

Oral History Collection

Oswaldo Cortez

Interviewer: Itzel Verdin

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Itzel Verdin: Hello, my name is Itzel Verdin, and I will be interviewing my tío from my mother's side. And can you go ahead and introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about yourself?

Osvaldo Cortez: My name is Osvaldo Cortez or Osvaldo Arturo Cortez for the full thing. And I am 53 years old. I live in Dallas, Texas with my wife and my two kids that that also live here and yeah.

Itzel Verdin: Okay. And so, can you tell me when and where you were born?

Osvaldo Cortez: I was born in in 1971 in Mexico City. So, there was six of us. Four boys and two girls and we grew up in Mexico City and moved here when we were young.

Itzel Verdin: And in regards to growing up in Mexico, do you happen to remember what kinds of food you ate growing up? Do you have any memories of that?

Osvaldo Cortez: Oh yeah, there was -- food was a big, big part of our life. It was different than here. Most of the food that we bought was bought from markets, some from stores, but it's just a different, you know, you didn't go to Walmart or a place like that

we bought most of the food that we that we got was from the outside markets that were that were outside the house where my mom would walk and get food and our milk was delivered to our house in a glass jar and it was all very fresh. Tortillas were picked up daily or, you know, a few times a week from the tortilleria. She would walk over and pick up tortillas from the tortilleria and bread from the panaderia. We would walk over and pick up fresh bread. And it was all very, very -- It's all really very fresh, yeah.

Verdin: Yeah, a lot different from here.

Cortez: Yeah. Even though even though it was the city and Mexico City is a big city, it still was just a different way of life. And it's not like that now, the Walmart's and grocery stores all over the place. But back when I was young, it was, you know, those, those are those places are still around. That markets and stuff? But yeah, that's basically how, how I grew up was uh. That kind of food and. It was, uh, you know. Always. There was always a woman in the kitchen cooking something, always. Whether it was my aunt or my mom or a cousin. Life

revolved around food, and it was -- there was there was no such thing as eating out the first restaurant I ever ate at was when I moved to the United States. I'd never eaten in a restaurant.

Verdin: Oh wow.

Cortez: I'd actually never gone to a building that was an actual restaurant that closest thing to a restaurant, quote-unquote was if we would pick up like the tacos from that, you know, from a stand on the streets and stuff, that was as far as food that you bought that was not -- that you didn't cook at home, everything absolutely every meal, 365 was home cooked.

Verdin: And I know that you guys had spent a lot of time with your tías at their houses. And had a lot of mealtimes there, my mom said. Do you remember how mealtimes went? Was it different than here?

Cortez: It was, especially if it was just to kind of go and visit. You know, food was actually just very simple, very simple ingredients. We didn't have a lot of money growing up, so. So, it wasn't fancy stuff, but man it was really, really, really good food. That's kind of why I love, I think the

restaurant business and why I've been involved in it, it's because I would always see my mom and my aunts, just cooking all the time. I mean, that's just what they did, was. And I would always just kind of approach and see it. And I always had an interest and a fascination with the kitchen where I didn't see any other guys really ever in the kitchen. It was just, I would always going to walk over. And Mom, what are you doing? Or tía, what are you doing? And so, it was different in that way. And also, if it was going to be, if we went over there because of a family gathering or if people were in town or whatever, it was, it was really an orchestra of food because there was a lot of food that was bought and breakfast was started early in the morning, before anybody got up and there was usually one or two women getting up early, probably by 5:30 or 6:00 start cooking. You'd get up and the men would just sit down and eat. And there would just be these meals. And then as soon as breakfast was over, then everything was picked up, dishes started washing, and there was no let me take a break from it was it was immediately started peeling and prepping for

lunch. And then the same thing happened after lunch, you start picking up and cleaning. And you start prepping for dinner. And that was just. And it was like that, all year round. So yeah, much different.

Verdin: And you said when you first came here, that's when you first ate in a restaurant. Do you remember which restaurant it was?

Cortez: I don't remember the name of it. My family remembers it, I know my dad does. It was in Lufkin, Texas because we moved to, when we moved here in 1980. The whole family moved here. My mom moved here in '79 and worked here for a year. She worked in a hotel, as a maid and my uncle Mendoza was a professor, at Stephen F Austin in East Texas, and my mom came, and my dad had lost his job. He'd worked for the latter Commission for, for several years. He'd lost his job. So, my mom came here for a year and she came back and grabbed us in 1980. And well we moved back in July, June or July, I think it was July of 1980. When we moved and so when we moved to the States. And so. One of the things that we did when Dad had got a little money

was the first time. And it was, I guess. It was just it was one of the first, American things that we did. Was that we knew that we heard that they were saying I don't know how we found out about her, maybe my parents had friends that eaten there I don't know but at the end of the day I just remember it was a little Mexican restaurant in downtown Lufkin. And we went and we ate, just like Mexican, you know, traditional Mexican food because he was, you know, pozole. And they had menudo and just and I vividly remember it because I remember just the restaurant ambience because it was just so fascinating to me that you know that my mom or sisters or women were not cooking the meal that we are actually sitting down as somebody was serving us. That was mind blowing to me that we just sat down and we sat at a table and food was brought to us. Yeah, I can understand that. And I'll never forget it too, because they had a little video game back then. It was very early in the video game era. And so it was a big deal that there was a video game. Sitting there, and I just remember just having a blast because something -- just a restaurant experience with the video game

there and I'll, I still remember what it looks like. I cannot remember the name of it, but it was there for many years, it is no longer there. But yeah, that was my first restaurant experience.

