that was the way it was.

AH: Yes.

CG: So, the restaurant, they were smart. The lease had a very low minimum rent which gave the survivability. So, in those days, a dollar was a dollar and it was a challenge.

AH: Yes.

CG: We had some people that we hired from Tampa to go there and prepare the food, because they learned it already here in Ybor City. But over time, we acquired other employees and trained people locally and had people come from Cuba that we hired. I got there and I had gone to school in Europe for several years and came back to Tampa. And actually, I never worked for Cesar Gonzmart, directly at this restaurant.

AH: Okay.

CG: When I was a child and then in my teenage years, I worked here some summers and my dad was here, but I was only here on a part time basis and I worked here until I was sixteen [for] a few months at a time doing different odd jobs. I started in the kitchen. I worked with Luis Diaz for a while in the kitchen.

AH: Okay.

CG: I worked the dining room with Joe Fernandez, and people that were very important to the restaurant, but I was just a young son, a grandson, of the owner that was coming to do a summer job. When I went to school in Europe, I came back and stayed in town for about a few months, maybe not even a year, but my dad had bought a restaurant down the street from one of our competitors, and I went to manage that at the age of—

AH: Oh, yes, Las Novedades right?

CG: —twenty-one, yes, twenty-one.

AH: Yes, so, what was that like? I mean, was it obvious from the beginning that it was going to be a short-term thing?
CG: Where?

AH: Las Novedades.

CG: No, no, no. It was a major restaurant.

AH: Oh, yes.

CG: It was a major competitor. It was a great family that owned it, friends of ours, the Garcias. And at that time, timing had it that my dad’s friend Jim Walter, they acquired it and I never thought I would be working for a competitor, or the enemy, or what have you. I never thought I would be at the place down the street. I thought my destiny would be to come back and work at the Columbia Restaurant—

AH: Okay.

CG: —the place that my great-grandfather founded and be here working beside my dad. So, that came up. It was an opportunity of sorts but I never had my heart in it because it’s like changing uniforms—

AH: Oh, yes.

CG: —so, I mean, how do you do that?

AH: Sure. So then, what, Sarasota came up after that?

CG: Yes. Dad called me one day, we had had a manager there and they had a falling out, and he asked me if I would come to the house.

AH: Okay.

CG: —I remember going to their house, my mom and dad’s house, and talking to them, and them telling me that they had let the manager go and that they needed me to go down there. And I asked them when and they said, “Tomorrow.”

AH: Whoa.

CG: And I said, “Well, I’ll go for a little while, but I’m not going to stay there.” I mean I had been away from Tampa for over four years and had just recently gotten back and wanted to come back home. I didn’t want to go someplace that had no connections, that no friends, and my instinct was to stay where I was comfortable, you know, back home. However, I packed my bag and I went. And I stayed in a hotel, the Sheraton Sandcastle, on Lido Beach for months.

AH: Now, was this the place that used to rent the whole floor on certain times?
CG: No, no, oh, yes, I did. Well, actually, we—

AH: I can’t remember. Was it the Harley?

CG: I don’t know. Now, it’s called the Harley.

AH: Yes. Okay.

CG: And I don’t know who told you that, but during the boat races—this is many years, many years later we would do that.

AH: Okay.

CG: I don’t know where you heard that, but we would do that. But while I was there, remember, I was a twenty-one year old guy—

AH: I think it was Jim Garris, actually.

CG: Oh, Jim. Okay, because Jim worked there right?

AH: Yes.

CG: Yes. You talk to people, they’re giving you history about things that go way after 1971.

AH: Oh, no. I understand. That was—okay.

CG: I went there single, and I didn’t know anybody in the restaurant, and I remember the restaurant had been sort of in a limbo, because of the seasonal nature and what have you. But I’m a lucky guy. I’ve always been a lucky guy. And the timing was such where things started flowing, and when I walked in there the first time, my mom had had a gift shop, which was part of the restaurant complex on the south end of the restaurant.

AH: Was this Adela’s Gifts?

CG: Adela’s Gifts.

AH: Okay.

CG: But it was no longer operating as a gift shop, but it wasn’t a dining room either. It was just—since we weren’t paying square footage rent, we were paying minimum rent, so we didn’t have enough business to open it up, so it was just there.

