

GEORGO TROJANOVICH
Chef – Biloxi, MS

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[Begin Georgo Trojanovich Interview]

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Francis Lam: This is Francis Lam for the Southern Foodways Alliance. Today is Monday, August 25, 2008. I'm with Georgo Trojanovich at the Slavonian Lodge in Biloxi, Mississippi and today we're going to be talking about his experience as the chef of Mary Mahoney's Old French House Restaurant and also as a Croatian immigrant here in Biloxi. Would you please state your name, age and occupation?

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Georgo Trojanovich: Okay; my name is Georgo Trojanovich. I'm 52 years old and I'm a chef.

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FL: Mr. Georgo where were you born?

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GT: I was born in the former Yugoslavia, which is Croatia now. I was born in 1956.

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FL: And why and how did you come to Biloxi?

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GT: Well, I had the opportunity to come to the United States and of course I jumped on it—, just like everybody else in the world— and that was probably one of the best moves I ever made in my life.

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FL: And the story of that as I had heard previously was that Mary Mahoney is—was actually Croatian or her family was from Croatia and she came to visit the village where you were born and she came and you met her there. Could you talk a little bit about that story?

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GT: Sure; Mary came to Croatia or then it was Yugoslavia in 19—1969 and she came to visit us and the situation in Yugoslavia then was pretty rough. And of course, I wanted to come to the United States and she helped me out to come over here and I've been over here ever since.

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FL: Why would—why did—why did she help you come here? Why did she want you to come here?

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GT: Well the reason—well she seen back home we did not have any opportunities or—or life was hard, you know? You'd be—it was hard to find a job; it was hard to get—go to college, it was hard to get any kind of education and basically she seen I was young, bright, and I imagine she wanted to give me a chance in life, so I can have a better future.

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FL: And so she arranged for you to come with your family, I believe.

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GT: That is correct; yeah well my daddy was already over here and she invited us basically to come over here just for a visit. And when I got here, when I started looking around and I figured things out and I just didn't want to go back. So I asked Mary; I said, "Well, if you'll allow me to stay here I would be more than happy to stay." And she— that's exactly what happened; she allowed me to stay and I've been here ever since.

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FL: Where did you live at the time?

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GT: Well at the time I lived with her for two years and I was working, saving money, and I bought my first house three years after I came here. I couldn't even speak English—barely; I was learning. I was not a United States citizen at that time. And I bought—bought my first house.

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FL: So you came—and you were working at the restaurant saving up money. You bought that house. Who—who were your—where did you buy the house and who were your neighbors?

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GT: Well I bought my house in Biloxi and of course my neighbors was all Biloxians. I didn't know any— any of my neighbors. I just knew I had to get out on my own and I— basically I wanted a place of my own, and I just jumped into it. I was barely, barely affording my house payments. I did not have any furniture. People that I bought the house from, they left me a refrigerator and of course I had a stove which came with the house. I did not have any furniture; I slept on the floor. And slowly, I kept on working and saving money and I— I'd buy a piece of furniture, a piece of furniture there and then I furnished my house which probably took me out about two—three years but it all worked out.

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FL: And at that time—you had mentioned that you were still learning English. You spoke Croatian; obviously in Biloxi there is a large Croatian community. Mary Mahoney grew up here but was part of that community and was visiting Croatia. Did you get to know many of the Croatian families? Did they—how did you get—how did you start to blend in and how did you start to feel situated here?

00:04:57

GT: Right; well whenever—the first time I came to the Lodge which was shortly I came here, the Lodge actually helped me out a lot. I met a lot of good people, and by the way we're still all here and we're still all friends. And our Croatian community kind of helped me out; of course they didn't give me no money or they didn't give me no furniture or a home or nothing like that. They were—they all kind of took me in, which was a big plus. At least I knew—I knew somebody here and people were just so—so great, so helpful, you know? They were always inviting me to their house; they were inviting me for supper and then I met a lot of younger

members rather, kids of the members of the Lodge and I started going out with them. And then shortly after that I went to Notre Dame High School and that was a little bit bumpy because at that time I still couldn't read or write or speak English. That helped me out a lot because I met a lot of good people in Notre Dame, so this little Coast is one of the best places probably in the world. You know, people are just simply great.

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FL: And when you were mingling with these families, when you were going to their homes for dinner and such, were they able to speak with you in Croatian?

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GT: No, no; that was very hard to come by because all our Croatian community, this is all second, third, fourth generation. Some of them knew a few words. You could —nobody was in town that I could carry a conversation in Croatian at that time, which probably worked out for the best because I was pressured to learn English, and I learned English but it probably took me about a year or so. I could get by and it probably took me about two, three years before I really picked up where I could communicate.

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FL: And when you were at the table with them did you recognize the dishes they were serving, the meals you were having? Did you recognize any of these as being Croatian dishes?

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GT: No, no; that was totally—. Food, it of course it took me a while to get used to all the food because food was different, including the bread and even the drinks. Back home, we always drank wine and fruit juices and what have you. Here, it was a different world and new beginning; it's not—I had to just learn the language. You had to learn a culture or you had to like—I didn't have no choice but like the food. So over the time, I kind of got used to everything.

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FL: What was the strangest thing you ate when you first got here? What was the thing you looked at and said, “What is that?”

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GT: Probably the most strangest thing at first when I got here I would say: shrimp because back in Croatia and I had never seen a shrimp before I came to Biloxi. The other thing was bread; back in Croatia we all eat hard breads. Here you have that sliced, soft bread where it sticks when you eat it. It kind of sticks in your—to your mouth, so of course all the food was different because back home we just cooked and prepared just different, so basically this was all a totally new world to me.

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FL: So you had never seen a shrimp before, but certainly you were—I think you had mentioned in a previous conversation that where you grew up was on the coast and there were a lot of fishermen there. It was very much a place where seafood was important to you. Is that—is that the case; can you talk a little bit about that?

