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Interviewee: Vallone, Tony

Interview Date: March 17, 2013

University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project
Houston History

Interviewee: Tony Vallone with Jeremy Parzen

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Place: University of Houston Hilton College, Houston, Texas

Interviewer: Lulin Wang

Transcriber: Michelle Kokes

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Abstract:

For Tony Vallone, fine dining is not defined by the price of the meal or how fancy the dining room's décor is, but rather by the attention to detail, from the selection of ingredients to the way the food is presented to the customers—just the way they like it. One of the most influential restaurateurs in Houston, he opened Tony's in 1965, originally where the Galleria stands today. It introduced authentic Italian food to the city of Houston, eventually becoming the longest-lived fine dining establishment in Houston. Over the years, it has served seven presidents, numerous dignitaries, and countless celebrities.

Vallone traces his personal history in the business and discusses the past and the present trends of the Houston restaurant scene and the restaurant industry in general. He talks in detail about what constitutes fine dining and how trends in foods and wines have changed over the last fifty years to appeal to the changing and sophisticated palates of Houstonians.

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Tony Vallone and Jeremy Parzen

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Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
Location: University of Houston Hilton College, Houston, Texas

LW: This is Lulin Wang interviewing Mr. Tony Vallone at Eric's Restaurant. What was it like in your saucier days in the kitchen?

TV: What was it like working in the kitchen?

LW: Yes

TV: I love it that's my heart, that's my passion working in the kitchen. I started in the kitchen. That is my true passion, being very creative in the kitchen.

LW: Did you only work the saucier station?

TV: I did it all.

LW: You did it all.

TV: I did it all. Saucier is my heart, although I think the very crux of any restaurant is the saucier because soups and salads are the very soul of any kitchen, of any restaurant and once you master any soups and sauces you can do anything.

LW: Were you in an Italian kitchen?

TV: Yes, quite a bit.

LW: What was the name of the restaurant?

TV: Oh gosh, I've worked way, way back in many, many different restaurants but always mostly Italian then later I started branching into the French kitchen also. So I like Italian and

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French are my background (Italian first of course). But of course French cuisine emerged from Italian cuisine, so two of the great mother cuisines of the universe are Chinese and Italian, which very few people really realize.

LW: And what was the condition working condition back then in the kitchen?

TV: Way, way back?

LW: Yes.

TV: Very difficult. We didn't have the product or the sources that we have today and working in kitchens was very hard because there were no rights and wrongs and there were no, how do we say, they can do what they wanted. There was no overtime there was no nothing. You could work around the clock. You didn't have all the benefits we had in today's world. And everything was done by hand. Everything was done before we had all the machines and all the help we have today.

LW: But do you believe everything being done by hand was an advantage?

TV: In those days, yes. We had no choice because that was fifty plus years ago we didn't have it; you had to do what you had to do. Now days there's so much more technique, and there's so many more machines to help you, and this is before food processors and even blenders or any of that, so you know you didn't have all that. You did it by hand. Everything was all had chopped, hand carved, (2.47) work so you had to learn the techniques of the old school.

LW: From my research I also read that you also waited tables back then. What was it like?

TV: I liked dealing with people, and I always handled people well. I love people so if you are a people person waiting on tables is not hard at all.

LW: Was the design of the dining room and the décor much different from today?

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TV: A lot. Today everything is it was a little bit more baroque then and not anywhere near as evolved today. Today we have much more, everything is much more evolved, and we have much more detail. People are more demanding. They know more. I guess much more cultured clientele especially here than we ever had before. Of course I'm going way, way back.

LW: Yes. And how has the conditions in the kitchen specifically changed over the years besides technology?