AH: Okay.
CG: Another area of the restaurant that I walked around was just—there were spaces that weren’t really developed—

AH: Yes.

CG —because the restaurant was a larger sized restaurant, but didn’t have enough business to require the whole restaurant. So, I had a good crew of people, a lot of people there had come from Cuba after Castro. Some had worked there for many years and what I began noticing is that we had created a nucleus at that time of local customers, people that maybe didn’t live year round, but lived there a lot.

AH: Okay.

CG: And they got to know us as their place. We had celebrities. We had all sorts of—people had discovered—artists. People had discovered Sarasota and they had—actually history had repeated itself. Almost like the Columbia of Ybor City had a good strong base of local people, while that restaurant began to create a loyal following of local people that enjoyed the Columbia restaurant for its atmosphere, food, service, hospitality, all the things that had given us the success in Tampa, were just beginning to grow there—

AH: Okay.

CG: —long with the city. It just was sixty years later than Ybor City. It was different, but in a funny way, it was similar—

AH: Yes.

CG: —because it was a very small town. It was an under-performing property, and even St. Armand’s Key was not developed. I mean, not fully developed.

AH: Yes.

CG: There were empty lots. There were shell roads, and on one end, you had Longboat Key, but that was sort of a destination, as well. I mean it was a lot of underdeveloped property. There was a hotel that [John] Ringling had begun to build in the twenties [1920s]. It was abandoned. I remember seeing the skeleton of it. He never finished it, but that was the kind of stuff that was there—

AH: Yes.

CG: —right beside us. Right beside our building, the entire rest of the block was empty, it was nothing but shells, shell roads. And the few hotels that were out there were smaller variety, a lot of “mom and pops.” And people came from the mainland, when they came out there, they would go to the beach and so on, but St. Armand’s really wasn’t—except for the winter season, they hadn’t developed. So, we began to develop it. Like I said, I’m a lucky guy. And from the time we started, we always just looked at it as opportunities
and a work in progress and trying to fill the niche of whatever our customers wanted. And one of the first things that we began to realize was that there really wasn’t any entertainment out there per say, nothing year round where people would go there and enjoy some music along with their dinner. And we thought of Flamenco and things like that. And a matter of fact, at that time, the Columbia Restaurant in Tampa was just beginning to do some flamenco, but really the history of the Columbia in Ybor City hadn’t been dancers, it had been orchestras, bands that played for the customers to dance.

AH: Yes.

CG: So, in another strange way, history kind of repeated itself that way, because rather than trying to have performances, we started very small with, I think, just a single entertainer. So, people could have a little bit of that flavor of music. That evolved into two entertainers. And we had a series of maybe two or three different duos. So, we didn’t jump in and say we are going to go blow it out. We just jumped in and started filling our customers’ needs, what we thought they would enjoy.

AH: Okay.

CG: And as success bred success, then we brought in a trio called Cat Foot. And at the time, this was early eighties [1980s], I guess—

AH: Okay.

CG: —the music scene was turning towards danceable music like disco and things like that. And what we injected was, we injected a live sound with modern music along with a Latin beat with people who were of Latin descent who could play great music, but they could switch between—one number might be an American disco song, next one would be a song sung in Spanish with conga drums, and people liked that. We took a big leap and we closed and we enlarged and remodeled, and brought in disco balls—

AH: When was this, in the early eighties?

CG: Early eighties.

AH: Okay.

CG: —Disco balls and strobe lights.

AH: Okay.

CG: At the Columbia Restaurant, which is kind of a funny thing—

AH: Yes.

CG: —if you think about it.
AH: Yes, yes.

CG: But the personality was, all day long we were the Columbia Restaurant, but at 9:00 PM, you’d dim the lights and start the disco and people liked that.

AH: Yes.

CG: Over a course of a couple of years we found a great entertainer by the name of Sal Garcia. He was working in Tampa. His history had been always in music. He had played with legendary bands in Tampa, and he had created his own trio and was playing in Tampa. And my brother Richard and I went and heard him and saw his talent and his ability as a band leader, and invited him to Sarasota and contracted him for two weeks to replace the previous band. And it just took off from there, just the timing and everything and grew his trio into a six piece group that played six nights a week, had people standing in line. His group is called Omni, O-M-N-I.