00:09:05

GT: Yeah; seafood-wise, back in Croatia and a lot of old, rather people that are here now, the older people when they came to the United States that's the only thing they knew is how to fish. Seafood is different. Like I said, we did not have any shrimp there; we had several different species of fish including squid, octopus is big over there; so, and so the—like I said that was totally different over here, and it took me a while to get used to that. For example, when you eat fish over there, they grill whole fish, including the scales and head and everything. Here we're more modern; we just eat fish filets which they don't have no bone or skin or anything else. So that kind of took a while to get used to that.

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FL: So the food was totally different but the people who were taking you in—obviously you're here at the Slovenian Lodge and they identify it as being from that part of the world; their culture and their heritage is from there. Do they practice traditions or were there holidays or feast days that you would recognize from Croatia?

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GT: Right; well during a holiday yes, like Easter and Christmas, mainly Christmas, that was a lot of similar things, especially whenever it come—whenever it came to the pastries, mainly like sweets. That was—yes; I recognized several things that they had here in Biloxi that we had back home over there. One of the famous pastries is pusharatas and then you got the bow ties, fingers, and so that was really exciting to be able to recognize that.

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FL: How did it make you feel? Did it make you feel more at home here?

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GT: Yeah; oh yeah, that kind of made you feel a little bit better. You know, to be truthful with you when I came to America, I never looked back. So I knew I had to go forward. It was nice every once in a while to recognize some of your—your food that, for example, my mama or my grandma made when I was home, so that was sweet.

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FL: Interesting; can you talk a little bit about those pastries, the pusharata and the bow tie?

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GT: How they're made? Well pusharata, that's basically like donut. The only difference is they put like pecans, apples, oranges, then they put liquor in them and mix it up altogether and then you fry it and then it's glazed with powdered sugar and PET [*evaporated*] milk and they are excellent. When you bite in them you—you taste orange, you taste apple, pecans, raisins, and it's excellent—an excellent dessert.

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FL: And so you're glad to have those here obviously but you said—you said initially you didn't look back. You didn't—certainly you were here; you were 15 I believe.

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GT: Right.

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FL: You were excited to be here and you started a new life here. But you didn't miss anything from home?

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GT: Well, I did miss my home; I just knew I couldn't go back. Because it wasn't it wasn't anything there for me. You know, you did not have any opportunities in that particular time in '71 or even earlier. That was Yugoslavia which was controlled by Tito and somewhat communism and time was very, very hard. So when I had the opportunity to get out of there it was—in many ways it was sad leaving home, and then at the same time I was happy that I was able to leave and especially come to the United States. That was very exciting, and of course when I got here like I mentioned earlier, I believe, it was very, very hard to get used to it, from the culture to the food and name it. I knew I was smart enough to realize that I just couldn't go back. I had to stay here so I just worked hard and made best of it and I made it.

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FL: You also mentioned that your father was here as well. Did you work with one another; did you help support one another?

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GT: Yes; well my daddy was only here for a short time. He just couldn't—he was like, I believe—like my age now, like 50 years old or so, so the older you are you have the hardest time to get then used to or get adjusted to American way. So he never really did like it over here; he

stayed here for a short time while I was here and he went back home and that was another thing I had to do. I had to help my family financially; I even do that today. My mama still lives—my mama is still living and she doesn't have any income, so I have to send her a few dollars every so often so she can survive.

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FL: You were certainly young when you left there and came here. You weren't a child though; I mean you were 15. Did you—did you do much of the cooking at home when you were growing up?

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GT: No; I did not do a whole lot of cooking. I did a lot of eating. My mother—my mama of course she was always a home-mom and she cooked breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And of course my grandma—I had two grandmas —grandparents on both sides, so we always ate good. We always had a home; we didn't have much besides that so no, no I never did any cooking. When I came to the US, I was just—in the right place at the right time and I just—that was the one thing that I ended up learning and got—I just got—was really good at it and I've been making a living ever since.

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FL: And I definitely want to talk a lot about your cooking and—and the food you serve at Mary Mahoney's. But just a little bit more back in Croatia; so you—you said you did a lot of the eating. Was cooking and eating together an important part of your family?

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GT: Yes; that was a very important part. We all ate at the same time and at the same table every single day, before we went to school. Of course mama would fix a breakfast; now a lunch had to be at 12 o'clock and then supper was around about 5:30—6 o'clock and we—yes; we all ate together every single day. That was very, very important. That was a good valuable family time.

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FL: Is that something you're able to do with your family here?

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GT: [*Laughs*] Sad to say, no; we of course like— holidays and birthdays and special occasions we do. Every day we do not, because everybody has a different schedule, everybody is working; everybody works at the different times, so we're not able to eat together as often as we would like to—no.

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FL: But do you get—do you get to cook at home some for your family or—?

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GT: Ah yeah, yeah; I enjoy cooking. When I have time; some days I get— I cook eight, nine, and ten hours a day and then when I get home sometimes I'll be tired and you call—we eat out quite a bit but I do cook at the house a lot and when—whenever I do cook then everybody appreciates it. Everybody enjoys it more because we don't cook as, we don't cook every day. So that's like a little treat; so I—I would say once or twice a week I cook at the house. Now in the

wintertime when it's cold and nasty and raining then of course I cook more often. It gives you something to do. **[Laughs]**

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FL: Do you ever cook some of your favorite dishes from Croatia? Did you learn to cook that food? I mean I know you learned to cook here, but did you learn to cook some of those—your more favorite traditional dishes from Croatia?

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GT: Well what happened, I memorized a lot of dishes, the way my mama was cooking it and all that, so whenever I get ready to cook a Croatian dish, if I don't know how to cook it the right—if I didn't remember the recipe I'd just simply call my mama and she tells me how to prepare it. And my kids just go crazy over it; they—they love Croatian food.

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FL: What are some of those dishes? Can you describe them please?

