

Interviewee: Gutierrez, Nicholas

Interview Date: October 16, 2010

JY: All right, this is an interview with Nick Gutierrez, manager of Katie's Seafood Market conducted by Jennifer Yucra at 10:30 AM on October 16th, 2010.

NG: My name's Nickolas Gutierrez. I'm the manager of Katie's Seafood Market.

JY: So where were you born and where did you grow up?

NG: I grew up on the island (*Galveston Island*) for most of my life and then I moved to Santa Fe Texas and went to High School over there and went off to college and found my way back to the island.

JY: what were you majoring in?

NG: In college? I got a general business degree.

JY: When did you begin working at Katie's?

NG: I started working there when I was 14 – I'm 27 now – so all during high school I came down there on the weekends and every summer all throughout college also.

JY: So what were your duties when you were 14?

NG: When I was younger? I was general labor.

JY: Oh, okay.

NG: So I'd help unload boats, pack orders, cut up fish, the retail - help out with the retail...you know, anything they wanted me to do, I'd do.

JY: Okay. Did you always want to work at Katie's or in the seafood industry?

NG: Hmm...No. I mean, when I first got the job I loved it but then I always told myself I was going to find something else to do but then when I was graduating from college my dad asked me to come back to the shop and I told him I didn't want to come back – I wanted to do something on my own and get away from the family business and he's like, well, just give it a year and if you're not happy...do whatever you want to do...and I've been running the place for a little over three years now and I'm happy with it.

JY: That's good.

NG: So, I'm not going anywhere.

JY: So no plans to move on? So, what are some of your earliest memories of seafood?

NG: Working there or just eating it?

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JY: Just in your family.

NG: Oh. My grandma frying up shrimp, but also, before we had the fish house my daddy used to do –you know - commercial fishing trips – he’s a commercial fisherman so the coolest thing is when I was really young, I was ten or eleven, I’d go down to the docks when he’s unloading his boat, he paid me to help unload the boat so I’d jump in this big ice-hold and help unload the boats, so that was my earliest memory with the seafood stuff.

JY: Ok. Did you ever consider being a commercial fisherman?

NG: At times I have but never ever seriously. I don’t like...I don’t like going fishing. I get seasick really easy and it’s just not something that interests me. Going fishing - I don’t have the patience for it – even fishing off a pier or anything like that. I don’t have the patience for it. My dad loves it, my two younger brothers really love it, they love going fishing with him but I just don’t like going out on the water and getting seasick all day. It’s just not really appealing to me.

JY: I can relate. So, what’s your favorite seafood dish?

NG: That I make? That’s probably...Shrimp brochette – you get a big shrimp and you wrap it with jalapeno, cheese and bacon and put it on the barbecue pit. It’s my favorite – it’s not good for you though.

JY: Well, no. Yeah I think all the restaurants are coming up with versions of that right now, everyone loves them. So, what is it like to work in a family run business?

NG: It has its ups and downs – I like being the boss. I don’t think I could go work for somebody else, having them breathing down my neck, telling me what to do all day. It does get stressful when it’s - a lots going wrong all at once and you’re the one who has to answer all of the questions and make all the decisions and get it done. Plus, everything kind of revolves around the fish house in our family so that’s a lot on my shoulders too – getting all that taken care of. But, you know, I like the job. I mean, I don’t - I don’t really see myself doing anything else...that’s what I want to do.

JY: Really - do you think there’s more pressure since everyone **is** involved in the fish house – for you to perform or do you feel it’s just...(waves hand)

NG: I know I’ve got a lot of responsibility but I don’t worry about...worry about...well, **now** I’m not worried. You know, I was worried when the BP oil spill happened.

JY: Right

NG: and I was worried after Hurricane Ike – like what was going to happen but, (clears throat) you know, I got my dad to help me with all that stuff, you know - he’s been doing this a long time. When it comes to big decisions like that, he takes care of that and I pretty much just run the operation.

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JY: So it must be nice to have family to rely on when you've got crazy things going on like that.

NG: Oh yeah 'cause I can't – he's been through way worse than that, so it's nothing to him.

JY: Ok. So, just some questions about Katie's – When did Katie's open?

NG: I think it was...February of 1998.

JY: Okay. And why did your family decide to go into seafood retail?