Verdin: That's exciting. Yeah, but again, you mentioned. So, when you guys first came here, you mentioned that your mother worked at the hotel, and that she came back for you guys that following summer. So, when you guys moved here that summer, my mom has talked a lot about that you guys were living on a farm in East Texas, and you guys did labor in exchange for food and housing.

Cortez: Basically, that's what it was. It was an exchange. We, my parents, quote-unquote, got paid, but they were charged. So, when we moved here in 1980, we were only -- there was a lot of us. My uncle, my Uncle Mendoza and his wife. My Aunt Mimi had children and they had a full house. Even though their house was a large house, it's still it was just a lot of people because we bought, it was five kids and mom and dad, so that was seven people that added on a house that was already like, 11 in that house or something like that. So, we're going

around close to 20 people in one house. And so we were only at my uncle's house for about, I think, like a day or two, it was very quick. And we, my uncle, my Uncle Mendoza, which, you know, he had some connections. Knew of a family that that had a farm in Garrison, Texas. And they said they'll give you room and board. You can have a house there that you can live in. You guys can work there, and they'll pay you to get to work with chickens to grab the eggs and separate the eggs from the from the chicken house. And yeah, so we moved, we all packed up and moved over there and, but they basically just took so much advantage of us. I was a baby. My aunt Lili, which is, your mom. We were the two youngest ones. And so we for the most part didn't do much. She was watching me. She would occasionally -- I found out from my dad that she would occasionally go to the grocery store with our cousin Celia Mendoza, which was my uncle Mendoza's daughter. My uncle remembers that, because it was during the Summer and so his daughter, his kids were out for the summer, so they would go with the with the lady to go to the grocery store. And I believe that my uncle said that she

would she pay him like a quarter, to go and to help her with the grocery stores, so she was paying them. And then my parents were getting paid like \$30 a day. That included, that was for my mom, for my dad. For my, for your tía Moni, for my sister Moni, and for my brother Tavo. So, for four people it was \$30 a day. So, it was basically slave labor and they would charge us you know rent to live in that house. So, once they charged us rent and once with the little that we got paid, there was really nothing left over. I guess that was my first. You know with actually working with food, which I actually didn't really work because I was young. I was nine years old and so. I'd go to the chicken houses and stuff and then see it, but they scared me. I was little because they --

Verdin: Yeah.

Cortez: They'd go after you those, especially those Roosters.
They would mean, they were mean.

Verdin: My mom has told me that you guys would sit on the, in the kitchen and you would peel peas.

Cortez: Oh, I forgot about the peas, yeah.

Verdin: A giant sack that the woman would give you guys a giant bag of peas.

Cortez: They were actually like sugar snap peas, and we'd have to peel them, yeah.

Verdin: Yeah, she says that she remembers that and that she would pay you guys a quarter a day for both of you guys. I think that's what she said.

Cortez: Yeah. And as well, yeah. And that was her main thing was to pay quarters for just little odds and ends. But it was pretty traumatic because my aunt, my sister Moni, your aunt Moni. She was used to, you know, they used her and Tavo, and they were both, you know, they were both young, you know, they were kids. Moni was in high school. I think she was a sophomore in high school, and Tavo I believe was a freshman in high school. And you know, just working 8 to 10-hour days doing that as kids was you know and then those chickens were very mean and those Roosters. Like I said, would go after. That's basically kind of what we're only actually there for I think for like a month or two, something like that. It wasn't very long because my dad finally, one of those Roosters kind of went after your aunt

and my aunt or my sister Moni. It kind of went. It was he was like the Bane Rooster, the one that kind of like, would you know? It was because of him that all the little, all the little chicken girls, you know, all the eggs were, you know. And anyways he went after Moni very aggressively because they can be very mean, very mean and Moni was just petrified and said, Dad, dad, this you know, it's like it's what I said and he's trying, you know, calm her down. She's like, no, he's very mean. And he's been doing it for a while and I can't get him to stop, you know, and I think he heard Moni. And so, my dad, you know, just got upset and went after the rooster. Just kinda like screaming at him, you know, trying to get him to stop, well the man, the owner of the ranch, saw my dad and got onto my dad. 'No, you can't do that to him. He's my he's our main one is because of him that. That we've got, you know, business,' and blah blah. And so immediately that's when my dad called my Uncle Mendoza and said, no, this is not working out. We can't as it is. We're not making any money. And then you know, and my kids are my kids are being, you know, they're being taken advantage of. I know.

I know one story that my dad told me. I just found this out real recently that your uncle, your uncle Tavo. You know, chickens, would chickens and hens would you know, they die on the property. And so that he made, the man made Tavo go around with a with like a wheelbarrow and collect all the dead chickens and. And so that was kind of traumatizing for Tavo because then you would you did, you'd have you know crows going around and you know, hovering over it and it's just it just it was very, it was very traumatic for Tavo, you know, and so. So, we did not last there very long. We went back to my uncle's house for a little while, and we actually lived in the hotel. And I remember this, we actually lived in the hotel for, I don't remember the time limit, but I want to say anywhere between 3 days and the weeks, something like that until we could try to find, you know, somewhere to live and. And my Uncle Mendoza helped my mom and dad try to find the trailer. Where they -- Mom and Dad still live to this day. So, they bought the trailer and yeah, it was, you know, it was very -- there's a lot of things that we went through that that you

know most you know. Most kids don't go through,
yeah.