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GT: Yeah; yeah, anything—anything from chicken, pork, beef, including the seafood. My kids' favorite food is baked chicken with potatoes, Croatian style. They like the Croatian spaghetti which is kind of similar like we do spaghetti here. Instead of using ground beef we use like a little small chunks of meat, and basically you make spaghetti the same way kind of like we do here and you add a little cinnamon. They like to use lots of cinnamon over there whenever they

cook. That's from chicken to seafood to soups to name it and they do eat lots and lots of soups over there. So every so often I'll make some type of soup or something.

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FL: What's Croatian style chicken and potatoes?

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GT: Well that's—it's the same chicken as we do here and potatoes and you lay them out in the same pan and of course you use salt and pepper. And really it's like a baked chicken and it's baked with rosemary—with fresh rosemary. Back in Croatia, like behind my mama's house, you can find—you can go actually pick almost any kind of spice you want, anything from bay leaves to—everything grows wild from asparagus to rosemary to thyme, to I don't know; just the list goes on. It's really amazing; everything grows wild.

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FL: Did you have a different appreciation for—for that kind of situation after—after becoming a chef and working here and having to buy all these things and then going back to visit? Did you—were you able to look at it a different way?

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GT: Oh yeah; it's so sweet. You'll get ready to cook something and like I said if you needed a bay leaf—as a matter of fact I just came back from over there and I was over there in April and for example, asparagus, they just grow everywhere. So before lunch or supper or so we'd go up in the mountain and we'd pick a bunch of asparagus and bring them home —pick them, wash

them, and cook it. That it is just unbelievable. And while you're cooking, if you need a bay leaf or you need the rosemary or you need thyme or—they just got so many different types of spices. And you just go behind the house and you pick and you bring them home and you cook with them. It is—it is here you've got to go to the grocery store and buy them. So, and the same thing of course goes with—with all your fruits and vegetables. Like they, first of all they grow all their vegetables. So if you need a green onion or if you need parsley or if you need carrots or whatever you go in the garden and you pick it. And then fruits; the climate is just perfect—ideal for you can grow almost anything. So even if you want peaches you can go get peaches; like when I was over there just recently, they never—they didn't even know what peach cobbler was and peaches were just riped and nice and I started thinking. I said, "Well this would be a good surprise for them," so I made a big old pan of peach—and they just loved it. So usually they just eat the fruits off the trees, just like they are, so there—anyway that's the first time they ever had a peach cobbler. *[Laughs]*

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FL: And so have you—have you tried to do it the other way around? Have you come here and have you tried to introduce any of the Croatian dishes to the restaurant?

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GT: Well yeah; I tried a couple of times but just—I just wasn't successful at it, I just wasn't successful at it, you know? Americans just like their own American foods, you know? Now whenever they go abroad I'm sure they'll enjoy trying different types of cuisine. I just wasn't successful in Croatian food; I tried it a couple of times and I kind of gave up on it.

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FL: Did you put them on the menu or did you run them as specials?

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GT: No; just—just ran them on a special. As a matter of fact one time I ran an octopus salad and that kind of didn't go over well, so—so I just kind of gave up. I didn't really—I didn't really try any Croatian food after that.

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FL: Do you remember when you decided you wanted to be a chef?

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GT: Yes; actually I do. The chef that was there at that particular time, he was kind of—I was talking to him one day and he said, “How would you like to cook?” And I was doing all odd—odds and ends around the restaurant. I was anything from busboy to waiter; I did everything there is to do at the restaurant business. So he said, “How would you like cooking?” And I said, “Yes; I'll give it a try.” And I tried it and I ended up liking it and I think, to be truthful with you, I knew I had to do something to make a little bit more money. So that was my—that's what motivated me to start cooking more than I actually *liked* cooking. And when I got into it, I enjoyed it and I still enjoy cooking. And I believe, still even today, I believe it's more money than actual cooking.

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FL: What do you mean by that?

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GT: Well what I—what I mean by that is: today, if you're a good chef in the right spot you can make good money. So like I said I do enjoy cooking; I am very—I feel like I'm very creative. Obviously I'm good at my job; I've been there for a long time. And I believe money motivates you more I believe than anything else. It's all about money.

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FL: But before you made your money and before you got good at this you had to learn, certainly. How did you learn to cook? Obviously you were in the restaurant; did he—did you have to go through all the different stations? Do you remember working through all the different stations?

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GT: Oh yeah definitely; the chef that actually asked me would I be interested in cooking, he basically trained me and he was a very good professional chef and yeah, that's how you do. You've got to go from one station to another station and then, well you climb the stepladder and if you can handle it, you'll get a position. Whenever they gave me a chef's position I was a nervous wreck, because that's a lot of responsibility, to take over. It's not that you just cook; you also have to manage the crew and a kitchen and you've got to know how to order, you've got to know how to buy and you got to basically—know how to make money which, I was—that kind of came to me naturally because I always kind of—I was always good at making money somehow. And anyway, so being a chef, it's one of the worst jobs there is; it's also—can be a high—a very rewarding job. So overall —overall it's been good to me.

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FL: Why do you say it can be one of the worst jobs?

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GT: Well because I always tell people when I hire people—I always tell people, whenever everybody else is playing and having a good time, we have to work. What I mean all the evenings, all the holidays, like I say, when everybody else is having the day off or for example like the holidays, you've got to work. So you got to work a lot of nights; you got to—so that's— that's what's kind of bad about it.

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FL: But going back to when you were first learning that, what were the different stations you had to work through? Do you remember every one of them?

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GT: Oh yeah, yeah. You've got to, first of all, the chef that was there, you had to wash dishes for about two—three weeks so that way that was one of his things. And then you have to—then he would—next thing was you had to learn to peel onions, for example peel garlic and getting all your vegetables ready, washed, prepared for the cooking. And then he started me off frying seafood, and then it's kind of a long process because you've got so many different stations in a kitchen. You've got to know how to put the orders on and how to read them, how to whenever wait staff come and put the food up; so anyway there's a lot of different stations there. So basically I went all the way through it, which I didn't have any problems, and actually he was

impressed. So then we just kept—he kept on training—it actually took about a year for him to train me.

