

Interviewee: Cook, Alison

Interview Date: October 23, 2010

Amy Breimaier – Hello. My name is Amy Breimaier; it is October 23, 2010. I am here at the M.D. Anderson Library interviewing Alison Cook. Will you please state your full name?

Alison Cook – Alison Cook

Breimaier – When and where were you born?

Cook – I was born in New York City in 1947.

Breimaier – Where did you grow up? Was it in New York City?

Cook – I grew up mainly in Vermont. My parents moved out of the city to Queens and then Long Island. And when I was seven, we moved to Vermont, where I stayed until I graduated from High School, in 1965. And came to Houston to Rice University, where I have stayed ever since.

Breimaier – And why did you decide to go to Rice University?

Cook – My dad was a Texan. And in those days, Rice had a reputation as being a free school. It was so heavily endowed by William Marsh Rice and those who came after, that there literally was no tuition, until the year I entered. But even then it was so reasonable compared to the fancy Eastern schools that I thought I wanted to go to. That they gave me a good scholarship and I ended up coming here and loving Houston and staying. Which I don't think was part of my father's plan.

Breimaier – What did you study at Rice?

Cook – English Literature and Fine Arts, Art History mostly.

Breimaier – What were your first experiences with the culinary world of Houston? Where you interested when you came here, or before you came here?

Cook – Immediately, fascinated. It was very exotic compared to Vermont. The restaurant scene was in its infancy, it really was primitive compared to what it is now, but still there were things that I had never experienced in Vermont. I watched my dad make Mexican food out of El Paso can tortillas and sort of enchiladas and that was very exotic to me and all of a sudden I was here and it was everywhere. And there were things like Texas toast, I remember we were all poor, so we went to something called *The Far East Frontier Steakhouse*. And it had steaks for something like a dollar seventy-nine, and it came with giant tumblers of ice tea, huge, that you could barely get your two hands around and enormous slabs of toast, and it was Texas tea and Texas toast, and I went, "this is some aesthetic that I'm not familiar with," and that was sort of the beginning of my fascination for things Texan.

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Breimaier – So did you go into journalism then?

Cook – Rice really didn't have a journalism program and my plan was to become a professor of English Literature, but that sort of, as time went on, and I took some grad courses, I realized I really didn't want to do that. And like many of my fellow students back then, when I graduated, like 1969-1970. We thought we were hippies and we were floundering around and not doing the career thing. I had no idea, how to start doing journalism, but I became an intern at an FM radio station in town for their news department, which was really excellent. And I met a lot of young journalists there that I still know some of them, they were very inspiring, and sort of got me doing documentaries for them. And they also, this was probably 1971-1972, they started something called the *Houston Journalism Review*, which was modeled on the *Columbia Journalism Review*. Basically, the idea was "we" critique the terrible old mainstream Houston media, which was pretty terrible. I mean, you know there was horribly sexist news departments at the TV stations and the papers were dismal, so there was a lot to critique. And we being young and full of ourselves felt we were the ones to do it. And I remember my news director at KAUM, said, "you know, don't you want to write something, for the review? And what could you write?" And I had an answer already.

What passed for restaurant criticism in the two daily newspapers drove me crazy. There was not a bad cup of coffee in town, not one, everything was fabulous. And the *Houston Chronicle*, where I work now and am the restaurant critic, for their "critic," they had tapped the executive secretary for the publisher. And her name was Mary K. Killburn. And she loved nothing better than a chilled fork to be delivered with her salads, that was the height of fine doing to her, and if you gave her a chilled fork, you were going to get great press. At the *Houston Post*, there were two dailies then, in the good old days. The man who did the restaurant "reviews," was the man who also sold the ads to the restaurants that appeared by his write-ups. And, I told my news director, "I'm going to write about these reviewers," and he said "you'll need to show how it's really done at a real paper." So, I did an elaborate flow chart and diagramed what percentage of their write-ups were about advertisers, and really it was a huge percentage, it was something between 2/3 and 3/4 of their mentions were about advertisers, and there was never anything bad, I mean, everything was good. So, I called Donald Dresden, who was then restaurant critic for the *Washington Post*, which in my youth I thought, "well that's a good paper, I'll call them." And he was very kind and spent really about 45 minutes on the phone telling me how he did it, that it was anonymous, that the paper paid for everything, how many times he went, you know, that it had nothing to do with advertising, that there was a "separation of church and state." And, you know, I wrote the story and it kind of caused a sensation. And the editor of the *Houston Business Journal*, after maybe a month called me, and said, "well, I read that story, and it sounds like you know what you're talking about," and I thought, yeah right (*laughter*). But, he said, "I'm starting a real restaurant review, it's going to be real criticism." And that was totally new to Houston, you did not say bad things, it was considered to be terrible manners to criticize anything in print back then, it really was, the papers were so polite,