Verdin: Yes, I know, my mom recently told me about how when
you guys left the farm, you had to kind of sneak
off in a truck in the middle of the night.

Cortez: Yeah. No, we went -- Because the man he was very mean.
He did not want us to leave. And because he had
free slave labor, you know, basically it's.

Verdin: Yeah.

Cortez: Is what it amounted down to it because even though he
was paying us, but then he was paying us for rent.
So, at the end of the day, he really wasn't paying
much for anything. He was just, you know.

Verdin: Indentured servitude.

Cortez: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. So, yeah. No, we had to. We
had to basically run away.

Verdin: After you guys left the farm, do you remember what
your parents did for work after that?

Cortez: I was the youngest one. I want to say the first thing.
Yeah, I'm like 100% positive that the very first
thing -- So, my Uncle Mendoza was a professor at

Stephen F Austin. He was very involved with the church, devout Catholic and so, Sacred Heart Catholic Church Nacogdoches. He knew that there was a lady that -- the same lady that that owned Continental Inn was Pollock. She had hired my mom the year before 1979 to be a maid. Well, my mom had left it to go work at, you know, at the ranch. And so, when we came back, my Uncle Mendoza just asked Miss Pollock, like, 'hey could she have her job back?' She's like, 'let me check and see. I think, you know, we hired somebody else. But let me just check and see.' And so I think the lady that they had hired that wasn't working out. So, they ended up, you know, bringing my mom back in. So, she got her job back. And my dad, you know, Mom and Dad didn't know any English. So, there's, you know. And it's a different world back then this is a small-town East Texas. It's not like it is now where you can find TV in Spanish anywhere you can find that pretty much any store that you can go to now. Even if you don't speak English. You can go to just about any store now and find somebody that speaks Spanish on the phone who picks, pick up the phone and somebody. There's

bilingual. It's just that's not a problem today. Back then it was a problem. There was, you know. And so, when simple daily tasks that you have to try to do to get it to get around it and be able to survive and do things. It was just a huge hurdle because they didn't, because of the English. So, they asked Miss Pollock like 'what about my dad?' She's like 'I don't really have anything for him.' And so, she talked to Dad and said what can you do? And he said, he lied, because he really didn't have too much skills and he goes, 'I can do anything well, you know, you name it I can do it all.' And so, he started just kind of telling her just to try to get a position. And she goes, 'oh okay. Well, you're going to start by sweeping the streets of the hotel, the parking lot. And, you know, so little, odds and ends job. So that's basically how my dad -- And so he made himself useful. He started by doing that by cleaning the parking lot of the hotel. My mom got back to cleaning and being the maid and then Dad. That was like I said, made himself useful as much as he could in Miss Pollock's house. Doing different things got an odd thing helping her out. Helping

them all the maids in the hotel helping them, bringing back and forth stuff of clothes and loads of the sheets and stuff, just anything that he can kind of do to so she wouldn't say no. Sorry. You know. So that's how that happened. And then but then we still weren't making it because we have that trailer payment. So, mom and dad actually got two other jobs, so at least at one time they were I know they were working two jobs. I believe at one time they were working three jobs. And so, my Aunt Moni, basically because she was the oldest female. She was basically the mom of the house. She was the one that was having to clean and cook and you know, and do those kinds of things and. And Lili and your Aunt Lili just wasn't. She's never really been to a kitchen person, so cooking or anything that was just not her.

Verdin: Oh, I know.

Cortez: And so and then Lili's very strong headed. So, it was basically left to Moni to kind of the responsibilities of taking care of us while Mom and Dad were working all the time day and night. Yeah.

Verdin: I was going to ask you about that. Yes. So, I was going to ask from moving from Mexico City to Nacogdoches, Texas in the '80s where like you said there wasn't a Mexican market on every corner. There wasn't people who spoke Spanish. So, your culture wasn't really accessible to you in those -

Cortez: At all.

Verdin: Yes, in those terms. So, I was going to ask in regards to diet. And just in general, how mealtimes changed during that time?

Cortez: It was incredibly hard, because the girls -- we didn't have a car. So, when we bought the trailer, and we got set in the trailer park in on Pearl St. in Nacogdoches. And so without having a car access because we just didn't have the money. The only way we could feed ourselves was to walk to Kroger, to go pick up groceries. It was either that or it was almost the same distance to go to like a little food Mart, you know, kind of gas station where you can kind of find. But there's really no food there. It's just stuff, junk. So, we had to walk to Kroger. We would have to walk over there and then

with all the groceries we'd have to carry them back. And it's just. I want to say it's like about two and a half, three miles. So, carrying and all that in your hands. It's just it's very, very heavy, milk, and all that. And I was little so I could only carry so much. So, especially my dad because he was, you know, he was the oldest and the strongest. He was the one having to carry most of it or time or whoever was able to go but, but I was so little I would kind of slow them down. So, most of the time that they go on those walks to the grocery store, it was my dad really, most of the time because Mom would stay home. And you know, if there was a day that they were off, that's when there's only time they would go to the grocery store. If it was a Sunday where they were off and that was another huge culture shock because East Texas Nacogdoches, 1980 I still vividly remember this, there was only about three items that you could get that were "Mexican." And that was beans, canned and sometimes you get them in the, you know, whole beans where you had to cook them. It was beans, rice, and tortillas, and tortillas were hit or miss. Cilantro took probably another year or

two for cilantro to kind of come into play, but there was no there was just nothing from our culture that we could buy at all. And so, it was all having to cook and eat American style. And cooking the best we could to try to replicate how we grew up and it was not close.