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FL: What was the toughest station?

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GT: Probably the toughest station would be to give the food out to your wait staff. In other words, whenever they'd come pick orders up because you got to checks— so many entrees on each check; that's the toughest job.

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FL: So not—not the grill station, not the sauté station; not—not the cooking was tough—?

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GT: Right; yeah—yeah I mean you go through all those stations and I believe the toughest job is to expedite the orders.

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FL: And the chef you worked with—Chef Scott was his name?

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GT: Right; yes, Scott Marshall, Chef Scott Marshall one of the best probably chefs that—that I know of even today. He was awesome.

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FL: What was—you speak very highly of him. What were his great strengths; what was so awesome about him?

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GT: Well this guy was just serious as serious gets. Every plate had to be perfect; he basically had his heart into it. It's not that he just managed the kitchen; he actually did a lot of the cooking himself, and that's kind of the way I am today, because if you then—if you don't do it yourself it's kind of hard to depend on somebody else to do the same thing that—in other words, the same consistency that you can do. So he was—he was the best.

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FL: What was the—what was the greatest lesson he taught you?

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GT: Probably looking back at it now, the greatest lesson, I think and there was several of them—

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FL: I have time for all of them.

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GT: What's that?

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FL: I have time for as many as you want to talk about.

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GT: Yeah; the greatest lesson I would say it would be to—I learned from him to be serious at my job, to be responsible, to be basically married to the job if you know what I mean. If a good chef is not married to his job, he's not that good. And you have to be consistent. You have to put your heart into it and if you don't then things might would have been different.

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FL: How many employees do you have in your kitchen?

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GT: Well right now about 30 employees—30 employees in the kitchen; that includes cooks, dishwashers, —.

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FL: But not 30 at once; 30 on your staff list, but how many—how many at a time?

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GT: At a time probably about—roughly about 15 at a time, uh-huh.

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FL: That's a big—that's a big kitchen. How many—how many seats are in the restaurant?

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GT: We can seat 550 people at one time.

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FL: Oh yeah.

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GT: Yeah; it's a big, big operation, like on a slow day we'll probably do 400 people. On a real busy day we can do up to about 1,200—sometimes about 1,300 a day.

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FL: That—you mean lunch and dinner combined?

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GT: Right; correct that's a lunch and dinner combined, yeah and then we do catering and we do—just—we do everything. And that's what I mean by being serious and that's what I mean by being married to it. You just can't walk away from it; you—you've got to be there.

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FL: And with that many covers and that much staff, it's impressive that you still insist on doing a lot of the cooking yourself. What are the things that you take responsibility for in terms of actual cooking?

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GT: Well like I say I'll do—I still do a lot of cooking myself. Then you have to manage a staff; you have to order all of food. You have to do the food cost; you've got to have a labor cost. You got to deal with all those vendors constantly so it gets—it gets very, very hectic. Of course I've been there for so long, I kind of got my ducks in a row and then —I would say my job would be a lot easier than if somebody else would take it over tomorrow.

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FL: But other particular—so even with all those other responsibilities, you still like to cook? You like to still put your hands on the food and pick up a knife and—?

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GT: Yes.

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FL: What are the things that you—are there things that you insist on cooking yourself every time, because that's the way you want them?

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GT: Ah yes; there's several I like—for example, seafood gumbo. I've been cooking it now for almost—I guess somewhere close to about 30 years now, and I'm the only one that cooks it. And then there's lots of different types of sauces and dressings and what have you because these days you have such a big turnover in the kitchen, and that's the only way you can keep consistency if you do it yourself. And I can promise you there's a lot of people that come to Biloxi that they

have been there 15 years ago and then come down there tomorrow and they'll have the same consistency. And I believe that goes a long ways.

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FL: So the recipes you're preparing now are they the same as when the restaurant opened?

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GT: Pretty good percentage of them it is, like a gumbo for example and many more— a few more entrees. And of course we've been in the business for 40-something years so after a while you have to change things around so you don't have the same old boring place or the same old boring entrees. So we do change our entrees and we offer a lot of fresh seafood and so our key entrees yeah; we've got several key— good entrees that's been with us for 40-something years now. And then like I said every once in a while we'll change them around and switch them around.

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FL: What are some of those classic entrees that you've always served?

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GT: Right; well like I say you've got a seafood gumbo. You have—we have Italian—Italian dressing, the salad dressing that we make, crabmeat dressing, which out of that crabmeat dressing, we serve crabcakes, we stuff lobsters, we stuff shrimp with that and many other things, and then we have this dish that's called Sisters of the Sea. One shell is a crabmeat in a cream sauce and the other shell is a shrimp. That's the old original dish. And also we have an escargot

that's very different from anybody else that's been around for years. And hmm, I got a few fish dishes that we do that's been around like a snapper Bienville, or we have like a stuffed catfish. We had our first stuffed catfish in Mississippi that has ever been served, and we stuff it with shrimp and crabmeat au gratin and whenever Mississippi starts raising pond-raised catfish we were the first restaurant in Mississippi to experiment with that catfish and we still have it on the menu. That's been several years ago.

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FL: How is the escargot different than anywhere else?

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GT: Well most of the places when you get escargot they just do it in butter and garlic sauce. Our escargot is totally different; I made—oh actually go back to the Chef Scott, he taught me how to make this escargot sauce and it's made—kind of looks like a brown gravy and it's—it's a butter, wine, lemon, and a few more secret ingredients in it. And anyway, we put it in this really cool dish and it's got like six holes and on the bottom is spinach, noodles – seashell noodles, and then we put escargot and then we top it with the brown sauce, garlic sauce I guess we can call it and then it's topped with parmesan cheese and then we bake it. It's out of this world.