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it was very southern, it was rude to say negative things. And he said, "I'm no holds barred," his first couple of people that he'd had in mind hadn't worked out, and he said "would you do it," and, um, yes. So, basically, Mike Weingart at the *Houston Press*, I always give credit for starting me on my career path, he just took a flyer on me, and Cook – basically they paid for my education. I started eating all over Houston, and the column was really popular. I did it for really a number of years, probably until I started working for *Houston City Magazine*. Maybe five or so years after I started the *Business Journal* column. And, it was anonymous, it was the HBJ Gourmet, a word I hate, but it was catchy, and at the time I didn't hate the word gourmet as much as I do now. And it was great fun, I learned to write, you know I learned to write a lead, I just taught myself pretty much, and I had a great editor, Bill Schadewald, who really encouraged me. And that's how I became a restaurant critic.

Breimaier – What year was that?

Cook – I am going to say, that it was 1972 or 1973.

Breimaier – Ok. Can you tell me a little bit about your first experience as a restaurant critic?
Going to your first restaurant.

Cook – Well, I do remember that for some reason I went to a very swanky New York style deli, owned by a guy named Ernie Krezez who was kinda like the P.T. Barnum of Houston restaurants. He was always doing these kinda flashy concepts that were based on like New York or Hollywood. And I remember liking the food, probably if I went today I wouldn't be nearly as impressed with it. I remember liking it, but having some negative things to say, and there was this enormous [pressure], you know, I think I must have been maybe 24. There was this horrible feeling of power that all of a sudden I could tell the truth about the food I'd been eating and been fascinated by in Houston. And, which I've proceeded to do.

Breimaier – And how was that review received?

Cook – You know, the first one, I don't think it was that bad. But I will tell you, before too long I had written a review about of a place that is still in existence, bless its heart, called *China Gardens*, it's downtown. And, it was truly I thought some of the worst kind of Chinese American food. Viscous, glutinous, sweet sauces, and lots of fried things, and I wrote a pretty scathing review. And the fans of *China Garden*, who apparently were numerous (*laughter*), I had not realized, banded together and hung me in effigy at a banquet. They organized a rally and banquet at the restaurant and literally hung me in effigy. And I sent my sister as a proxy, I didn't dare go, I kinda wanted to go, I was sorta proud and sorta embarrassed. But my sister and a friend of mine went. And my sister, she was a student at Rice at the time, and she had come with me on my initial visits and she came back from the banquet, and I said, "well how was the food," [and she said] "well listen, just as bad as when we were there" (*laughter*).

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Breimaier – Have you had any other experiences like that?

Cook – Well, you know, I've been kicked out of a restaurant just this last year. I mean, I think if you're fair, most people, not everybody, takes criticism well. I think I'm much fairer now than I was. It was so exhilarating to be able to say negative things in this environment of everybody must be nice. And I was so young and I wanted to kick up my heels, and it was much more fun for me then to write a negative review. Now I have the quality and mercy and I know these people put their hearts and souls into it and I feel bad if I have to write a bad review, I really do, it is not that fun event that it was for me in my twenties. I got sued at one point, for a very very bad review, that was much later. And it is not fun to sit through a libel trial.

Breimaier – I can imagine. Are there any particular qualities required, you think, to be a restaurant critic?

Cook – I think, a very keen, to the point of obsessive interest in food and restaurants, is really important. And I think a good palate, an educated palate. And I'm very lucky, I mean part of it's just natural ability, and I have my mother to thank for that. She had an unbelievable sense of smell and that's so intimately tied with your sense of taste. I still think that's the sense I use almost more than anything. The minute I come into a restaurant, it's about the smells. The worst thing to me, is when you walk into a place and you smell Lysol or cleaning fluid, or something. So, I think I had a natural palate. And then it's really just educating yourself, tasting widely in restaurants from the highest to the lowest. The interest, I mean that's really the requirement. I don't think you have to be someone who's gone to cooking school. Chefs would much prefer that they only be judged by other chefs, but I don't think you have to be able to make a movie yourself to be a movie critic, and I don't believe that [going to cooking school is] a necessary qualification.