Verdin: And would you say that that's something that affected the way you approached your future life and your career?

Cortez: It affected me in the way that I saw Mom, and that's the way I took to this day. That's the way I took to this day is that I saw Mom make meals with very little, with what was in the pantry with having to modify things to go with 1, a low budget, a small budget, and 2, very small selection for the kind of foods that we were used to, the kind of vegetables that we were used to, the freshness that we're used to. And so, seeing Mom do that affected me because I could see her doing that and it was impressive to me. It was something that affected me in the way that I cook now because to this day that's kind of how I cook I don't cook with a recipe I just grab what's in the pantry and I can

make a meal pretty much out of anything with very little ingredients and make it taste pretty good with not much, yeah.

Verdin: With what you got.

Cortes: Yeah.

Verdin: And growing up in Nacogdoches, I know that you guys were one of the very few Mexican families there, especially in the '80s. Would you say it was hard to keep your culture up in this time because everything was new, and it was foreign to you? Would you say that it was hard to keep it alive? So to say.

Cortez: It was extremely hard to keep it alive because there was very few families for that kind of -- Little by little, over the years, more families started kind of moving in, so that made it easier and so as families were starting to come in, then -- because that would, there would be Spanish mass at Sacred Heart, but a lot those families we didn't know them but they lived in different areas. And so, you know and so we started becoming kind of friends with some of those families so that helped a little in the culture part of it. But Mom and

Dad were not huge, like social people as far as, 'hey, come on over,' because they just were not big drinkers or big partiers. 'Hey, come on over. We're going to do a carne asada and bring the beer.' It's just that's not the way I grew up. I didn't grow up like that. The culture of what we had as far as music and TV and being around people, friends, and family, that was a massive, massive change because how I grew up in Mexico City, everybody was outside. Nobody was inside. You knew all your neighbors. You walked everywhere and so you got to know people. And then coming to the US, where there was fences, and houses were far apart and you didn't know your neighbor, who your neighbor was. And if you said hi, it was. It's just that and everything was so spread out. And if you need to go somewhere you have to have a car. That was foreign to us because everything we did in Mexico scene was all public transportation was either a paset or a taxi or a metro. Or, you know, it was, you can get around by doing that without, you know, very few people had a car, you know, we didn't have -- You know, I think my uncle had a car. And then there was something. And we were big

family. There was only two cars in the whole family. It was just something you just didn't -- It was not required. So, That was a big culture shock in coming to the US and not and not being able to get anywhere unless you owned a car and not being able to talk to somebody because neighbors would kind of close the door, they come home from work and they shut the door and they had fenced in yard. It was just different and so. And so yeah, as far as culture that was huge. And again, like I said, it's not you know if we wanted Mexican music, you either owned the cassette or you owned an album. That's the only way you listen to Mexican music. There was no Internet where you can kind of -- And then if you turn on TV, you had to have a satellite dish to be able to get something from Mexico, from Mexico. That was the only way you could catch any TV from Mexico or any TV in Spanish. And unless you live close to Houston, maybe there'd be something, we'd get a little bit of that. I think we get one channel from the Houston area because Nacogdoches gets some of the Houston channels. And so, I think we would get one channel in Spanish, and so that's all Mom and

Dad could watch and but I want to say that took a while. That wasn't initially either. So, all those were things that kind of helped or hindered our ability to be able to live out our culture and besides and everybody that I went to school with spoke English. They were all American. And so, I didn't have anybody to kind of relate with that. I had to be able to speak to anybody. And my dad just recently told me that he came by and because I just thought because I asked him, you know, I asked him a question and he said I went to -- one day I was at work at the hotel and Miss Pollock said Valdo's sick. He was like, okay. And he knew she never. It was early on. It was like the first few months. You know, when school started back. So we got here in the summer. As soon as school started back. I don't know if it was a month in or how long it was, but. Dad is like I gotta go pick up Valdo and then, you know, at this time we had just got a car. We had just gotten an old beat-up clunker car. That was hit or miss whether it would go a mile or two, you know, we'd call it the cucaracha. And because it was just this old white, I think, I think Dad paid like \$200 for it. And I think they should have

paid us to take it over because it was horrible. Anyways, and it was, he went and got in the car and he came and picked me up and it was because I'd had an anxiety attack and I'd thrown up because of nervousness of being in the school where I didn't know anybody. I didn't speak the language. I was just, you know, I was just scared. And so they take me to the hotel and I just stayed there with them. For the day.

Verdin: So that was another question that I was going to ask you was, I know for my generation, just personally, that my generation is full of a lot of first generation kids, a lot of children of immigrants and even with us being born and raised in America. We're still bullied if we bring our cultural foods to school, like, oh, that smells weird. That looks weird. You're weird, was that something that you sort of felt in a way? I know it's not the same.