NG: Well, my father was a commercial fisherman and he was selling to this **big** company and...everybody was sick of getting ripped off by these people – they gave bad prices and all this stuff – so he was unloading at this little place – he switched places – and he heard they were going to sell it, so him and my uncle got together and opened up the fish house so they could buy their own fish and sell it.

JY: Okay...and do you know any of the difficulties when they first opened...and the successes?

NG: Yeah. My uncle had a tough time getting in the industry because, you know, he's a new fish house - he's trying to take boats away from other fish houses so...

JY: Right

NG: They pretty much declared war on him at first, trying to get the boats and all that stuff but he stuck through it and...got us to where we are today because he didn't give up on it and stuff.

JY: So when it opened, was it selling to individuals or was it doing supplies to other companies?

(Background noise)

NG: Oh it was both.

JY: Both?

NG: Yeah, because it had retail before so we did our retail operation and wholesale operation.

JY: I know some fishermen used to sell right off the boat – did your father use to do that?

NG: No – his loads were too big.

JY: Right.

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NG: You know, it's okay for a little bait...bait or bay fisherman who catches not that much to sell all their load off the docks but when they come in with a bunch of shrimp, they only peddle a little of it and the rest goes to the fish houses.

JY: Right. So...why don't you run through a typical day at the fish market?

NG: Well, a typical busy day – a typical day when a boat unloads – well, I usually try to wake up at 7 in the morning. start getting ready and everything and my phone starts ringing...while I'm at the house, you know – seafood buyers calling me while I'm trying to make breakfast and stuff – “what've you got coming in? You got fish? blah blah blah - what are you going to have for me?” (*spoken in another voice*)

And, you know, I just tell them what I think is going to happen for the day. Go on about my business – make my breakfast, get to work. I walk in there – my guys are setting the retail up, putting ice up on there (*the stands that hold the fish*) and stuff. The captain's usually sitting in the back dock – we're not unloading yet...we wait until we get everything set up first in the morning. While they're doing that, I talk to the captain and I try to get an estimate of what he's got on the boat for fish 'cause (*clears throat*) we don't have enough room in the fish house to unload **all** the fish...and then have it in boxes just sitting there – we kind of gotta unload at the same time we pack so, I get an estimate from the captain and then I call my whole sellers and I tell them what I **think** I'm going to have and then I'll...I'll partially fill their orders and then that gives me a little playing room with the last amount of fish I've got to fill the orders but, while that's all going on I call the fish buyers and tell them my prices and all that stuff and I try to coordinate...what's going where and when my driver needs to leave. We've got New York trucks that pick up – I've got to coordinate when they're gonna pick up the fish, how many pounds they can stick on the truck...that kind of deal. And then I call my people I ship fish to on the airplane and see what they're looking for...try to get the fish out when they want it out. So, it's pretty much like chaos until we get all the fish sorted out and...we get the boat unloaded – I get all my tallies straight and we have to...for most of the fish that we unload we have to report to the government so, I get the captain and we go over all the paperwork - look at it and make sure everything's good and then they have to – I have to put in all that information that the captain brought in to the government, and then the captain has to check all that again and put in his pin number and that gives me a dealer – a federal dealer landing number – that goes with the fish so I use that number when I send out the fish that, you know, this fish was landed by this guy, at Katie's Seafood - that's where it came from so people can trace it back.

JY: Right, right.

NG: So, I do that. And, you know, while that's going on we've got restaurants calling asking for their orders – you know, I put those in with the ice...the retail's running – my guys are doing that also at the same time and I'm always trying to collect money during that time. And then paying people off, paying off other captains – I'm always doing that. And...trying to stay on top of everything so it doesn't get out of hand. And so I pretty much get out of there – it depends how busy we are, how fast we get it cleaned up, you know. Sometimes I get out of there like six, sometimes like seven thirty. But it's usually six I get out of there. And...I usually go to the gym but sometimes I'll have the fish sitting there after we close and the refrigerated truck won't get

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there until like ten o'clock at night so...I might have to run back down to the fish house and load up that big truck. But it's no big deal – you know, I live...five minutes away from the fish house and that gym is only...eight minutes away so, it's no big deal for me.

JY: That's good. So about how many boats do you deal with?