Breimaier – How do you choose the restaurants you go to? I know you go to a wide variety.

Cook – For many years I've worked for magazines, I've essentially spent most of my life as a magazine journalist. And, you know, now we're *the* only daily left in Houston, so, there's a kind of almost official record keeping capacity for the restaurant critic, I think, of looking at the important new restaurants and also leavening it with small places and interesting places, places that are uniquely Houstonian in some way, or that represent some far-flung part of the dining culture. But, really the record keeping part means if a significant new restaurant opens within, say two, three, or more months, two is my minimum, I'm going to review it, even if I don't really want to. I just feel that that's part of the responsibility, to keep up with developments in the scene. And the rest of it is, I

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keep running lists. It kind of can be as easy as what interests me on a given week, or if I'm out in my car and I see a new barbeque place, and duck in, and it's fabulous, I'll rotate that to the top of the list. But I've been very lucky. I've never really had to work on an assigned basis, I'm really self-directed and my editors have always given me the latitude to decide what to cover and mostly, I haven't had any complaints, that's a good part of the job, I really like that.

Breimaier – What makes a restaurant uniquely Houstonian?

Cook – I think, it's that at any moment, part of our very complicated culinary tradition can pop out at you. I think we're so lucky that we have a cuisine here that is a combination of strains that you won't really find together anywhere else, [well] maybe a few other places in Texas. But, I'm talking about Mexican, I'm talking about Cajun and Creole from Louisiana, deep south cooking, either soul food or the kind of southern cooking you'll find in east Texas at church suppers. You've got the central Texas German and barbeque tradition and then you have the sort of western cowboy thing that intersects with the barbeque tradition. And it's all together combined with this extraordinary ethnic diversity that we developed, actually, I would say by the early 1980s, was when it first started to really bloom. The Immigration Act of 1965 really had huge implications for Houston, when they abolished the National quotas, because by the early 1980s, you had so many different cuisines, you never would have seen in the 1960s or 1970s. I remember the first story I wrote for *Texas Monthly*, where I worked for six years, was called "International Houston," and it was basically about eating all over the world in this one city, which at the time it kinda caused a stir, because people weren't thinking that there was a city in Texas where you could do all this. Dallas was really behind us in terms of ethnic cuisines and it still is. And there had just been this explosion here, you know, there were Ethiopian restaurants suddenly, there were things nobody had ever eaten before.

Breimaier – Is there any particular type of food that is your favorite? Or do you just like to try them all?

Cook – Well, no, I love everything. My dirty secret is that I am not fond of Japanese cuisine, which would get me drummed out by various gastronomes, I know. I love sushi, but the rest of Japanese cuisine that I've sampled has sort of left me cold. But Mexican has become my favorite in terms of comfort food. I go out of state and maybe five or six days in to my trip, I want it, and I crave it, and it makes me home sick, and it's the first thing I do when I come back. I still go to the *Spanish Village* on Almeda Road, which was the first Mexican restaurant I ever went to when I was at Rice and a student. And a Mexican plate cost \$1.15, plus they were always sort of liberal about letting students drink margaritas and they still have the most incredible margaritas, just very strange and idiosyncratic; where they freeze the lime, they squeeze fresh limes that they get from the valley and then they crush the juice so it splinters up and put in the tequila and triple sec. It's like this very crinkly, crispy, not slushy, I don't know how to describe it except

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that it's like drinking these tiny little super charged crystals of ice, it's fabulous (laughter).

Breimaier – It sounds good (laughter).

Cook – It's a frozen margarita that's not like anybody else's. But, they've been in business about as long as I've been alive, I think. Have you been there, it's on Almeda Road?

Breimaier – No, it sounds really, really good. You were talking about how the *Houston Chronicle* is one of the last published papers here and I know you run a blog, so how do you think that's changing the face of restaurant criticism?

Cook – Well, it's interesting. It's changed a lot of things, because for many years I very fiercely guarded my anonymity and I really do think that for much of my career that served me well. You know, restaurants, I don't think can change their cooking when a critic walks in. I get lots of bad food even when I'm recognized. What they can do, and they do, is vastly change the service, to the point where it becomes fawning and sort of objectionable and intrusive, and I really hate that. And they can also change your portion size; they can go out and pick the best piece of fish, and I know that, so you give up something.