Cortez: Oh, I used to get made fun of all the time because, it's part of the culture, like I told you in in Mexico, you don't go eat out, you don't buy, you know, now there's like, lunchables and stuff like that. But even back then, there were foods for kids

that you could kind of buy for, you know, and kids would eat certain kinds of foods in the, in the cafeteria. I was the only one that had a container with home-made food from Mom. I was brutally made fun of and laughed at for those kinds of foods and I was very shy when I was young. I'm not shy now, but when I was little I was extremely shy and so that was just. I didn't understand why kids made fun of the fact that I just had food. It's just food. What's the big deal? But not only one, was it homemade, which is something that nobody did, but it was also, it was also Mexican, you know, home-made. And so yes, the same thing that you went through, I went through as well because I would get, I would get comments on that like that, you know. food as a...

Verdin: Food as a source of isolation?

Cortez: Yes. No. Yeah, exactly.

Verdin: And then moving forward as a teenager, I know that your brother's like tío Tavo, and them, they worked in the Mexican restaurant in town. Once you guys got a Mexican restaurant. And I remember, I think

my mother mentioned that you were a dishwasher I believe or?

Cortez: No. So basically this restaurant you're talking about is called Casa Tomas. And uh, Casa Tomas you can call it a Mexican restaurant, but it's a Tex Mex restaurant. You know, there's really nothing Mexican about it. I mean, except for the rice and beans. But even those are Tex-Mex there's a difference and so basically that restaurant played a huge role in our families, journey through being in Nacogdoches. Because that restaurant actually, my dad has worked at -- Did you ask what kind of job? And then remember I told you they had like 3 jobs at one time. Mom worked there for a time, very short time. My mom worked there for a time. My dad, your tío Cefe, your tío Cefe, my dad has worked there. Cousins. My brother Tavo, Lacho, Temo. A lot of people have run through that, went through that restaurant. And so that was really probably my introduction into the restaurant business is that my brother Tavo got a job there as a server, no as a bus -- he got there as job there as a busboy initially. When he was little, when he was young and in Casa Tomas. And then he eventually

became a server very quickly after that, he became a server. And so, once Tavo started working there because like I said, my different cousins have worked in there. Whatever, it was just kind of a natural fit for me to, when it was time for me to start my first job because I'm very independent. I do think I've always been very independent in what I do, and one of the things that I that I wanted to do was have a car. So, I started, so I wanted to start working. The only way I could afford to buy a car, my, mom and dad weren't going to be able to pay for my car. Mom and Dad were not to be able to pay for my insurance. Mom and Dad were not going to be able to pay for drivers ed. If I wanted any of that, I had to work. So, I spoke to Gary, which was Gary Gibbs was married to my cousin Anita Gibbs, which is Anita's, my uncle Mendoza's daughter. And I think Tavo, actually Tavo asked, Gary, 'hey listen Gary, you know my little brother wants to come on you know, can he come on?' And so, he said sure, I'll bring him on as the busboy. I was 15, it was actually illegal. You have to be 16. So, I've been in the restaurant business since I was 15. On and off, mostly on. There's been a

year here or a year there, but it's close to 40 years of being in the restaurant business. And so I came on as a bus boy there and was a busser there and then just like Tavo, my brother, I became a server. I was up to the server there and at the time that I was a server, my brother Temo was a bartender. Tavo was serving, waiting tables there. My brother Lacho was waiting tables there. My cousin Anita was there as a Hostess, and I talked to her as I talked your Hostess. And so yeah, that's kind of what got me into the into the restaurant business was Casa Tomas.

Verdin: Oh wow. Are there any memories from Casa Tomas that really stick out to you?

Cortez: The smells. This was one was probably one of the bigger -- One I loved, and to this day people ask me, you know you've been in it for so long. I honestly, honestly, truly do love the industry. I'm a people person. I've told you I was very shy. I was very shy. My whole life when I was younger, but once I kind of got a little bit more self-confident and started kind of just learning the language and just being, you know, a little bit

more, you know? Got comfortable in my own skin, I was able to, you know, to kind of break out of that. And working in the restaurant, having a job helped me to kind of break out of out of that shyness and talking to people and, you know, kind of seeing how people interact and how servers interacted and how bartenders interacted in the kitchen and all that. And it's always lively. The restaurant business is very, very, very hard, very fast paced. And I enjoy that. I enjoyed the kind of hustle and bustle of going and blowing. And then before you know it, hey the shifts over and then everyone would just going to get out together afterwards. And then that's kind of what happened. We would get together afterwards. And you know, once I became the server and we'd have beers and go here and go there. And it's just it's just kind of a lifestyle. That kind of draws you in and but me, being a people person, I enjoy talking to people. I enjoy finding out about people's lives and you know, you know, how are you doing and that kind of thing. And I honestly think that, you know, part of it obviously is to try to make money and if you know a lot of a lot of my experience has

been -- I've done I've done it all but a lot of it has been as a server and finding out the -- Talking to people. Learning how to talk to people at Casa Tomas has helped me through my journey and everything that I've done in my life. In all positions, in other positions that I've done. In friendships, in my relationship with my wife, in my relationship with my kids, all that started with Casa Tomas and the restaurant business and really getting used to talking to people, asking questions, learning how to listen, finding out about some people's lives and. And that was the thing of, I think it was big. They informed me a lot and he taught me a lot on how to relate to people and how to and how to build friendships.

Verdin: And --

Cortez: So, I don't know if I really answered the question, so my apologies.