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FL: And do where all those classic dishes that you just mentioned, do where those recipes came from?

00:37:18

GT: Yeah; all those came from Chef Scott. He was a chef—actually all over the United States and whenever Mary Mahoney opened up her restaurant, he was—he actually opened up the restaurant. And that was a lot of his recipes, and I was just lucky enough I guess in the right time, right place, and he trained me and he gave me all the recipes, he explained it to him—to me, and I’ve been doing it—I’m still doing it the same way he was doing it.

00:37:54

FL: That’s—that’s really a strong lineage. That’s a lot of continuation. Those are—do if those recipes were all ones that he had invented or if they were recipes that he had taken up from a previous teacher?

00:38:06

GT: I believe—I’m pretty sure he—that’s what he told me over the years. Like I say he worked in New Orleans, Chicago, Washington; as a matter of fact he’s the one that opened up—that was years ago—Biloxi Hotel which is still the right there where the Edgewater Mall is today in Biloxi. So anyway, basically he collected these recipes in his time and then whenever Mary opened up the restaurant he brought out all the best recipes that he had, and he contributed a lot to the restaurant’s success.

00:38:53

FL: And so now you prepare a lot of those things; you prepare the gumbo like you said, the dressing, the—a lot of those things that have been really associated with this restaurant. Are there other dishes that you really love to prepare or to cook or even to eat?

00:39:06

GT: Oh yeah; there's a— the list goes on and on. You know, we do— anything—I mean basically you can get anything that you want. If we don't have it we can get it; I can order it, I can get it, and you just got to get creative. You know, a lot of times you'll be under pressure; somebody calls you up well to say I want this, I want that; well you might not ever heard of it before because food—that— I mean you can do so much with the food. That's when you have to get creative and then get artistic and creative and what have you and come out with a good dish.

00:39:51

FL: That's happened; someone has called you up and said, I want this thing and you don't know how to do it and do you remember that time? Can you tell me one of the times that happened?

00:39:59

GT: Well yeah; it happened—actually happened several times. I do have some a lot of friend chefs locally and mainly in New Orleans, and when somebody calls you up and gives you something off the wall that you never heard of, you know, I don't know everything. I don't think anybody does; we all live and learn so that's when you have to pull out all your connections and you get on the telephone and you start calling, and then you find out how—how it's made and you make it.

00:40:31

FL: What—what was one of those times? What was one of those dishes you had to suddenly research?

00:40:37

GT: That would be kind of hard to—there was several of them. Right now I can't really think what exactly was it. Because our restaurant gets people basically from all over the world, so sometimes you get—as a matter of fact, I remember one time this lady wanted, it was like in November I believe, and she wanted figs wrapped in a prosciutto. Well that's—you might think that's easy and it is very simple but if you never wrapped a fig in a prosciutto before you just don't have no idea. The biggest problem was to find fresh figs. Well I had—like I say I had a lot of connections and I found the fresh figs in one of those foreign countries. Oh I can't remember the name of the country—Turkey I believe—Turkey or one of those countries; anyway well they cost us a fortune. Well what you—what you do you, you quarter the fig and you wrapped each piece with a thin slice of prosciutto. She wanted that type of appetizer. Well, me growing—growing up in Croatia we had figs growing everywhere. I knew what the fig was; I never realized that you wrapped the whole fig with the prosciutto, or do you slice it or what do you do? So I called up one of my buddies in New Orleans and said well it's—he said it's very simple. He said you quarter them and you make sure your prosciutto is real, real thin so you can bite it and you wrap it and it's simple. And then I had a—it was a nightmare trying to find figs, so you— you'll get into those jams all the time, people will call you up; I want this, I want that, and there's a lot of—for example seafood that somebody might request and they're not available on the Coast, . You might have to fly them in from China or God knows what that if they're willing to pay we can find it.

00:42:52

FL: But okay; you mentioned creativity a lot and you're proud of your creativity. Can you talk about some of the dishes that you've created for the restaurant?

00:43:00

GT: Yeah; oh yeah I created several of them. One dish that we have I'm not sure if I mentioned, it was what we call a Lobster Georgo and basically what it is—it's a half a Lobster Florida that I was just playing around one day and I made it up. Anyway, it's half a Lobster Florida and you chop up the lobster tail into little chunks, and then you add shrimp, cheese, mushrooms, brandy, cheddar cheese, mushrooms, brandy in a cream sauce, and then you kind of make like a dressing type. And then you stuff a whole lobster and you top it with the parmesan cheese and you bake it. And it looks good and it tastes good and it's been a number one seller for years and years. Another thing I've prepared; it was a stuffed snapper—stuffed red Gulf snapper, local fish. And we stuff that with crabmeat and that's one of the big sellers. Veal Antonio that was another thing; it was—it's just a—like a slice of veal and you—of course you've got to pound the veal out and then you salt and pepper it. And then I made this mixture of four different cheeses and you mix mayonnaise with them and you add a little salt and pepper, a little garlic and green onions. And then after you pan fry a veal, you top the veal with the cheese and then you melt the cheese on the veal and then you top it with the crabmeat. An unbelievable dish; very, very popular—.

00:44:57

FL: Do you remember—you mentioned when you were talking about the Lobster Georgo you were just playing around one day. Do you remember what inspired you specifically to combine these different things for any of these dishes?

00:45:07

GT: Well yeah; [*Laughs*] yeah I had some lobsters that I ordered from Florida. This was several, about 25-something years ago. And they came out; they shipped us the wrong lobster. It was a very, very small lobster; it was kind of like a baby lobster, like a half a pound lobster. Well I ordered several hundred pounds. I said oh my God; what am I going to do now because I mean, you can serve two or three or four it just doesn't look right. And so just to cover myself I said well I have to do something, so I can use these lobsters out. And because when you look at half a lobster, just it's not really a whole lot to it. It was very petite. That's when I played with it and like I said I made that—basically it's a cream sauce. And that's very rich and very filling, so instead of serving a, a two-pound lobster, I served up half a pound lobster with a nice rich sauce and I included like I mentioned shrimp and mushrooms and brandy and cheeses and it was just out of this world.