But really the thing about blogging is that many critics now and food writers need to take their own photographs and once you have a digital camera in your hand at a restaurant, people know something's up and it's not the ideal situation, but it's what it is and I've learned to deal with it. I really think I'm at a point in my career where it almost doesn't matter. If I were young and just starting out, I think I would worry about it a lot more, but I've lived in Houston for so many decades and I've had different jobs where I was more in the public eye, where I went on television, when I was writing about politics and business and when I was at *Texas Monthly*, at one point I appeared in a TV commercial for them. And, you know, you go to parties, you go to cultural events, people point you out, you meet a wide group of people, so eventually people know who you are. That's the downside of living somewhere a long time as a critic if you want to be anonymous, the upside is you become more deeply rooted in your city and you understand it better. So, I think it's a trade-off, I bring a lot to the table now, I have a real depth of experience. I know the city incredibly well. Would I rather be anonymous now? Yes, I really would. I die when I'm recognized, it's so unpleasant for me. I think if the restaurants knew how I was squirming inside, they wouldn't send five people rushing up to check how I was. But, the blogging has changed it, even Rob Walsh at the *Houston Press* said the same thing. He said, "I've given up being anonymous, I can't really anymore, I'm a blogger now." He's taking photographs, he's interviewing restaurant owners for stuff. He's no longer at the *Houston Press*, he's actually going to open a restaurant now.

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Breimaier – Do you find that you’re publishing more frequently?

Cook – Yes, my workload has essentially tripled. And, that makes things difficult. I’m a slow writer. I’ve always been a slow writer and I like to really think about what I’m writing, and there’s very little time for any kind of reflection anymore, it’s push it out, push it out. I drag my heels, I think to the dismay of my editors, but I made a decision a couple of years ago that there was a point beyond which I wouldn’t go, no matter what the pressure was to produce copy. That if I’m not happy with it, if I don’t feel it represents, if not my best work, at least my very good work, I’d rather do something else and so far I’ve still have my job. I’m not as prolific as some people on the staff, but I think a lot of journalists right now are having to figure out where they draw their line. Rob Walsh felt that he was being pushed to produce so many blog posts that he wasn’t interested in

Cook – doing it anymore at the *Houston Press*. And, I kinda understand the impulse.

Breimaier – With the comments section, people can comment right away on what you’ve written, does that change...

Cook – That’s a blast, I love that (*laughter*). For so many years, I labored in a vacuum. You know, occasionally somebody would actually hand write or type a letter. But, usually it was when they were mad (*laughter*). So, you’d receive a letter and your heart would just kinda drop, cause you knew, every once in awhile it was nice, but usually it was the anger that moved people to write. And now you can get instant feedback, you can see what interests people. Some of it’s ridiculous and you just have to let it roll off, they’re a lot of angry people out there. But, to me it’s fun, I sorta like a good battle in the comments and there’s a perverse part of me, if somebody really insults me, it’s like alright, you know, you’re spelling my name right.

Breimaier – You’ve talked about Rob Walsh; what’s your relationship with him and other food critics in Houston?

Cook – Well, actually, it’s not as good as it once was. We sorta had our differences. He’s fun to debate with, for instance on the topic of iodine in Gulf shrimp, he loves it, I hate it (*laughter*). He’s a worthy opponent and I respect his work a lot. The others, I mean his replacement at the *Houston Press*, she’s really too new for me to tell. Who else is there? I get along really well with Pat Sharp at *Texas Monthly*, who was there when I was there, so we’re friends from way back when she was sorta directing the food coverage and I was the restaurant critic there. I know a lot of the food writers in Texas now because I’m on the James Beard Foundation’s Restaurant and Chefs Committee for the Beard Awards, which basically administers that part of the awards program every year that picks the best chefs and restaurants, so I have reason to be in touch with people from around the state.

Breimaier – What is your relationship like with local Houston chefs?

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Cook – You know, I try to keep arms length. I don't want to be friends with chefs. Eventually it's going to happen, because they're interested in the same things you are. Every once in a while you'll meet somebody. I had a very dear friend who opened the first Thai restaurant in town and she busted me immediately when I came back after [writing a review]. She didn't know until after I had written the review who it was, but the minute I came in, it was six months later and she went, "it was you." So, I broke my rule and became a friend of a chef, but generally, when they know me, it's like keep it friendly, but don't be friends with them. You don't want to pal around with them, there's the perception of bias and you just can't do that.

Breimaier – Yeah, I was going to ask, like the lady you were talking about with the Thai restaurant, if that makes it difficult to be a critic?