Verdin: No yeah, you said the smells. But that was very --

Cortez: Yeah, sorry. But basically I guess what I'll say about the smell is because Casa Tomas, it was Tex Mex. And there's certain just like if you were to go let's say, let's say if you were working in a

seafood place. Obviously, your clothes would smell like seafood, right? Well, there was a certain smell to Casa Tomas, that you can ask the hundreds or even thousands of people that have gone, because it's no longer around, that have worked in that place and if you ask them, I'm telling you, let's just say 1000 people don't know if there's been 1000 people that have worked there. But if you were to ask those thousand people, what's the one thing you remember, about Casa Tomas. I would probably tell you that 995 of them would say that smell. That you couldn't get out of your clothes. You could not get that smell of chips and salsa and beans. And if there's just a Tex-Mex smell, that that not only soaked into your clothes, it soaked into like the pores of your skin, you could, and in your hair, you couldn't get, even after you showered and the next day you're like, oh, still smell like Casa. That was like, and I'm telling you, if you ask anybody that's, that's why I said that immediately because that's the one thing that I will never, ever ever forget about that Casa smell.

Verdin: Nice. I remember tío Temo coming home and smelling
like --

Cortez: You know that smell that I'm talking about!

Verdin: Yep, I would go up and I would run and hug him, I'd
say, hmm. I'm gonna back away now. Yeah.

Cortez: You know that smell and it's and it's just, it's just
and it was so strong and you couldn't get rid of
it unless you burned the clothes or got rid of
them. That's the only way you were gonna get rid
of that smell. It was horrific

Verdin: Yeah, I gotta ask tío Tavo now and see what he says,
but.

Cortez: But ask him ask ask tío Tavo and see what he remembers
about Casa. And I promise he's going to say the
smell. Now I don't know where he's going to rank
it, but it's going to be there.

Verdin: Yep.

Cortez: If not the first thing. Yeah.

Verdin: And then, later on in your adult life, you moved to
the DFW area, where you are now, and you became a
chef over here. What was that like? That move?

Cortez: Well, it was actually just, I don't want to make it too long of a story, but I got a degree in graphic design. Like I said, I've been in the restaurant business most of my life, but there was a spell here, and so I got a degree in graphic design. And so, the reason I moved to Dallas is because I got a job as a graphic artist for a for a magazine here, in in Lakewood. Called "The Advocate" and then to get to become the graphic artist. And so, I did graphic design there. For a little while and but I stopped. I stopped doing that because very long story, I don't want to get into it, but it basically had to do with my son Christian. The fact that my daughter -- my wife was a teacher, had been a teacher. But she left teaching so she could -- and she was going to stay home with Christian, I was going to be working as a graphic artist, but it's when you're straight out of school, especially out of graphic design. They pay you peanuts, pay you nothing. Nothing that a single 20 something year old person could live on. Especially nothing that a single 20 something year old can live on and support a wife and a kid. It was just wasn't - - We're not making it. My wife was working. My wife

Susan was working in a daycare for my where she was taking Christian and she was getting sick all the time because he was getting sick. Because it's a daycare. So anyways, long story short, I left graphic design because. We didn't want the only thing we had options of Susan going back to teaching and then I stay as a graphic artist during the day. But then Christian would have to be in daycare, and we were not. We didn't have any family here in Dallas to be able to drop them off at the you know a family, let's say my mom. But nobody could watch him. We didn't have anybody here, so it was either us watching them or we would have to take them to daycare or get a nanny. Nanny, we couldn't afford. Daycare, we couldn't afford either. But especially, and we just didn't trust anybody to take care of Christian. So that I did the natural thing. Susan went back to teaching. My wife went back to teaching. And I went back to the restaurant business. So that way she could work during the day. And then as soon as she came home from teaching, I would already be ready dressed to work. And basically, I would just tell her about his day because I was basically a stay-at-home Dad

during the day when he was young for many years. I would just tell her-- because back then there was no cell phone, so I would just tell her, tell her about the day, what he was doing, what he ate and good day, bad day, whatever. What happened during the day took him to the park, whatever and then. And so, I was working in Lakewood and I got a job at the and a Mexican restaurant in the in Dallas called Nuevo Leon, I got the job there as a server and then I was a part-time assistant manager there for a little while, but then the place burned down. Nuevo Leon burned down. And so, from there I went to Texas Land and Cattle, which is a steakhouse, and I worked for that company for 7 years as a server. And I did that for a long time. Again, Susan working and me taking care of Christian during the day and then she'd come home. You know, we did that song and dance for a long. We were kind of ships that pass in the night. We really never saw each other except on the weekends. We would never see each other. I mean, we'd see each other when we it was a drop off. You know come do the handoff. Like in track and field. Here's the baton boom. And here's the baby and. So, the restaurant

business has been good to me in that way that it could afford me the fact that I could stay home with my son and not have to worry about anybody else watching him or hurting him. And my wife being able to go back to school. There was very other little industries where I could go in. Work for about four or five hours and make the kind of money that I could make. As opposed to maybe, let's say, work a night shift at a factory. Where I would maybe go in at 8:00 PM and come home at you know, 6:00 AM or whatever. That wasn't going to work for us because then my wife would get up in the morning and go to work, and then I'd be dead to the world and not being able to take care of Christian so I could, the restaurant business afforded me that the opportunity to be able to work at night, make good money in a short amount of time and so basically all that kind of led to the fact that I left Texas Land and Cattle. And then I started working at a Silver Fox Steakhouse, as a server, again as a server. So, I was only there as a server for about a year and a half, two years, and then they offered me the position and said if I would be interested to go into as a manager and also a

chef in the kitchen and that's basically how that career started but. But yeah, can I just keep going. Is that good?