AH: Okay.

CG: And we kept it up, we kept it up with popular music, we had a Latin beat.

AH: Which, you know, decades before, [that] was exactly what your father was doing.

CG: Amazing, it’s amazing—

AH: Yes.

CG: —it’s amazing. If you look at it—


CG: Yes. We had a conga player and we had a sax player, we had keyboards and drums and bass and electric guitar.

AH: Yes.

CG: So we mixed it all up—

AH: Yes.

CG: —and we could play the most kick ass rock and roll and then switch it over to a Latin song and the people would just eat it up.

AH: Yes.
CG: So, with our dedication to the food and continuing to be a restaurant and even though the success was incredible of the nightclub, we continued to develop the food. And just traveling and looking at other places, it occurred to me to take a big step to feature fresh seafood again. Even though it was always on the menu, but feature it. So, we stopped again and we closed the place and we remodeled it again.

AH: Okay. When was this about?

CG: This was mid-eighties.

AH: Okay. All right, so it hadn’t been that long since—

CG: No, no it was all in a span [of] maybe six to seven years, but when you’re living there and you’re on a roll, you think you’re invincible.

AH: Yes.

CG: And we were somewhat able to be—I mean, we’re part of the same family and same company and same restaurant, but we were a little bit independent.

AH: Oh, yes.

CG: We had a great chef, Frank Lorenzo, who came to us from Cuba. His nickname was Guantanamo, because he had worked in Guantanamo base with the [United States] Navy. He was in the Navy.

AH: Okay.

CG: And his son now is a doctor here, Marcus Lorenzo, so our chef’s son is one of the very important doctors here in Tampa.

AH: Okay.

CG: Which is similar to other cases were we’ve had waiters, cooks, and bartenders whose sons have gone on to become the governor of Florida—

AH: Yes.

CG: —and chief judge and so forth. We had our own recipes. Evolution again.

AH: Yes.

CG: It had the same name, but it was made like Frank Lorenzo would make it.

AH: Yes.
CG: The Caldo Gallego [soup] was different there. I think we even had [to] stop serving it here in Tampa, but people swore by it down there.

AH: Okay.

CG: So—

AH: Any things that Frank made that were specialties that you might not find here? (Inaudible)

CG: He made a great beef stew.

AH: Okay.

CG: We were making beef stew when they had stopped making beef stew here.

AH: Okay.

CG: We were making things that—he had tricks, he had tricks of the trade that he would do, you know, and we still would do things from scratch, you know, butchering our meats and things that, as the food industry progressed, there was a tendency towards some convenience and we were still doing things very, very much the old fashioned way. So, to get back to the seafood, so in the travels, well, maybe we should stop and consider featuring the music but we needed a big space for the music and at the same time why not, in the same room, create an oyster bar and serve fresh oysters and put a window that the people going by the sidewalk would see an ice display. And there was a good source for fresh Florida stone crab that we had always sold off and on, but never featured.

AH: Okay.

CG: So, two names that we created, I’m going backward, but the first name that we created when we started the music, we stole the name—which is the name created—we stole the name from the patio, the patio dining room here in Tampa and we called the place where we had the entertainment The Patio—

AH: Okay.

CG: —not the Columbia Restaurant.

AH: Okay.

CG: Some people would go to The Patio at night and not know it was the Columbia Restaurant.

AH: Okay.
CG: And people that would go eat at the Columbia Restaurant would come back after eating there and at night because someone told them to go to The Patio and dance and then they would say they thought they had been here before but they didn’t remember—

AH: Yes.

CG: —because the place looked different at night.

AH: Okay.

CG: So, it was the same place, but with that personality. So, when we did the remodel on the stone crab, then we created the name Stone Crab Corner so we would have an identity to advertise, market, and display stone crab in season which was October 15 through May 15, which was a peak winter months in the time we had this opportunity.

AH: Yes.