00:46:33

FL: And do you have other—you also mentioned you like to eat out a lot. When you're eating out what are some of the favorite places you go to and do you ever take some ideas from there and get inspired by those things?

00:46:47

GT: Ah yeah; well that happens every once in a while. I like to go out. It's very important that you go out to eat and you kind of keep up with what goes on in the world and you—as long as you live, you're going to learn. And occasionally yes; you'll see something that you'll like and you incorporate it to your menu or sometimes you go out to eat and something catches your eye and it gives you an idea. And from that you can make your own dish or some cases, you might

can serve the same thing or something. So it's very important for any chef to go out and eat and just to kind of see what everybody else is doing and you can learn from it or—.

00:47:41

FL: Do you remember the last time you saw something while eating out and thought oh that's an interesting idea and then you got back and played with it? What was that thing?

00:47:48

GT: You know, as a matter of fact, the last time I ate at one of these local restaurants they had some very interesting bread. They were like different types of—they were like little small rolls. There was several different flavors of, like a brown bread, sweet bread, the yeast bread and they were like really beautiful little baby rolls. And I was impressed by that; it was great. And the next week or so I had some of that at the restaurant and I still have it. **[Laughs]** So you do learn from it; what I'm saying?

00:48:32

FL: So how would you describe the cuisine of Mary Mahoney's? How would you describe the food that you serve?

00:48:40

GT: I would say it's first of all—I'm proud of it; I think it's one of the best foods in Biloxi. It's not that I just work there; I really mean that. We have a very, very unique menu, you know? We offer almost everything. We put a lot of pride and a lot of hard work into it. I think our seafood dishes are probably one of the best in the town, you know? And if you really look at the whole—

the whole situation probably 80-percent of our business is all the repeat business, which is very important because if you have a repeat business, if somebody comes back and comes back and comes back that means they like something. So I believe that's when you can consider yourself very successful. And if somebody comes and eats four or five times a month, the same person, you're doing good.

00:49:49

FL: Would you say that the food is—you mentioned I mean you offer a lot of different dishes, a lot of—maybe the food comes out of a lot of different traditions. Would you say that it's— if someone were to ask oh what kind of restaurant it is, is it Creole, is it French, is it Italian, is it Japanese or Chinese, whatever—is it Gulf Coast; how would you describe that? How would you answer that question?

00:50:14

GT: I would probably answer seafood—a seafood restaurant because probably about 90-percent of our sales are seafood. We do have excellent lamb chops, pork chops —the best steaks you can buy and what have you. We sell more seafood than anything else; some people make a joke that we have— we have a French restaurant, the half of owners are Irish, half of owners are Croatian **[Laughs]** so anyway we have a combination. I would say our—it's— seafood cuisine definitely.

00:51:03

FL: Why do you think that is? Why do you think so many of your patrons come in and—and want to eat seafood?

00:51:10

GT: Well because our seafood, which is very important, it's a good fresh local seafood. And if you come to our restaurant for example and you order speckled trout, if we don't have it or if it's not fresh we'll simply tell you we don't have a speckled trout today, you know? If you want snapper it's—it's a snapper. If you get salmon, it's a salmon so when people come there they already expect now that what you're telling them that's what they're going to get. And obviously like I said—mentioned earlier, if somebody comes a few times a month or a week—we got customers that come to eat down there four times a week, and there's plenty of restaurants in Biloxi, so that ought to tell you something. Obviously we're pleasing them with the product, with the service, atmosphere and everything else that comes with it, so but like I said that's very—. And I think what—what even tops it all it is consistency. If you don't have consistency in a restaurant, you don't have a restaurant. You have to be consistent. And I believe that's what people appreciate because if you go out to eat and you have something good at my restaurant and you get ready to go to eat, well no matter which way somebody pulls you, you're going to come see me because you already know what to expect. You know what I offer. You know what quality of my steak or seafood or whatever might be. You know what you're going to get and I think that's very important.

00:52:59

FL: And speaking of quality and—you mentioned the seafood is local. Do you get to buy, are you able to buy all or most of your seafood from local fishermen?

00:53:11

GT: I would say majority of it; I do get a lot of—lot of seafood that I fly in from East Coast which is Florida. We do not use any seafood out of the United States, like I mentioned earlier. For example, catfish it's all pond-raised Mississippi catfish. All our shrimp are all local shrimp and what I mean by local, they could be from Texas, Louisiana or Mississippi, and it's all shrimp with no chemicals on. It's all good—good quality, good quality shrimp so we do not—we don't not use any foreign seafood products or meats or—anything; everything is domestic. All our food is domestic.

00:54:13

FL: Why is that important to you?

00:54:16

GT: Well I'm going to tell you; Gulf of Mexico, that's got to be one of the best seafood—the Gulf of Mexico I should say produces one of the best seafoods in the world. And I think that's very, very important to me. These days of course you—you can get seafood from all over the world and don't get me wrong; it's all good. Our Gulf of Mexico it's just something about it; it's rich, it's healthy and it's just simply good, good quality seafood.

00:54:55

FL: But like you said, if you can get excellent quality seafood from the Mediterranean, you can fly fish that they caught out of the Adriatic yesterday and get it on someone's plate today. Do you have that available to you and yet you still always make the choice for the most part to buy Gulf seafood. Why is that?