Cook – Yes, it does, it really does. And you don't want people to think that there's a bias. I'm trying to think of the right cliché, that the die is cast, or whatever, you just don't want to hang out with them. There are people who go and they do food events and do media events, I mean, food writers will do this. Who will be on panels or judge contests where there are chefs and I just will not do that. I just think it's inappropriate.

Breimaier – I noticed during some internet searching there are a lot of local food blogs that aren't affiliated with any newspaper or magazine, how does that change your profession?

Cook – Well, I think it makes things really interesting, because then you have a lot of interested palates out there kind of sending information back and you can find out stuff really fast. In the old days, I would literally have to get in my car and drive around town. I would drive for hours up and down the long commercial streets looking for new restaurants. Now there's a jillion bloggers and there's *Before You Eat*, which aggregates all the new restaurant information. And it's great for me, because it's data, it's data I can use. I don't know, it's fun to read them [blogs], I like that there are a lot of voices, I think it's good for the city's whole culinary scene and some of them are really good.

Breimaier – I know you have the burger section and your top 10, how did you decide what the special features on your blog were going to be?

Cook – You know, part of it is what's fun and part of it is a very naked calculation about what will get clicks, that's the horrible, cynical truth about the internet and online journalism now. I love burgers, I could see every time I wrote about them the comments exploded and finally after this had happened enough, I went, "there's this demand out there and I'm going to do it. I'm a little embarrassed, it's a little bit cynical to have burger Friday, but it's enormously popular. I've found I can't really do it every week the way I thought I could at first, because it'll just kill you to eat a cheeseburger and French fries and milk shakes every week. You know, some weeks I literally can't face it, especially if I've

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been eating a lot of meat, it's like I can't go and do it, but it's hugely popular.

Well journalism is reconfiguring and everybody is trying to figure out how we make money off the web, hits are just hugely important right now. And the top 10 thing, I always make fun of top 10 this or that (*laughter*), I almost did this as a joke, and then I realized people love it and I learned to build photo galleries, which I enjoy. It's kinda like mowing the lawn for me, it engages a part of my brain that isn't exhausted by writing. So you can build the gallery and boom, boom, boom, this is the cynic talking, you get say 16 hits instead of the one, because people page threw.

Breimaier – I also saw on your blog that you travel a lot. Is that part of your job or do you do that separately?

Cook – Part of it is just my own interest. It comes from my family really. My dad and mother, always when we went on vacation, when I was a child, I think my interests in restaurants stems from this, we would always go to at least one really good restaurant and it was a big deal, and we all looked forward to it. So, I remember sorta when the light bulb went off, this is what a restaurant can be was when I was about 15 and we were in New Orleans and my dad took us to *Antoine's*, the very old-line Creole restaurant in the French Quarter, where the mystic was you had to have a certain waiter who you would call for a table and he would take care of you. Well, we went and I had this amazing food, and I still remember the meal very vividly. We had oysters Rockefeller and it wasn't the Rockefeller with spinach, it had an almost parsley like, persiade on top, with bread crumbs and parsley. And they were on the half-shell, I had never had a baked oyster on the half shell, they were fantastic. And I had a little turnadose of beef with merchan-de-van sauce, which was so deep and sort of intense and red winey and profound to me, I mean I never had a sauce like that. And little potatoes, soufflé potatoes, that were like little blimps, they fried them so they puffed up, like little dirigibles. And I could not believe it, they were like magic, this whole meal to me seemed magical and transporting in a way that I still remember. Maybe ten years ago I went back and had the same meal and it was just nowhere as near as good (*laughter*) and part of it was me and part of it might be the restaurant. But, that to me was the moment that I fell in love with restaurants, seriously.

So there was that travel tradition and now I'm very lucky to be involved in the James Beard Foundations Restaurant Committee, because we make it a point now to meet in different cities twice a year, or maybe three, because we want to familiarize ourselves with cities outside of New York, for years that was a criticism that the awards were too New York centric. So a lot of my recent travel has been that, but sometimes I'll just go because I want to go to a restaurant. A friend of mine, who's a wonderful food blogger, though he's fallen off lately, but a great palette, Mischagofsky, he's in software, he has a software company, had a reservation at *Noma*, in Copenhagen, which recently

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surpassed every restaurant in the world on the San Pellegrino list, which I always thought was a joke, but it turns out it's not, they consult reasonable critics for it. Before it was named the number one restaurant in the world, he'd really gotten interested in it, he'd been last year, and he had a reservation, they are almost impossible to get now that it's been named number one. But, he said, "do you want to go to *Noma* in June," and I went yes, and it turned out we had a table weeks after it just exploded. Basically, I went to Paris and Copenhagen really so I could eat at *Noma*.