CG: And all of a sudden, that took off. And the oyster bar, buying oysters by the bushel, stone crabs, selling thousands of pounds of stone crab and people would call us and say you know, “Are stone crabs in season?” We became the place to eat stone crab not just the place to have a Cuban sandwich—

AH: Yes.

CG: —or the place to have paella, but we were the place that people came and danced at night until three in the morning. We were the place that people came and had seafood at the bar or at the table, whatever they wanted. People came in and had great food prepared by a wonderful chef and we had—like I said, the timing was incredible.

AH: You know, and you say you’re a lucky guy. That may be true, but it sounds like there is more than luck at work here. I know when I was talking to Luis Diaz. He said, he was very complimentary about what you’ve done in Sarasota—

CG: (agrees)

AH: —because of course, he’s been keeping tabs—

CG: Yes.

AH: —even after he left and everything.

CG: Yes.

AH: I think it’s an important distinction to make.
CG: Well, I appreciate that and well, you have to appreciate that I’m blessed in a way, too. I’m lucky, I know I’m lucky but I’m blessed too. So, we have opportunity and you act on it. And we always didn’t ask for permission, you know, it was almost you ask for forgiveness sometimes because, you know, we weren’t—

AH: Yes.

CG: —doing that great everywhere. And sometimes, if you would’ve sat down and discussed everything and done a business plan, well business wise, it may not had been the right choice.

AH: Yes.

CG: But from a standpoint of your intuition and your heart, you knew it was worth it to roll the dice.

AH: Yes.

CG: I mean nothing is guaranteed in life but this was something that if you knew the territory, you know, if you lived there—

AH: Yes.

CG: —because Dad never really went there.

AH: Yes.

CG: You know Richard and Dad here were working hard to do what they were doing here. And they were working together and maintaining the Columbia here, and then sometimes I wouldn’t come to Tampa for months either. My three older children were born in Sarasota, and then I just embraced it, my friendships, and we had opportunities there, I mean, in the spring training at that time, the Chicago White Sox were the team that trained in Sarasota. And we became great friends with the owners of the team, with the players, it was a place they came to hang out. My son Casey, one of six, became the bat boy in the spring training for the Chicago White Sox. You know, and they would have all their parties at the Columbia and birthdays and things. Once again, it’s almost like the baseball thing in Tampa, you know, my grandfather was friends and he was a huge baseball fan.

AH: Oh, yes.

CG: And we would have the big teams here in Tampa, the Yankees and so forth, and they would all come to the Columbia. When there was spring training in Sarasota, it was the same thing with that place, and people would come there to see these guys—
AH: Okay.

CG: —you know, and they’d be—I mean, I could name names after names—but they would be all kinds of people and now hall—of—famers, they would come there and just sit down and have a meal at the Columbia.

AH: Yes.

CG: And so, I think that the fact that we had the brand was important because people recognized the name Columbia—

AH: Sure.

CG: —but then, like I said, we kind of created this personality and then the thing that really eluded us, that we wanted to do was—always wanted to do something, we never settled down. I never grew up actually. We called it dancing as fast as you can. It wasn’t dancing, it was working, but we just called it dancing.

AH: Yes.

CG: And so we were just always trying to move faster. And we would get complimented in the winter time, because people come in on a cold night and we would sit them at the table and the seat was warm and then, you know, “That’s what we like about this place, we can come in here, we’re cold, we can sit down, and get warm.” And the reason the seat was warm is because the other person had just gotten up—

AH: Yes, exactly.

CG: —and we wouldn’t take a second to sit the next four people down.

AH: Yes.

CG: And that’s what we kept doing. So, we kept trying to over-perform by doing the next thing. And what had eluded me, I discovered, because we started getting European travelers—

AH: Okay.

CG: —in about that time, eighties. Florida really hadn’t gotten discovered by the English and the Germans but in the summer times, when things slowed down, the Europeans took their vacations and they started to come to Florida. And they would ask us about out—door dining. At that time, not only was it not available at most places, but in Sarasota County, it was illegal. The health department wouldn’t let you serve outside because they said you were contaminating the food by serving it outside. And then, eventually, they amended it by allowing us to serve outside with a cover on it, plastic or metal cover, and the customer could take the cover off—
AH: Oh. (laughter)

CG: —so, legally they were contaminating themselves. That’s between you and me. It’s a ridiculous story—

AH: Yes, that’s great.