00:55:12

GT: Well for—for for several reasons; first of all if you get a seafood that's flown in from overseas it's going to cost you a lot more than a seafood that you'll get locally. If you ask any of the seafood experts, ain't nothing wrong with the Gulf—the Gulf of Mexico seafood; it's an excellent seafood and like I say it's good and clean. It's healthy and some people might argue that point, but you know, I think it's the best seafood in the world now. Like I say, I grew up Croatia and you know, there ain't nothing wrong with the Croatian seafood. For me to fly in Croatian seafood you just, you just couldn't make any money. It would be way too expensive, so I mainly focus on— because anything all our soft shell crabs, we sell out of soft shell crabs and oysters; we sell a lot of oysters and everything is from the Gulf of Mexico. And what's most important—everything is chemical free, because today everybody likes to use—I don't know if you've heard of Poly—it adds water and increases the weight and this and that. Our seafood does not have none of that.

00:56:33

FL: Do you know a lot of people in the seafood industry here?

00:56:40

GT: Oh yeah; oh my yeah, yeah I know everybody. I got more connections than anybody out there. [*Laughs*] Well over the years, I've been at my job for altogether for like 36 years and over the years you get connected. And we still stay in touch and when I order shrimp from one of my seafood people, I know exactly what I'm getting. And it's a good quality shrimp. Matter of fact today you can buy foreign seafood lots—lots cheaper than you can buy domestic. You know, it's

just the quality is not there. When you eat shrimp at Mary Mahoney's it'll melt—melt in your mouth. Some places you go eat it you got to chew it, so that's the difference.

00:57:36

FL: And how have you seen that industry change over the years dealing with it from a chef's point of view?

00:57:43

GT: Big changes, big changes; I think what, over the—well 20 years ago it was very plentiful. And of course these days everybody is on a health kick; everybody wants to eat seafood and bigger demand you have, higher prices and less products you have. I'm lucky because I've been around for so long and like I mentioned I—I have my own connections and I've been dealing with these people for years and years and years. So I always get a first priority on any kind of seafood, anything from crabmeat to crab claws like I mentioned, shrimp, oysters, any type of fish, so it helps when you're connected.

00:58:30

FL: The industry, though, has clearly changed a lot like you said from talking to other people and from my understanding of it—is the seafood industry here in Biloxi is not as booming as it once was. It's gotten a lot smaller; many fewer fishermen, many fewer—a lot fewer processing plants and so on and so forth. How has that affected your ability to get the seafood that you want?

00:59:02

GT: It gets—it seems like it gets tougher and tougher each year. You know, before, 20—30 years ago you have a lot of Biloxians—that’s what they made a living on—it was the seafood. Then they got older and of course they educated their kids, so their kids don’t harvest seafood anymore and yes; the situation is a lot, lot tougher and of course seafood today it’s not as plentiful as it was 20—30 years ago. It’s just not out there; it’s being over-fished. So that’s the reason why you see so much foreign seafood coming into this country because we just simply don’t have enough. And like I said, so far I’ve been lucky. I can get almost anything I want because I have between Texas and Florida there’s lots of still, seafood factories that process seafood. And over the years I’ve accumulated so many good—I call them seafood friends— and we still work with each other. And it’s working so far; any time I need something I can get it.

01:00:32

FL: What do you think is going to be the future of that industry?

01:00:37

GT: I believe the seafood industry is going to survive. I think, speaking of our local industry, it’s just less and less seafood out there because it’s been just over-fished. I’m hoping it won’t go away anytime soon. And then today which it might be a good thing, with these high gas prices, less and less people are fishing because there’s less and less profit in it. So like I said, that might be a good thing because if we would quit fishing for a few years then nature would refurnish all the seafood and everything might come back. Then on the other hand, the Gulf of Mexico is large, so there’s a lot of love-making going on in [*the Gulf of*] Mexico, so I believe seafood-wise, I think we’ll be okay.

01:01:49

FL: You mentioned that you saw a lot of the people that you knew working in the seafood industry eventually retire, their children going into other industries and so you don't have necessarily a new generation of people taking up that work. What about your own children? Do your children, are they—do they work in restaurants? Are they interested in going in the field?

01:02:08

GT: No; and I hope God they never do. *[Laughs]* Of course I wish my kids—I hope they have a better life and better future than I had. I think every parent hopes their kids do better than they did. I'm strongly focusing on educating my kids, and so they can have a college education and so they can go out in the world and they won't have to cook like I've cooked all my life. And so I think that's—that's how it's supposed to be. So hopefully where I can see that's exactly what's going on; I got two daughters in college and my son, he's very smart. And one, shortly the next two—three years he'll be going to college, so all my kids are going to be educated. Now after they get educated, if they want to go work at the restaurant they're more than welcome or I'll open up the restaurant for them if they wanted to. But I'm hoping they get in different fields and so they can have an easier and better life.

01:03:29

FL: So then in your kitchen do you have anyone that you're grooming, anyone that you're training much like Chef Scott trained you to take over for you eventually?

01:03:38

GT: Yes; oh yeah definitely. You always—you constantly train. Whenever I come to the retirement point, or when I realize I want to retire then of course I'll get serious and I'll try my best to train somebody. And I will try the same thing that Chef Scott did for me—I would like to do the same thing for somebody else. So we'll see how that plays out.

01:04:11

FL: There was a story that I had heard that at one point you cooked for President Reagan. Can you talk about how that came about?

01:04:22

GT: Well actually I ended up cooking for President Reagan, President first George Bush; that was let's say—Mississippi, Louisiana— Mississippi, Louisiana Congressional Delegation and I believe that's right. And they called our restaurant and they wanted to know if we wanted to participate. And of course that was a big excitement, and Mary was still alive at—I believe that was 1984, the first year we went. We actually went five years in a row and that was an unbelievable experience. Can you imagine cooking for Ronald Reagan? That was the first time we cooked for the President; that was a just awesome, awesome, awesome experience, something you'll never forget. I still have the pictures and videotapes and all that. And that was like I said, very exciting, but anyway we went up there five years in a row. I cooked in the White House. I cooked on the White House lawn. I cooked in the Rayburn Building. I cooked in the Canon Building. And like I said we cooked for Reagan and we cooked for Bush and that was just like I said—the first year was more shocking because you just couldn't believe you was cooking for the President of the United States. And then when we went like I said five years in a row and

the second year got a little bit easier, the third year got a little bit easier, and that was an awesome—awesome experience.