TV: Tremendously. Because of course we have more stations. We used to be in the old days we had to get the job done. That many people working so meant many times you worked more than one station or more than one area. You know what the brigade is, the way the kitchen is laid out all the terms. So one man may have done three different things. Now days a person can do, she really does one but they can cross train to do more but you also have help. You know you have more technique, you have better scales, you have better cutting areas, better chopping, better everything. There was no microwave, none of that before. No convection oven, so it was a much different area. So slow reductions, big pot on the stove. We didn't have braisers or stock pots. You had stock pots, didn't have the kettles and all that. We are going fifty plus years ago. So it was a huge difference and food has evolved. It is lighter, cleaner. We don't use... in those days we used a lot of flour for thickening, we don't do any of that anymore. We do a lot of slow reduction. [Speaking to Jeremy Parzen] You and I were talking about that earlier.

LW: So besides food becoming lighter what other changes in the food trends have you seen over the years?

TV: I think you see more fusion. I am not a big fan of fusion but you do see it. Food is just far, far advanced.

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LW: More fusion and maybe more of the trends from molecular gastronomy do you see that in Houston?

TV: No I think fusion started before molecular. I'm not a fan of molecular because I believe in the stove being the central part of the cooking not the chemical. So I am not a fan of molecular. I don't think it as a true cuisine nor do I think it will last. I think it's not as popular now as it used to be.

LW: How do you think the movement in organic has affected the industry specifically for Houston?

TV: Somewhat but many of us were buying organic before the word was used. I was buying from the close in farmers forty years ago, and we didn't know what organic was. We just knew it was fresh from the farm and I bought it because it was good. Well actually most of that was the organic approach even if it wasn't organic it was the organic approach. So farm table is nothing new for me. Organic there are different schools today that don't feel that organic has the advantages we once thought it did because maybe the product was raised organically but not the soil was treated organically and there's different things.

LW: And also maybe the feed of the animal is not...

TV: Exactly well said. So the systems are not as organic as we thought. However, having said that the most simple fresh food have always been and always will be the freshest and the best.

LW: Thank you. Do you think this I guess this new era of organic has an impact on the Houston restaurant industries economically?

TV: Yes organic is a little bit more expensive. I think people want again wholesome, fresh and good. This is a wonderful food community.

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LW: It is. What is your definition of fine dining? Like the essential elements.

TV: The crux of fine dining is the attention to detail in every way shape and form. It is attention to detail. First of all you have to have product, the technique to know what to do with the product, and the delivery to get it to the table in the pristine, well-balanced manner for the palate that you want it to be. That's all the attention to detail, buying only the best and fresh of what you can find. Always authentic, always exactly what it's supposed to be, having the technique and the knowledge of what to do with it and how to prepare it. Keeping it pristinely fresh and succulent, and getting it to the table in front of client, in front of the customer, where they see it beautifully preserved presented to the eye, eye appeal, and beautifully tasty and not so heavily masked that you don't know what you are eating because of some of the ingredients on it. If you order an "X" item you should taste "X" item. If you order, clams or fish or whatever, that's what you really want to taste. Enhance it, complement it, but don't mask it or overpower it. Many times these young chefs especially will put something on a plate because it reads or writes well but it doesn't marry well on the plate. It's all about harmony, harmony on the palate. That to me is the end result. You have to have harmony on the palate. Certain things go together very well. Certain things they don't. You have to know how to place them and that all it takes experience to get to that point. You won't get it right away. It balances. It takes experience to get to that point. You won't get it right away. In any phase of life, in any type of work, you have to learn balance. When you get balance you get harmony, and harmony is happiness.

LW: I have...

TV: I talk a lot. When I talk too much just stop me.

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LW: No that's okay that's why I'm recording it. I have read that you are very well known for doing everything for a customer like bending backwards for them. Do you have a limit of things you won't do for them?

TV: If there is something that I can do with, that I know how to do and that I can do, I don't feel ... that I can do without the restaurant suffering in any way and I can do it well for you. If you come in and ask me to do something that I didn't really feel that I know how to do well I wouldn't do it for you because I wouldn't be doing it justice. But generally I can do most dishes, and I will try to do them within reason within the spectrum of my cuisine. You are the customer; you should get what you want. You are paying, and you have in your mind a certain experience you are trying to achieve, whether you think of it that way or not. We are really making that decision, then we should give that to you or do our best to do it.