CG —It’s true, believe it. So, the landlord at that time, we drew up a plan to put some outdoor seating on our premises on the other side of the wall from the dining room. And the landlord, when we ran it by him, said he wanted to get paid rent for that and we explained to him, you can’t lease this, rent this to anybody else.

AH: Yes.

CG: What are you talking about? And he was making a percentage rent at the time, he was getting a percent of our sales, so if our sales were to have increased and we were the ones who were going to do it—anyhow, he wouldn’t go for it. He wouldn’t sign and okay the improvement that we were going to pay for.

AH: Yes.

CG: So I was frustrated for years not being able to do it but I had this design—

AH: Yes.

CG: —for ten years.

AH: Okay.

CG: He sold the building to somebody else.

AH: Okay.

CG: And we approached them at that time to do it.

AH: Wait, who sold the building?

CG: The landlord, which was that Hamilton, the owner then was Joe Hamilton, J-O-R-A, Jora was the name of the company that they formed, the company that owned the building.

AH: Okay.

CG: But, they sold it to someone else.
AH: Okay.

CG: So we re-approached them, the new owners of the building and they said, “Fine.”

AH: Okay.

CG: That, that—

AH: Over ten years?

CG: Over ten year, yes, the blueprints were faded already. But we never gave up on it.

AH: Yes.

CG: Just couldn’t do it.

AH: Okay.

CG: But good things happen sometimes, because in those ten years we had evolved. And when I opened those blueprints again, what I had envisioned ten years before wasn’t the best idea, you know—

AH: Yes.

CG: —there were other things, different improvements that could be done. So we immediately got it okayed for the building permit.

AH: Okay.

CG: And started very small scale. We only put seven tables outside. Home run.

AH: Yes.

CG: Everybody wanted to sit outside.

AH: Okay.

CG: And even though the biggest thing to happen to the Columbia in Ybor City was inventing air—conditioning, the most important thing to happen in Sarasota was sitting outside in the hot sun—

AH: Yes.

CG: —I don’t know why, but the Europeans love it.
AH: Yes.

CG: And my god, now we have over half of the restaurant are tables that are air—conditioned but with open air. It’s a hard thing to blow off, but if you blow enough air—conditioning at something it will get cooler even though there is no windows.

AH: Yes, okay.

CG: And I think that that was the transition between having a nightclub atmosphere at night and being able to be even more successful, at that time, music had run its course—

AH: Yes.

CG: —popular music as we knew it. It was transitioning into another type of music, our clientele was changing, things were—talk about many years, I was there for twenty-three, twenty-four years. Things change, things change, things change. So, something occurred with the music issue that we had to discard it.

AH: Yes.

CG: But we replaced it with outdoor dining.

AH: Okay.

CG: And the constant is the food. The food was always the driving force, not the music; the music was the whipped cream on the cake or the cherry.

AH: Yes, yes.

CG: But once we changed and no longer offered the music, we developed more seating with outdoor atmosphere, same menu but expanded. And the restaurant, that worked.

AH: Yes.

CG: And we did our last remodel outside six or seven years ago.

AH: Okay.

CG: Added more seating outside, remodeled all the dining rooms, and just recently, we redid the kitchen.

AH: Yes.

CG: We couldn’t keep up with the business because the kitchen wasn’t developed enough to deliver the food to that many people—
AH: Sounds familiar, yeah.

CG: So, yes. So yes, again, again like this. So, we did the kitchen and now we’re experiencing—thank god—we’re experiencing the best that we’ve ever done.

AH: Great.

CG: You know, so the Sarasota experiment, you know yes, we may have made a mistake or we may have jumped the gun, we had good intuition—

AH: It was an investment, yeah, it just keeps getting better.

CG: —and it seemed that even though it took awhile, but you know the position we are in today we never would have had the opportunity had not someone had the foresight.

AH: Sure.

CG: Even though when things weren’t obvious what they were going to be—

AH: Yes.