Breimaier – Wow.

Cook – And it was worth it, it was the best meal I ever had. And I'll do that, it's sorta my job, but I have an awful feeling I'd do it anyway (*laughter*).

Breimaier – How did you become involved with the James Beard Foundation?

Cook – Well, there was a period about seven years ago where the Foundation got involved in a financial scandal. Their president had been embezzling money for years and it was a terrible scandal and a lot of people resigned from their Restaurant Committee and they were sort of decimated. They always tried to have critics from all around the country and there was a Dallas critic who had been on the committee for years, and her paper said, "you got to leave," and really they were looking very hard for people in the various regions. And they called me and at first I was very dubious, because the scandal was not good, it was really distasteful what he had done [the president], and you just had to think what kind of foundation could let that happen, he was appropriating so much money for his own use. But, I was assured there was a new board of directors, there were lots of changes that were happening, that it was going to be impossible to happen again, and there were people I knew on the committee, whom I respected, who were urging me to join it and I finally thought, you know, I guess I'll take a chance, because I believe in what they are doing and maybe there's a chance to help it get back on its feet, it's been interesting. But it's back on a good basis I think. And I've enjoyed it and it's given me a really interesting perspective about dining scenes in the rest of the country and really how lucky we are here.

Breimaier – What do you think is, since you've been around the country, the most unique thing about Houston?

Cook – I think it's all those strains combined with the ethnic diversity and the way it keeps combining and re-combining. Places like *Reef*, for instance, where Chef Brian Caswell will do a beautiful gulf fish dish, he's one of the main people responsible for turning people's attention toward species that aren't the holy trinity of red fish, flounder, and snapper. Although nobody eats red fish anymore, cause we over fished them. But, he's

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done that and he's presented things in a way that very neatly ties up strains, like southern, he's got a fish on greens with pecans, it's a very southern kind of presentation, and then he'll throw in an Asian touch, and it's not that kind of applied fusion, that goes, "look at me, I'm fusing," it's the kind of thing that he's eaten because he's a Houstonian and he loves Asian restaurants. Or, he has somebody on his line who may be Vietnamese or Filipino or something, who'll say, why don't we try this? It's that kind of fusion, it's grass-roots from the bottom up, not that top down, "let's see if we can do Mexican Italian food," that kind of cooking that gave fusion a bad name back in the 1990s. It's a kind of Houston fusion that seems almost off-hand and natural and right to me. And that's something that I think we have that a lot of other cities don't have yet.

Breimaier – Since you've been a restaurant critic for a long time, what are some of the major trends that you've seen?

Cook – Well, really, one of the starkest to me is the development of wine drinking. When I first came, believe it or not, you couldn't buy liquor by the drink. You had to brown bag and purchase some bogus membership in a club at a restaurant in order to be able to drink, and believe me people weren't bringing bottles of wine, they were bringing whiskey, the hard stuff, and the restaurants would give them mixers. I wonder what year that changed? I know in 1965 we were still...and it made it very hard for good restaurants,

Cook – because so many restaurants get their profits from wine and beer sales, or cocktails, and at the time you basically couldn't do it, you had to go through all that club rigor mural and then people brought their own, so it wasn't a profit center for you. But when that was over turned, sometime in the late 1960s, it really freed up restaurants to develop here [Houston], on the upper end and even in the middle sort of spectrum.

Breimaier – Have you seen an increased role in female chefs?

Cook – Not as much as I'd like. You know, they're there, I even wrote down their names, because it's something that has bugged me. But really there were few and I can't remember anybody back in the 1960s. The women in the Houston restaurant scene that I remember most vividly from the late 1960s, early 1970s, was the waitresses at the old *Maximes*, which was a very good French restaurant, this was back when it was in its old location, which was Foley's parking garage, I guess it's Macy's now. And you would go in there, and there were these women, I'll never forget them, they were sort of awe inspiring and a little fierce and frightening and had very sensible shoes and they would sort of stomp around. I remember once my sister and I were in there eating dinner, I was going to review it, we had some crepe suzette or something and the waitresses did it at tableside, that was really the old-fashioned way. And her napkin caught on fire and she just threw it on the ground and with her big sensible shoes stomped it out, just like that, Melissa and I were just agog, it just seemed sort of heroic and wonderful and absurd. But those were really the women I remember, those women and Mrs. Brenner.