01:06:12

FL: Were you nervous?

01:06:15

GT: Oh extremely nervous; oh yeah. That was—like I said, the first—especially the first year because you had to go to the White House from Biloxi, Mississippi. You went to the White House and cooked for President Reagan. Oh that was as nerve-wracking as nerve-wracking gets and you had to go through all that security. They came to the restaurant; they inspected—we—we brought our own seafood out there by the way. They wanted a sample of the Gulf Coast so that was another thing you had to decide. Well what—what in the world are you going to cook for President Reagan? That was—so anyway we ended up doing fried crab claws, fried soft-shelled crab, and a grilled fish. And it turned out—couldn't have turned out any better.

Everybody was pleased and—and that was, by the way, for like 200 people. So to go in a—to come from Mary Mahoney's or rather Biloxi to go in the White House kitchen and work with the White House Chef and with his staff, oh that was just nerve-wracking as nerve-wracking gets.

[Laughs] So that was an experience, and of course I was so happy and I was thrilled; how many opportunities in a life you get to go and cook for the President? And then I'm not sure how everything worked out. Then we got invited a second year like I said then; whenever George Bush, the first, became the President, we cooked. We did a seafood—basically the same—almost the same thing on the White House lawn. Everything was picnic style; they had up picnic tables and all that, so that was very unique.

01:08:07

FL: What was the grilled fish you made?

01:08:14

GT: We brought our—our Gulf snapper which is probably one of the sweetest fishes that is. Yeah; like I said we had it caught locally here, and the security of course came, and they checked everything out and you pack it and they take it. They fly it out there, of course, for the safety and all that. So anyway the whole process was very, very interesting, and let me tell you one thing. Me being from Yugoslavia, from a communist country, that was a little nerve-wracking for them, you know? So they basically they came, and the FBI came and interviewed me and of course I got a— after I became a United States citizen they got enough fingerprints on me. That was— of course I was clean; I have never been in trouble in my life, and anyway then I had to go through that security process and then a food process. Anyway overall it was a great, great experience.

01:09:24

FL: That's wild. So the—the FBI—oh man; when did you become a citizen?

01:09:30

GT: I—let's see; I got here '71, so '76 or '77. You had to live in the US five years at that particular time before you became a United States citizen. And before I became a United States citizen, I already owned my home and so anyway when I got my citizenship the Judge shook my hand and he said I'm proud of you. **[Laughs]**

01:09:58

FL: And so now, 20 years later you're cooking for the President. Did that cause you to reflect? Did you think about oh my God I came to this country as a Croatian immigrant? Did that cause you to think about that a little bit, the chance that you got to be—?

01:10:11

GT: Oh yeah; no question about that. You kind of go back and you think look; I'm the lucky—luckiest person alive because like I said not too many people get a chance to get close to the President or even cook for the President, because of—we was— actually Reagan came in the kitchen while we were cooking. And I—as a matter of fact, I still have the pictures of that I can show you. And he was a very, very friendly, normal guy; you wouldn't— it just kind of blows you away, the President of the United States. Looking at it, oh yeah; like I said, I've—I'm a lucky, lucky individual that I had the opportunity. And like I said, looking back from the time I came to the United States, and I worked hard and everything I went through, and then all of the sudden you get the opportunity to cook for the President of the United States, so that was awesome.

01:11:15

FL: And you said that the—the Mississippi Congressional Delegation called you and invited you to do this. Do why they chose you?

01:11:24

GT: Well, the main reason why because Mary Mahoney's Old French House Restaurant is such an established name—it's got a name, famous place. And basically what they were doing they—

they were picking somebody from like each State and it was like, for example, they had a guy from Florida. They had a guy from Louisiana and a guy from —restaurants actually from—sorry from Louisiana, Florida, and Mississippi. And for Mississippi, Mary Mahoney’s restaurant got picked, and then there was a White House—let’s see White Pillars or White Pillow restaurant from Alabama, and so anyway each year they were kind of—picked different restaurants from different States.

01:12:13

FL: Oh so you would go and, as part of a team where you would—you said you did three dishes but they would do other dishes as well?

01:12:21

GT: Right, right; yeah. There was—I believe if I remember correctly there were three restaurants involved each year. I went five years in a row. Why asked—I’m not sure. But I was glad to go.

[Laughs]

01:12:39

FL: Did you get to know some of the other restaurants or some of the other chefs? Did you try their—did you try their food and—?

01:12:43

GT: Oh yeah you always; you always keep your eyes opened and what I’m saying. That’s just a— you see different restaurants or different chefs doing something well yeah; you’re going—

you're going to try it or you're going to look and see how he does it, what does he do, what does he have to offer—oh yeah, oh yeah.

01:13:06

FL: Finally, you had mentioned earlier that when you get to the point that you think about retiring, you would be more serious in finding someone you'd want—you'd want to train to take the reins from you. But what do you think about your future? What are you planning on? What's in store in your future?

01:13:26

GT: Well I've been working now almost 36 years and as soon as I get my kids on their feet — educated, yeah; I would like to retire. So I'm hoping in the next hopefully in the next five—six years or somewhere in that neighborhood yeah I would like to retire. I believe anybody that works 40 years deserves to retire and then after that who knows? I might go back to the Croatia for vacation or—or do something; I don't know. I guess I'll figure that out when that time—when that time comes, but yeah; I will— one day I will like to retire, yeah.

01:14:16

FL: But you would go back only for vacation?

01:14:18

GT: Oh yeah; Croatia—yeah just to go for vacation. This is my home now.

01:14:26

FL: Great; well thank you very much. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

01:14:29

GT: Not really; I just hope I gave you a good interview and I appreciate you doing it.

01:14:37

FL: Well thank you very much Mr. Georgo.

01:14:41

[End Georgo Trojanovich Interview]