NG: That's...about six or seven shrimp boats and then about...about eight commercial fishing boats. They come early and unload their fish.

JY: And they only deal with you – I mean, they don't go to other fish houses?

NG: The shrimpers bounce around sometimes but the fishermen pretty much stay with me.

JY: Okay. How many restaurants do you supply?

NG: I don't have the number...it's quite a bit.

JY: Quite a few?

NG: Yeah.

JY: Are they all on the island?

NG: Yeah, all my restaurants are on the island. I try to stay out of Houston 'cause a lot of my other – the people I sell to...sell them to Houston so I'd be taking their business.

JY: Right, right.

NG: But I do supply a lot of the restaurants on the island with certain products – mainly just snapper. That's what we mainly unload so that's what they want. We get it to them the cheapest and the fastest.

JY: That's good. How did Katie's start – like did it start supplying the restaurants as soon as it opened or did they cultivate those relationships?

NG: I think, in the early days my uncle, you know, started that up - just thought that'd be good business. I don't think we did it in the very beginning – the restaurants – it just kind of happened and we started getting into it.

JY: Okay. How has the business changed since you opened it and have you made any changes while you've been running it?

NG: My changes? Or, since I've taken over?

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JY: Well, since it opened how do you think it's changed and then, have you made any changes since you've been running it?

NG: Well, (*drums on table*) yeah...it's changed a lot, I mean, a long time ago we would have boats unloading at one in the morning and stuff 'cause it was a different kind of season they'd have...and the fishermen only had like ten days to fish...every month so they come in at all hours of the night and the guys would be getting there late, early in the morning packing fish and then getting back...going back to work at eight in the morning and it was chaos. I remember being there at work and it's like, Jesus, are we ever going to get done with this fish? Is it ever going to end? We always made it through the season...it was just chaos and I don't think our retail was taken care of right, you know, because we had so much fish going on and these guys packing fish, having to help customers, that kind of deal. My uncle was – he wanted every market, he just wanted to be the biggest but, he wasn't very organized. He had his papers scattered everywhere...he'd work his butt off but he'd also go drink - go to the bar after work or he'd have a bottle of whiskey under his desk or something like that – get drunk at work. And...sometimes it sucked working for him if he was in a bad mood – he'd just take it out on you. But I never quit, I wanted to when he was a dick to me but I never did. And my cousin Jennifer came down, she...came down and helped my uncle with the office...she came down from Minnesota and she was a really good worker – she just liked to stay on top of things and keep them organized. He was telling her what to do at first but then it just kind of...she didn't want to do what he said because she was just – she knew everything he was doing wrong and all this stuff and told my dad and...they just didn't get along – they started clashing and he ended up quitting and she took over the fish house. She did a real good job keeping everything organized – she had a really good system going but... she wasn't a people person. Some of my employees just dreaded going up there and talking to her because she was real mean to them. There were other seafood buyers who didn't like dealing with her because of her attitude and stuff. She'd...she had problems outside of work and she'd bring them into work, you know – that's what it seemed like. She wasn't happy on the island but she was a really hard worker. She got the business turned around financially when she was working here - going to school at the same time she got a master's degree. And since she got her degree, she (*laughs*) escaped back to Minnesota and that's when my dad called me because he had nobody else to run the shop – he wasn't going to do it. So, since I've taken over...I've made mistakes here and there. I'm not super organized like she was – I've gone through a couple of secretaries and...they're family members so it's kind of... telling a family member what to do all the time is just...I don't know, I don't really like having to deal with family members and all their problems all the time like “Oh, I've got to go do this...my daughter..blah blah.” So, I'm on the right track now with the organization and I'm good at dealing with people and just getting stuff done. I don't like to argue or anything, I'm a pretty good salesman...I've got a good system going with our fish. Right now, it seems like we don't even have enough fish – I've got so many customers. So, I'm doing good and everybody seems to be happy they're my employees...and the fishermen, and the seafood buyers and my pop's happy, it seems like. So, I think I'm doing a good job – you know I'm not perfect. I know I get there late but, that's what you can do when you're the owner or the manager, you can do that. (*laughs*)

JY: (*laughs*) Yeah, when you're the boss no one can say you're late.

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NG: Yeah.