There was a steakhouse, that still exists, now it's owned by Landry's and it's nothing like it was, but it's out on the Katy Freeway. And Mrs. Brenner and her husband

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had opened this steakhouse in what looked kinda like a log cabin and her husband had made a beautiful diorama, like full size, in a garden with a working water wheel and all these facades of houses. It was like when you were little and your parents would take you to fairy land or story book city, it really was magic. And they had a wall of windows that you could look out on and see the waterwheel and this town, and they made these amazing steaks, and Mrs. Brenner ran that kitchen with an iron fist. I had a boyfriend at one point who worked for her in high school and he said she was just as no nonsense as she appeared to be, to the point that her busboys once took a baked potato, wrapped it in foil, and as a prank stuffed it in the tailpipe of her car (*laughter*). But Mrs. Brenner was the female I remember from back then, there were very few women involved in the restaurant business.

There was a couple that ran the *Confederate House*, Gordon and Betty Edge, and Betty was a real part of that restaurant management team, but they [women] were scarce. I really was thinking last night, who were the first women chefs I remember. Elouise Heatherly, who is now Elouise Adams Jones, Heatherly was her married name, back when she first started *Ouisie's* over near Rice University. And that was very unusual to have a restaurant owned by a woman and she kind of acted as the chef at first. She will have chefs-de-cuisine, but she's a marvelous cook, her sister is too, her sister is a cook book writer, [who] does not live here, but they are amazing sisters. That restaurant was a sensation. That's the first really high profile restaurant I remember a woman owning here, except for *Arno's*, and the chef was Janice Beeson, I think she grew up in Bellaire. And she did very refreshing, simple Italian food, quite unlike anything in town and it was hugely popular. For a while she owned what is the *Daily Review* now, but Janice was an early pioneer. There was a woman who came up from catering, which was one way women entered the restaurant world, it was the traditional way. A woman named Mary Nell Reck worked with some of the tonier membership clubs in town and she ended up running a restaurant with Manfred Jachmich, called *Café Moustache*.

I was trying to think who else I wanted to mention. Kathy Ruiz, who's had an interesting career in Houston. She started out, she had her own restaurant, over where Monica Pope first started out, where *Zimm's* wine bar is now, on Montrose Boulevard, right south of Richmond Avenue. And she eventually was hired by Tillman Fertitta to be the executive chef for the entire Landry's corporation and that's a huge thing for a woman. I mean she's at a corporate level now, and that's rare, so she's had a very unusual career. And you know, there are more women now.

And Ninfa Laurenzo, who entered the restaurant world, kinda the way a lot of women I found do, something happens to the husband, and you gotta earn money, and Ninfa had a restaurant. Irma Galvan, same deal at *Irma's*, her husband was killed and it's like, "what do I do now?" Ninfa was such an iconic figure right from the beginning, people really responded right to her food, and it was such a cult, really right off the bat. It was part of that going to that part of town that was a little bit of the slumming thing, people were like, "oh we're going to the east end," where I live now (*laughter*). But, part of it was just her food was so vivid and elemental and beautifully made, right away, people loved it, and the hand-made flour tortillas. That was really Houston's first experience with Mexican food that seemed really soulful and beautifully made, rather

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than sorta something you would get at your local Tex-Mex joint, where the salsas were really carefully thought out and the tortillas were not out of the package. There really was not very much interior Mexican food back then, there were a few taquerias, but that's totally a development of the last twenty years. But those are kinda my names of women who really stood out for me, I mean, there's a good list of women chefs now, but I still don't think there's enough. I mean, if you look at the line in most high profile restaurants, it's all male, it's still a boys club, and they act like it's a boys club. I mean there's really very much of that Anthony Bourdain, you know, towel snapping, profane, drug taking hijinks and it's not particularly female friendly, I don't think.

Breimaier – Do the women, when they come into the culinary world here, what do they do differently than the men, to avoid that boys club or to deal with it?