AH: Well, let me, we have got to wind down, but let me—

CG: When you listen to this, if you want to fill something in, plus I would suggest, if you talk to Luis about Sarasota, Luis Diaz, he knows, but if you haven’t asked George [Guito] about it, it might be, if you want to go back in the good old days—

AH: Yes.

CG: —of fifty-nine [1959].

AH: Yes.

CG: He can tell you about it.

AH: Okay.

CG: He is older than I am.

AH: Yes.

CG: Tell him I said that.

AH: That you’re about the same age, though.
CG: Yes.

AH: What is it, by a month or two, the difference?

CG: Yes, but he keeps removing years from his birthday—

AH: Okay.

CG: —where I accept it.

AH: Okay. Well, all right one question I ask everyone is your Columbia dream menu. I know you’ve been eating this food for a long time. Put together your favorite meal, your favorite dishes, from you know, the beginning soup to nuts.

CG: I would always start out with the Spanish bean soup which, um had been the favorite many, many years ago and now our customers prefer the black bean soup.

AH: Okay.

CG: But many still enjoy it. But to me it’s a great, great soup—

AH: Oh, yes.

CG: —and its part of what Ybor City is famous for.

AH: I don’t think there is a better specimen. I can’t find—

CG: No, it’s delicious, it’s delicious.

AH: It’s the best.

CG: And our black beans are wonderful but my preference would be to have that. And everyone will tell you that they’ve got to have the 1905 Salad and even that’s a story in itself because if you go back, the 1905 salad wasn’t offered as a salad with your meal. It was offered as a main course plate salad—

AH: Okay.

CG: —that people bought and had in lieu of another entrée, they would have a salad. And back to Sarasota real quick, we were fighting a battle at the time. Restaurants at the time were coming in with a salad bar.

AH: Oh, yes.
CG: In the seventies [1970s] or what have you. Drove me crazy, people would call me up and say, “Do you have a salad bar?” So, at the time, we were offering our salad for five dollars as an entrée and so we had to brainstorm, because everybody loved it but 95 percent of people didn’t get to taste it, because 95 percent didn’t buy it, they bought something else.

AH: Yes, yes.

CG: So, we figured to somewhat offset the salad bar that we would offer, included in your meal before any entrée, a portion of 1905 Salad. Just to get the garlic flavor going. So, 100 percent of everybody that ordered an entrée got a salad.

AH: It sold, yeah.

CG: It worked. We immediately were able to market that flavor to 95 percent more people—

AH: Yes.

CG: —because it was included in with the entrée. Cost more money, but, so what.

AH: Yes, but by the time you took it off the mandatory list or whatever, people were hooked and were ordering it.

CG: You got it, you got it. But if you think about it, it was all brought about because the competition was offering something that we weren’t going to do. We weren’t going to put in a salad bar even though it was salad bar world.

AH: Yes.

CG: But we don’t do trends and [we] don’t do things—we don’t copy.

AH: That would have been a huge mistake, yes.

CG: We don’t do things like that.

AH: Yes.

CG: We don’t do things that other people do, because we’re doing them. So, at the time the 1905 Salad was made at every table and the whole aura or part of the aura, you have to really appreciate it, is that we do things at the table.

AH: Yes.
CG: You might get a great presentation that some chef put together in a wonderful continental restaurant and they’ll bring it out and it will be plated like oh my god, you know, it looks like some sort of a work of art.

AH: Yes.

CG: But how many places do you go and it comes straight from the kitchen and the waiter puts the tray and gets his spoon and serves it to you fresh hot out of the casserole. I mean, not that often.

AH: Yes.

CG: And so anyways, so part of serving the Paella and so forth at the table, we begin to mix the salad at the table.

AH: Yes.

CG: Salad used to be mixed—and remember, nobody ordered it; I mean ten people a day would eat it.

AH: Yes.

CG: Now you have five hundred people a day that eat it.

AH: Yes.

CG: But not only that, you have five hundred portions being tossed around in front of people and the whole place smelled like garlic.

AH: Yes.

CG: Everything that came out of our refrigerator smelled like garlic.

AH: Yes.

CG: It was garlic Jell-O, it was garlic everything—

AH: Oh, yes.

CG: Because it would just permeate everything.

AH: Yes.