JY: I know when I shop there all the employees seem happy – they're usually willing to give out a recipe or something to help you out. What years was your cousin working there?

NG: Jennifer...I think it was 2003-2007.

JY: Okay – that's a while. I know it must be hard to draw that professional line when you're working with family, but one thing we are looking at is women in the seafood industry...and it's largely a male run business. So, do you think there's a gender division with your...I know I've seen women working there at Katie's, so?

NG: At the fish house?

JY: Yeah. Well, I mean, running around...whatever.

NG: I mean the girls...I usually don't like girls lifting boxes all day, unless they're super strong or something. I had my niece working there – she was real strong but I wanted her to focus on the retail – get the customer service thing going...customers kind of like...a friendly girl dealing with them sometimes than an old, forty year old man with fish slime all over him so I wanted her up front, clean and stuff, dealing with that. And then...I'd rather have a girl in the office with me just to keep everything neat instead of another guy all day...it just makes sense to me, I don't know.

JY: Well are there any women on the fish boats that you deal with?

NG: There's one.

JY: *(laughs)* Just one?

NG: Yeah she's a little...she's a rough little woman – she's pretty much a little man. Her name's Scooter. She's a character...she lies and steals and...I think she does drugs – I know she drinks. I mean, that's how a lot of deck hands are.

JY: Right, right.

NG: She's just a woman that's like the guys. That's about it, as far as women deck hands on commercial fishing boats.

JY: Okay. Are there any women captains?

NG: No.

JY: Okay. Well, I know a lot of the fish markets around here are family run businesses – is that typical of island fish markets?

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NG: It seems like it with the smaller ones. With the bigger ones I think they get other people, you know, you can't rely on your family...but the family is running the office I guess, so...yeah, I think a lot of them are different little families or getting together to do their business.

JY: Did most of them come from a commercial fishing background like your dad?

NG: I don't think so. I'm not sure but I don't think a lot of them are fishermen like my dad.

JY: Okay. So, what would you say influenced the business the most over the years?

NG: I guess my father...I don't know, he's always – it's his business so he's pretty much influenced everything that goes on with it, as far as the big picture goes. That and...the desire to keep on growing and doing better, you know – get more of the market share, just keep it in the family, keep it going so we've got something...something down the line to hand off to my kids or something like that if they want to do it. That's what Buddy's – my dad – he wants us to have something when he dies.

JY: Right, okay. Do you think operating a fish market on Galveston is different than, like, the fish markets in Seabrook, or...?

NG: Yeah...'cause those are just – they don't unload boats over there.

JY: Oh yeah?

NG: Yeah – a lot of those little fish houses are just retail shops. But, they have nicer set-ups up there; I'm not going to lie. *(laughs)* They've got better retail flow over there because...it seems like a lot of people go in that area whereas on the island you get some people that get back in there - Pier 19 but...

(Phone rings. Stop recorder)

Part Two

JY: Let's see, where were we? Oh right, we were talking about the places in Seabrook. Do you think Galveston is a typical – I mean, Katie's is a typical fish market on Galveston?

NG: No.

JY: No?

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NG: Because we do...everything over there. A lot of these places are just like...you've got big companies that're mainly – they're all wholesale, they just process and distribute it. And then, there's a bunch of little places that just do retail and bait over there. But we do everything – we unload boats, we do the retail, do distribution, and then we do all the restaurant supply stuff, so, we do everything.

JY: Right, right. Okay. So, to go onto outside influences, how have state regulations on commercial fishing and national environmental regulations affected the retail seafood business?

NG: Well...I think some of the state regulations kind of hurt some of the shrimpers on the bay, because they'll close down the season – you know the season's just closed, it's just set - it doesn't matter when the shrimp's coming in or not. Okay, so, let's say, the season's open for shrimping but there's no shrimp – they're not making any money and there's no...the diesel's high and they're running five hundred dollars a day on fuel and they're only catching thirty pounds of shrimp...and then all of a sudden they close it and all of a sudden there's tons of shrimp out there and then the shrimpers aren't allowed to bring anything in.

JY: Right.