Verdin: No yeah, yeah.

Cortez: Okay, so, so. So basically, what happened there is I got a job as a server at Silver Fox Steak House. It's fine dining. I've never done fine dining before. Even better money than working, you know, even at Texas Land and Cattle where there were steaks, which is better money, because the more the more money they spend, the more money tips you make. And so, I did. I had a taste of that and taste of that at Texas Land and Cattle. So, when I finally got this job at Silver Fox I was like, ooh steaks, more money, better, good work, so I did that and so when they offered me the position. And they said, 'do you know anything about the kitchen?' I was like, 'actually, I cook every day of my life. I've been cooking my whole, you know, I just. It was something that always interested me in my I always wanted to. I always wanted to work or. I love cooking.' It was not a problem. And they're like, you know, 'do you feel comfortable

in the kitchen?' I was like, 'actually, I feel very comfortable in the kitchen. I'm okay with that.'

So I got a job as the AGM, the assistant general manager of Silver Fox Steakhouse in Richardson and then also I was the chef in the back, not executive chef because I had Ceaser as my executive chef. But I was one of the few people, actually probably to this day. Still probably to this day that I could really do anything in the front or back. Yeah. So, I was fully trained to be front of the House manager, inventory, schedules. Anything that had to do with front of the house and dealing with guests and everything that has to do with being in front of the House manager. But I could also do everything in the back of the house. You know? And so, I did both. You know, sometimes I will be front of the House manager. Sometimes I will be in the back as a chef and in the kitchen. Most of the time I was in the kitchen cause that's really where they kind of needed me. And so that was an amazing experience because I learned a lot. I knew how to cook already, but I don't know about different techniques. I learned a lot about the food, things that I already knew, but things that that I didn't

know. I learned how to do food orders and how to do a food cost, and it was just interesting and fascinating to work on the other side of the restaurant industry where I was, I was mostly working as a server, you know, going in, putting orders and then just seeing it from that end. But seeing it from the other end and seeing, seeing kind of how the other half lives, I guess you could say. I will tell you that both are very rewarding. Both, I probably had more fun in the kitchen as far as just fun to be able to enjoy and cooking because I love cooking. I enjoy doing that, especially if we would have, like chefs' dinners and I would come up with a recipe or come up with things to cook for somebody that, that again, I can cook on the fly and I can cook things, and somebody would come in and go. Hey, I've got a vegan. So, I came up with a with a vegan appetizer, vegan entree, and vegan dessert. Literally in about 45 seconds. It's you had no choice, you know. And so, that I enjoy it, you know, and then it pushes you.

Verdin: Just on the spot. Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Cortez: Just like this is the VIP and we need it. It's like, okay, well, let's see. And then I came up with a recipe of coconut crusted shrimp. Again, it was all just from my head that there was no book. It was just from years of experience of cooking at home and watching my mom cooking, watching my aunts cook and seeing all that. And I think there's just there's not only that, but there's also, it's a natural knack that I've got. That I didn't go to culinary school, but there's certain things that I know that spices go, when certain amounts go, when certain techniques go, that nobody, some were taught, and some are just I just know. I don't know how I can explain it other than I just know when to turn it or when to sauté it. And when to do certain things, and it just comes very naturally to me. And so, I enjoyed doing that. But I will tell you hands down without question, and I've done a lot of things in the restaurant business. I've been dishwasher, I've been a server. I've been a bartender. I've been a chef. You know, for the house manager, all that stuff. Nothing is harder than work in the kitchen, physically. Nothing, not even close. It was. It was exhausting. And

especially being the manager, there was just a lot of hours and a lot of prep and a lot of things that people don't realize that go on, in order for the show to kind of go on.

Verdin: Mhm.

Cortez: And many hours that I was there cooking and baking and prepping and doing things and then especially like on holidays. Because we, being a steakhouse, we opened every Thanksgiving. That's I think in the last in the last like 15 years last over the last 20 years because I've been I was gone for a couple years. So, in the last 20 years. I think I spent. Well, COVID happened, but so let's not count COVID if you don't count COVID, I think I'd spend one Thanksgiving with my family, like in 17 years, because I worked every Thanksgiving. You know Christmas Eve. I would come home, and it was there was no Christmas Eve because I was working and I'd come home and everybody was already asleep. And everybody you know. And I know when I would call home and everybody was kind of getting together and having fun and hey, we're hugging and I'm like, I'm dead to the world. I just came home and I'm

exhausted, you know? So, there's a lot of sacrifices. That come from working in the restaurant and I tell -- we have a lot of kids come through the restaurant business that I've worked, like let's say in the culinary program of their high school something like that. Or they're going to school, you know, to a junior college and they're in the culinary program and they want to come in and or even kids that will, that will come into the restaurant. 'Hey, I want to be a chef.' I don't ever want to put them down. I tell them how exciting and how great it is, but I also give them the reality of what it entails of being in the kitchen and what you know it's not cute and whatever. Like what you see on TV?

Verdin: Two sides of every coin.

Cortez: Yeah, it's very demanding and very time consuming and just know that if you enjoy holidays don't get in the restaurant business, yeah.

Verdin: Well, is there anything else that you'd like to share?
Any experiences, emotions, memories?