Cook – You know, I don't know. I think they keep their head down and do their work. You don't see them doing this crazy braggadocio thing on twitter that the guys get into. They don't go all molecular and "look ma I'm innovating as hard as I can, look no hands." I think they tend to be more pragmatic and truer to their roots in a way, oh this is going to get me into trouble (*laughter*), but you know, this is a generalization. Well maybe a little truer to their roots than men are. It's interesting to me that it's always been okay for a woman to be a pastry chef, but it's not quite so okay for her to be running the entire kitchen, unless she has a lot of women working for her. Anita Jaisinghani came up from the very high echelon ranks of pastry chefs, she worked at *Tony's* and now she has *Indika*, her wonderful contemporary Indian restaurant on Westheimer Road, so she made the leap. Her desserts are still magnificent, but she had plenty of other stuff to offer, and Cook – to offer it she had to start her own restaurant.

Breimaier – Where do you think Houston's culinary scene is going, or where do you hope it will go?

Cook – That is an interesting question. Right now, I'm really hoping that the city will finally recognize how important our food scene is and start trying to ease some of the over regulation that has kept for instance a very rich food truck scene from developing here the way it has in Austin and Portland. That again is a way to let people in at the ground level who might not be able to open their own restaurant and I think that can be a real entrée for women if they ease some of the regulations. There is a completely nutty rule that makes people in trucks every night have to bring their trucks to a central commissary to be completely cleaned. Well, okay, let's start inspecting restaurants every day. You know, that seems ludicrous and unfair. You're adding two, three, maybe four hours to an already killing workday, it's nuts. I mean, that's the kinda thing I'd like to see the city sorta get rid of. And the rule that says there can't be seating near food trucks.

Breimaier – I didn't know that.

Cook – I mean, I love the food truck movement cause it's bottom up, it's not top down and a lot

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of things can happen. So that's my current hope for the future, I don't have any predictions.

Breimaier – Too dangerous (*laughter*). Are there any particular topics you would like to discuss?

Cook – Let me see. You know, one thing that's interesting to me is, for instance, I'd kinda like to talk about Monica Pope, who I think has been a really important figure in Houston. She was really almost from the first very political and ethical in the way she looked at food and she really I think pioneered the local movement at a crucial point. And a lot of the guys that are now all local, local, local, owe a debt to Monica and what she did, really when she opened *t'afia*, that's when I think it became really obvious what direction she was going in. I think it's interesting that it was a woman who saw that and acted on it and started even doing those amazing cocktails and ratafias with local fruits. She had the first bar with artisanal cocktails, she and her partner, Andrea Lazar, also a woman. The more I go along, the more I respect what those woman did. I think that was a real turning point for Houston. And, Anita Jaisinghani, I didn't realize this until recently, at *Indika* is just very quietly serving only ethically raised meats. It's funny, I'm not saying men don't get the politics of food, they do, but it's been interesting to me that women maybe started getting it and doing it, acting on it first in Houston.

Breimaier – Have you seen, I know you talked about Monica Pope, and I know she does the local farmers market, more chefs getting involved in that?

Cook – She's been a model for that. You know, it's wonderful. When I went to the first City Hall Farmer's Market the Wednesday before last, I saw Chris Shepherd out there and I saw Randy Evans and Monica with samples of their food and talking to customers, I thought really we've come a long way. And I really think Monica was the beginning of that movement and I think most of the chefs in town would tell you that too.

Breimaier – Anything else?

Cook – I'm trying to think, is there anybody I was thinking of. You know, one thing I think is interesting that I realized when I was looking at my list of women chefs, was in the area of Mexican food there's been a really strong tradition of women restaurateurs and chefs in Houston, almost more than in any other kind of food I can think of. You look at *Ninfa*; you look at Tila Leach Hildago, who's had *Tila's*, a very long-standing Mexican restaurant on Shepard Drive. *Bocados*, that is like almost a quarter of a century old, the partners are Terry Flores and Lily Hernandez. You have Silvia Casares, who has *Sylvia's Enchilada Kitchen*. You have Irma Galvan and one of Irma's friends now has the very good little taco house, *Chilosos* in the Heights, which is just this wonderful place. There just seems to be this very, very rich strain of woman owned, or chefed

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restaurants in this town.

Breimaier – Do you think it's cultural?

Cook – I don't have the answer to that, I really don't know, maybe it is.

Breimaier – That is interesting. Are most of them locally based and raised here?

Cook – Yeah, or the valley. Sylvia's from the valley, but they all ended up in Houston.

Breimaier – That's interesting.

Cook – Well, I can't think of anything else, I will the minute I walk out (*laughter*).

Breimaier – Alright well, thank you so much for letting me interview you.

Cook – You're welcome.