NG: So that hurts the shrimpers and a lot of shrimpers got out of it. The bay shrimpers used to make a lot of money but now they don't make anything - only a few people do it and they all have to go out...you know, the only shrimpers that are doing good, real good, making a lot of money are the guys with the huge steel boats that go out for weeks on the ocean. Giant, giant boats. But the...everyday little bay shrimper – that's pretty much...it's dying, it's not like it used to be. Everybody talks about how good it used to be back in the day and all that stuff but it's not like that anymore. As far as fishing goes – state regulations...I don't see the fishermen getting hurt, really. I...sometimes I think the law enforcement goes overboard, you know, with the boats and everything. They just want to write you a ticket...they don't like letting people slide for the little mistakes. It just seems like they're not...yeah, they'll work with me sometimes but it just seems like they're not...they want you to hate them. It's like, they don't like you and you're not going to like them. It just makes... creates tension. As far as environmental laws... I don't really know of anybody violating them or anything - the only environmental law that we've had a problem with was a boat that anchored on the flower gardens and you're not supposed to do that. But the guy – it was an emergency and I guess his boat died or whatever – he couldn't do anything and he didn't want it to drift off.

JY: Right.

NG: But, he got a ticket for it. That's pretty much the only environmental regulation violation that I've seen.

JY: Well, I know that three years – I guess in 2007 they implemented individual fishing quotas for like, snapper so that the fresh fishermen would be given shares of snapper. Do you think that's improved the system?

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NG: Oh yeah. I guess, from an environmental standpoint, they know how much is coming in...exactly; they can set how much they want to. They can do other studies, they can see how much fish they've got and they can set how much they want fishermen to catch. From a commercial standpoint...it's helped out the market as a whole 'cause the fish aren't getting flooded every ten days, it's coming in – the boats are coming with big loads as we need them now.

JY: Right.

NG: You know, say “Hey – fish are real high could you go catch me some fish?” And that's helped out. A lot of fishermen have become rich because of it because they have – because of their catch history they got a lot of quota than some of them did. I like it – it's really good. The only problem is they've got the commercial fishermen on this quota system but there's no recreational fishermen on a quota system, so there's really no telling how much they're catching or any of that stuff but there's a lot of tension between the recreational and commercial fishermen.

JY: Yes, fairly disturbed situation. All right, how has the increase in foreign imports of shrimp and other seafood affected Katie's?

NG: As far as shrimp, I really don't - I've never really seen anything. 'Cause we've always just dealt with American, our neighbors got American shrimp and most of our restaurants like American shrimp so I just order for them. So I've never really seen anything with shrimp, but as far as fish, there are certain times of the year when you've got Caribbean snapper, South American, Mexican snapper flooding our markets and it messes up our prices and it's hard to sell because they've got their stuff in our markets and it's flooded.

JY: Right

NG: And it brings our prices down because they don't have enough...which does suck...but, I mean, there's nothing you can do about it. You can complain about it all you want but it's something you've got to deal with and do your best at selling the fish.

JY: Right, right. So you haven't noticed a change in shrimp, like they haven't been going down or anything? Or are people willing to pay more for American shrimp?

NG: People pay more for American shrimp than imports.

JY: Right, right.

NG: All the import stuff's a lot cheaper 'cause a lot of it's farm raised, like China or whatever...so it's always going to be cheaper but a lot of customers don't want to come down to the fish house to get stuff they can get in the grocery store, so they come for American shrimp.

JY: So pretty much everything you guys sell is from fishermen in the area?

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NG: No, we import some stuff. Tilapia filets – every fish house has them, but they're all imported pretty much. Salmon – not from here. *(laughs)* You gotta have a little salmon on retail. Restaurants all have salmon on their menus.

JY: Right. I'm sure the popular fish – of course you have to have those. Okay...so, how have developments such as the cruise lines and Tilman Fertitta's development on the wharves in Galveston affected the business, do you think?

NG: I don't know. I don't think the cruise lines brought a whole bunch of customers over to us 'cause most of those people don't know where we're at and we don't really have a billboard up or anything so it really hasn't affected us. We're kind of hidden back there unless they've heard or know...most of those people are just ready to get off the cruise and head home.

JY: Yeah.