Cortez: Oh my gosh, I've got so many I wish. I wish I could.
I've got so many I met so many friends through the

through the restaurant business. I mean, I've seen everything from -- I mean, just craziness like crazy Mexican guy dishwasher that was going to kill somebody with a knife because that's where he came from. Yeah. And Victor Machado was a server and he was -- Victor was very strong and very built, but he missed. He came across a dishwasher that was from Mexico. That was from the streets. And this boy, this guy didn't play. And so, he got, like, the butcher knife ready to kill him, like, not playing around. And we're like, whoa, dude. Yeah. So, things like that that I'll never forget to. To the fact that the --

Verdin: Yeah.

Cortez: One of my greatest experiences, I love it because I'm a foodie and I'm a big, huge restaurant -- and I've always loved it. And I remember I was a server in Austin in a in a place called, Jalisco. I was a server there and I became a manager there for a little while too and but anyways I was a server there at the time and I got a call and they said. Hey, listen, there's some guy on the phone. He's coming over and he says he's, you know, he's coming

in a limo or whatever and but I don't know who he is, but he wants to come inside. Anyways, he's telling me all this stuff and I'm like, well, who is this guy? I don't know. So I get on the phone. I'm like, I'm sorry, who are you trying to bring? I mean, nobody knew him. Nobody in the kitchen. Nobody. But I did -- But you probably don't know, a lot of people still don't know, but he's basically one of the original -- Now you've got like, you know, celebrity chefs, your Gordon Ramseys. And you know, they're all over the place. Back then, you know, he's like one of the original celebrity chefs. But before TV and any of that, his name is Paul Prudhomme and Paul Prudhomme is basically he is a legend in Louisiana cooking. He invented blackening and he's you know. And if you've ever seen him very famous, big old fat. Anyways, Paul Prudhomme. So, I'm like, freaking like, going like Paul Prudhomme! So, I was so excited, so Paul Prudhomme came in and I waited on him and he wanted to try everything in the restaurant. And I was like, just like, just going goo goo and everybody was like, 'I don't know who this dude is.' So, things like that that. That

things like that will always stick in my mind in the, you know, working in the working in the restaurant that that I think has you know. Well, I will never forget, and you know, and it's funny because, you know my daughter has worked in the restaurant and as a server and as a Hostess, not for her. I don't think it's not. She's done it a few times, but she's not, you know. Sophie she's not going to continue restaurant. It's a little too hard, too much for her and it's very hard, very demanding, very stressful and. And if you don't, it takes a certain skill set. It takes a certain kind of person to be able to do it, and if you don't have it, you kind of know it. My wife was working in a restaurant for a little while, and that was just nuts. She just she left because she just she was like, Nope, can't do it. My son has been a server, has been a host and the server he's got a kind of knack for it. He's teaching now. But he's, you know, he's got a knack for it and he can kind of handle it so that. I guess one of the biggest things about it, about the industry, is that it has afforded me the ability to be able to raise my son and my daughter because I did both to

be a stay-at-home Dad. But it was different because the stay-at-home Dad position that I did when I did with them. It was different because I would kind of go to play groups with other stay at home dads. But it was different because all the other stay home dads, their mom, their wives were CEO's and doctors and lawyers. That's why they were staying at home. Because they, you know, I was staying at home just because I didn't want, you know, it was a different and so I didn't quite fit into that into that group. But it had afforded me the ability to be able to do that and to be able to raise my kids. And for my son and my daughter. To have the same level of care with me, as they did with their mom. Most of the kids are growing up, especially if they've got if they've got the Mom, that's raised them. They're really close to their mom, and they're close to me. They're really close to their mom too. But the ability or the gift to be able to spend the same amount of time. It was truly 50/50, when Susan and I raised our kids because, you know, I was with them for so many hours during the day, and changing the diapers, and feeding them lunches, and feeding them

breakfast, and watching videos, and going to the park, and go to the Children's Museum. And doing other things and all there was just moms all around me. And then if I did a group with a stay-at-home Dad, I didn't feel that. But it didn't matter. The matter of the fact is that I was with them. We knew they were going to be safe. And then I knew that she. So, Susan knew that when I was at home with them, they were going to be fine and I knew that when I was at the restaurant they were going to be fine because they were with mom, with their mom. But the great thing about it is that that that, that again, especially as a server I could stay there for a short period of time and go in at 4:00 or 5:00 be home by 10:30 and make more money than I would have made from, you know, working two shifts at a, you know, at a plant or something. So that that's one of the things that I that I probably enjoy the most about the restaurant business, is that it's afforded me the ability to do that and to put both of my kids through college and to, you know, have this house and it's just a lot of things that it's afforded me to do. It's very hard physically. I am just shot because of

the industry, my feet are gone, my knees are gone,
my shoulders are gone. But, and I'm still in it.
I'm still serving. I'm still a server in my 50s.
But I do it, I do it because I think, you know,
I'm pretty good at it and I and I love it.

00:55:36 Verdin: All right. Well, thank you so much for taking
the time and energy to talk to me.

Cortez: You're welcome.

Verdin: I know that we talked about a lot of stuff, that, you
know, very emotional periods of your life, very
traumatic periods of your life. So I really
appreciate you being open and talking about those
with me.

Cortez: No problem.

Verdin: Yes. So, thank you very much.

Cortez: You're so welcome. It's my pleasure.

[End of Interview]