CG: And we would give thirty-five pounds, bushels of garlic, we would take the garlic clove and ball the garlic cloves in our hand and put them on a table cloth and go in the back parking lot and like you can toss anything in the air with a sheet or something—
AH: Yes.

CG: Well, we tossed this garlic in the air, and then the breeze would blow the peel off of it—

AH: Yes.

CG: —and that’s how we’d peel garlic.

AH: Okay.

CG: [A] garlic storm in the back of the restaurant every day. And then we would do and grind fresh garlic. And that’s another thing, I mean, people, you know, buy garlic in jars and you know, diced garlic.

AH: Yes, yes—

CG: — No, not us, you know, real garlic.

AH: —yes.

CG: And anyhow, so everybody got the kick of the garlic. So, going back to your question, yes, I would have a 1905 Salad. I still enjoy it.

AH: Yes.

Woman: —Me too.

CG: And I think that is forever part of our history and—

AH: Yes.

CG: —people order it. And they will think that that salad had always been a big deal since 1905, but it wasn’t called the 1905 Salad. (aside to others, talking) So, a salad that was invited by a guy named Tony—

AH: Noriega.

CG: —that was served occasionally as an entrée—

AH: Yes.

CG: —instead of giving the customers a green iceberg lettuce and a pressed wooden little bowl with some canned, ah which was once—canned everything.
AH: Yes.

CG: Canned vegetables.

AH: Yes.

CG: Richard probably told you about, you know, that was the convenience of the new thing, the canned beets.

AH: Oh, yes, yes.

CG: I was always amazed at how the beets could dye the lettuce red like that when I was a little boy.

AH: Okay.

CG: Because you would take the beet off and the lettuce that was under it was still red.

AH: Yes.

CG: We got away from all that, started tossing a fresh salad at the table and so that would be part of the meal.

AH: Okay.

CG: And then—

AH: The appetizer? What stands out for you?

CG: I never used to eat appetizers, too much food, our portions are too big. People kept saying, everyone would tell us, “Cut down your portions, it’s too much food, cut down—oh, you know, I ate too much.” Everybody walks out and says they ate too much. Everybody says that they ruined their appetite. That was what it’s all about.

AH: Yes.

CG: That’s why they came there.

AH: Yes.

CG: So, I never listened to anybody.

AH: Yes.

CG: They would like to say it just to compliment you but they didn’t mean it.
AH: Sure.

CG: You know they loved the over-portions. So we were over-portioning before over-portioning became famous.

AH: Yes.

CG: Now, everybody talks about, “Oh, look how big the steak is, oh look how much—We were doing that then.

AH: Yes.

CG: And we were cutting the steaks to order. If you were a good customer, we’d cut a bigger steak.

AH: Okay.

CG: So what? (laughter) It didn’t matter. It all worked out.

AH: Yes.

CG: So, I would tell you, I wouldn’t order an appetizer.

AH: Okay. So, entrées?

CG: I would love Steak Salteado, which is filet mignon and a hot sautéed pan of olive oil, fresh Spanish onion, green peppers, and garlic.

AH: Chorizo.

CG: A little chorizo in it and sauté it, really, really hot skillet, almost like a stir—fry. And stir that and I would have it with white rice. Everybody knows about yellow rice but the truth is the only people that would make yellow rice, ever, were the people making yellow rice and chicken. If they didn’t make yellow rice and chicken, there was no yellow rice.

AH: Yes.

CG: And the rice of my childhood and the rice of Cuba and the rice of Spain and the rice of everybody is white rice.

AH: Yes.

CG: You get rice and garlic again. My mom would get in the bowl, when she was cooking the rice, she would get some olive oil and get some fresh garlic cloves and sauté them and then she would add the raw rice and then she would add the water. And when
the rice was cooked it was white steamed rice but it had that little Cuban taste to it. And that’s what I would have with my Salteado because why mix the flavor of yellow rice and chicken when you’re really having Steak Salteado.

AH: Yes.

CG: And it exists in other cuisines. If you really go and you really think about the Oriental cuisine, people order fried rice but fried rice made by them is something to be eaten separately.

AH: Yes.

CG: Not to be eaten with, you know, comingling the sauce.

AH: Yes.