NG: So...but I do see Starbuck's gets a lot of customers from the cruise ship. *(laughs)*

JY: They certainly do. *(laughs)*

NG: So they're doing good. As far as development on the wharves...I mean, it hasn't been that – nothing's really changed down there except for a store closing down – that Joe's Crab Shack, and they just opened an Olympia Grill down the road. I don't think it's brought us a bunch of retail customers but I do sell to Olympia so that is a customer for me.

JY: Okay. Well I know when Joe's Crab Shack was there it was impossible to get parking to go to Katie's.

NG: Oh yeah...and they're going to reopen.

JY: Oh, they are?

NG: So we'll see what happens. That could be good I guess, it could be bad – we'll see.

JY: But you didn't notice anything different while they were there before?

NG: No. Like you said, parking was a pain in the ass – that's what I noticed. That's about it.

JY: Okay...so have there been any difficulties with Katie's location there on the wharf? I know they renovated it in 2001 or something? Pier 19?

(Drumming on table)

NG: Oh...yeah I remember that. Well, there were problems then when they were doing the renovation - to run your business – when they've got the whole road closed down, doing construction nobody wanted to come back there. But...we were okay through all that. You know,

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it sucked for a little while but we made it through it. As far as the location...it's a good location but you just got to get more people to know that it's there.

JY: Right.

NG: It's a perfect location just...we're kind of limited on size of the operation because we've got so much stuff going on and it's all so tight in there... it would be very nice to take over Sampson's (*fish market next door*) and turn that into our retail, but that's just a dream. I don't think he's going to sell his business.

JY: (*laughs*) No, he's been open for awhile. Okay...so how did Hurricane Ike affect Katie's?

NG: Ike...well, I mean it was scary at first after the storm – we didn't know what happened. It was just like months – a couple of months of clean up, just going down there. We had money in the bank – we were doing good financially...It was crazy – just trying to sell all the fish before the hurricane came and then it hits and then going down there and trying to clean everything up ourselves. We didn't hire people 'cause they were just taking too long – to hire people – we wanted to get the business running. But, you know, we got everything back together. We got it built the way my dad wanted it built instead of just the way it came so, we redid a lot of stuff and it's helped out with our processing and keeping fish fresh and stuff so, you know – it was rough but we're good now and we got our insurance money and all that stuff. It was tough there for a little bit but we're back on our feet and we've got it set up a lot better than we used to have it set up.

JY: Good. So, was the structure completely demolished?

NG: Well not the...well yeah, some of the concrete slab was cracked...the walls were taken out but it was all sheet metal so it wasn't a huge deal – all we had to do was made welded the frame together and started screwing the sheet metal in there and getting to work. It wasn't as bad as we thought it was going to be, we just – I mean a lot of the stuff was gone but it is... a chance to start over.

JY: Well, was there kind of a depression in the market after that because, I mean, there were a lot of people from Galveston gone and the restaurants were having trouble. I was waiting tables at that time and the customers were pretty scarce at the restaurants.

NG: We just did wholesale.

JY: Oh, you just did wholesale?

NG: Yeah.

JY: Okay, that's pretty good. Oh I did want to go back – you were talking about how crazy it used to be to unload the fish because of the restrictions in season and stuff...when did that stop?

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NG: I think it was 2006 - was the last year and then that's when they went to quota system, so we don't do that in 2007.

JY: Okay. So, oyster season's coming up, do you expect any difficulties with that or did you make any preparations?

NG: I don't know. I'm not a processor.

JY: Oh, Okay.

NG: I just buy it from other processors because you have to have a separate room for this and that and you got to have the health department come out there and it's just a whole different set up for operations - oysters, so I just go by hearsay and call up east and see what's going on and I get it from other processors, I don't process it and I'm kind of glad because there's a lot of...yeah, I'd be scared to sell oysters because you hear about people getting sick from them and stuff and I'm just kind of glad I'm the middle man between that.

JY: Right. Well, have you noticed any decreases in certain amount of fish or oysters or increases in others?

NG: Well, oysters, you know since the BP spill. Right after it they...the oysters coming in from Louisiana they skyrocketed the price and everything - you couldn't find them and it was hard to get them from the restaurants. We're getting some in now, but the season's just gotten started. Everything's kind of expensive at the beginning so we'll see what happens. I think it won't be too much worse than it was last year - probably about the same as last year.

JY: All right well, I think that's all my questions. Thank you very much.