CG: So the Cuban tradition is white rice and then when you get something with a flavorful profile like a Salteado, then you’re enjoying the flavor of the Steak Salteado, along with your white rice. So, I would have Steak Salteado with white rice, would be my favorite.

AH: Okay.

CG: And I would have a flan for dessert.

AH: Okay.

CG: Because, why not? It’s delicious.

AH: Yes. Any favorite Columbia cocktails, or other beverages?

CG: I’d still like a daiquiri. I mean, rum would be one of my favorite drinks, you know, but a daiquiri well made like we make it at the Columbia—

AH: Yes.

CG: —it’s a good refreshing drink. There are a lot of other drinks that we’ve created.

AH: Yes.

CG: Some drinks were created right after Prohibition. Some drinks were created—at the time it was said that some places in America served alcohol when it was against the law and in those places I understand that the bartenders, mixologists, had to create cocktail recipes that would disguise the flavor of this moonshine, which tasted terrible. So, a lot of these drinks were created so that you could actually mix them with alcohol and make them tolerable.
AH: Yes.

CG: You know it wasn’t done just because they wanted to create a special drink. They did it because they had to camouflage—

AH: Sure.

CG: —the low quality of the alcohol of the day. So I just think that if you look back at those days some of those recipes are kind of strange but they are a necessity. If you look at a daiquiri, a daiquiri is nothing but fresh lime juice with rum.

AH: Yes.

CG: And a little bit of cane sugar. It’s not the concoction you see, you know, in many of the drinks these days. Now they’ll tell you, “What kind of daiquiri do you want?”

AH: Yes.

CG: Strawberry, banana—

AH: Yes.

CG: Yes. In that day that would have never happened.

AH: No.

CG: —Never happened. It was only one way. But that would be the drink and I think that the portions we serve and the type of food we have, I mean, that particular menu would be very satisfying.

AH: Yes. Oh, yes.

CG: But it depends. It depends what time of day.

AH: Yes.

CG: You know, when I come in here I’ll have a Cuban sandwich, nine times out of ten, at lunch.

AH: Okay.

CG: It’s the best sandwich around.

AH: Yes.
CG: But anyway, that’s what I would have.

AH: Okay.

CG: Another question?

AH: Yes, one last one. And this is for her benefit (speaking about unidentified woman at table) too. What would you like the Columbia Centennial Book to look like, or what would you like it to have in it? Anything specific? And this is something you can always get back to me on.

CG: Sure.

AH: If something pops in your mind.

CG: I wish I could ask each of our customers that question, because really it’s just like our food—If we give them what they want, you know—

AH: Yes.

CG: And, like I said, we hit home runs now and then. I certainly would want it to be a home run, to be something fulfilling—

AH: Oh, absolutely.

CG: —and you know, the book would have no equal. The predecessor that people take home with them is the cookbook developed by my mom and Ferdie [Pacheco]. And I think we would be challenged to do something that would be creative in our own way—

AH: Yes.

CG: —but still fulfill the customer’s desire. Because that was [a] home run. It was—

AH: Oh, yes.

CG: Right out of the box. It just became a legendary kind of thing.

AH: Oh, yes.

CG: It was something that people give as gifts, people buy and take with them, and not only because of the cookbook profile, it’s the stories.

AH: Yes.

CG: So, I think, the stories, I think that if were are able to inject stories that are interesting enough so that the people come back and tell you about, and actually read, I
think that’s where we will have our success. I think our opportunity; once again, having it’s our personality—see what it looks like versus its substance, those are two different things.

AH: Yes, of course.

CG: I think that, for it to have legs, you know, the damn cookbook has lasted with no changes, for how long, fifteen years?

AH: Yes.

CG: And I think, that I know of, there hasn’t been any revisions.

AH: No.

CG: I mean, they reprint, they reprint, they reprint and—

AH: It’s the University Press of Florida’s biggest seller. It still is.

CG: Yes, I know. If you think about it—I think our challenge is, if you have something that is a best seller, you know, and two people wrote it without any type of a model to speak of—

AH: Yes.

CG: —and what I hear from my customers is they love the stories. I think you’ve got to have a story, got to have a story someplace.

AH: Okay.

end of interview