LW: That's why it's fine dining.

TV: That's attention to detail. And that fine dining could be done to any realm of food not just an expensive restaurant. Any realm of food you can have fine dining.

LW: Can you give me examples?

TV: Yeah if you go to a restaurant, a Chinese restaurant, maybe it's not fancy service or maybe it's not doing very well, its fine dining. If you achieve that feeling that you are after and it is delivered to you right and correctly, that's fine dining.

LW: So for fine dining it's more about the experience of the diner rather than the...

TV: Centered around the plate.

LW: Centered around the plate?

TV: The plate is all important. What's on the plate is all important. There is an old saying that the finest food in the world cannot carry bad service but great service can carry an awful night in

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the kitchen, not bad food but an off night. I really believe that, but the star of the meal is what's on the plate, the food. Again, product, technique.

LW: Who said that I'm sorry?

TV: Just an old restaurant axiom, an old restaurant saying. And I still believe its product, technique, delivery. That's what you have to have, attention to detail. Those three aspects, that's what gives you the harmony you are talking about.

LW: For fine dining to develop and then prosper in the city what do you think are the requirements besides the population's appreciations for gastronomy and the ability to afford it?

TV: I keep going back, it doesn't have to be expensive. I keep going back to product. You have to know what you are buying, follow the season, follow the freshness and the quality and know what to do with it once you buy it, that is your technique. You've got to know how to butcher it, how to prepare it, whether it should be sautéed or braised or grilled or whatever you are doing, be creative, bring out the qualities of that product. If you are looking for branzino, delicate fish, delicious fish. If it is correctly done, bring it from the Mediterranean, which we get all the time there in France, so if you are going to be doing that you are going to enhance that fish, compliment it but not overpower it or mask it. So you wouldn't take a delicate fish and put lots of peppers and strong ingredients such as cilantro or a lot of these other things available that overpower the fish. You want to do something that will bring it out. If you know what you are doing for the product you will have a more, for another example, a more sturdy fish such as an East Coast sea bass or a Chilean sea bass or even our own fabulous red snapper which will go against any fish in the world these are fish that you can do a little more with because they will be a little more sturdy. You've got to know how to handle your product. Then you get into yields and how to make money with the dish later. First you've got to know how to handle it. First

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how to buy it, then what to do with it, and how it's going to look good to the customer. Taste, it's all about the taste. That's balance. See I call the results harmony.

JP:: What's that?

TV: I call the results harmony.

JP:: Yeah, I love that. I took a note on that.

TV: It's unison of mind and palate.

JP:: I am getting very Zen. I like that; I love that. But it's so true. That's something I never thought you'd say. But when you look at Tony's career. When you look at Tony's career you're always on the cutting.... Today you are doing.

TV: Well I believe you should be as creative as you can. The only thing I'm saying is don't have a tendency to overpower food because it reads well on verbiage. Make sure it plays well on the palate first. You can always write it well.

LW: How do you think the development of fine dining affected Houston's other types of restaurants?

TV: I think Houston has developed and emerged into a great food city that is just now starting to get recognition. I've always felt that Houston lacks city pride, and we should have more city pride. But I think we've emerged as a great food city, and fine dining is a big part of it. We are so lucky to be on the Gulf with all of this wonderful... we have a plethora of fresh seafood at our fingertips. We have food... to me there are three coasts, East, West and Gulf, and we have everything here. We have the knowledgeable clientele to eat all these foods too, which is very important. So I think all that has played a big part, and again fine dining can be in any realm of restaurant. You can do a hamburger well, it can be fine dining.

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LW: So you think also maybe fine dining this category is training, I guess knowledgeable personnel for other types of establishments?

TV: Training is very important. You have to know what you are doing. Without the passion, forget it you're not going to have it. You've got to have the passion. That is the number one thing. It's got to come from here. Then you can have fine dining. It doesn't matter what ethnicity or type of food you are doing, do it well. Buy it well and do it well. [Speaking to waiter] Anyway that's it in a nutshell. It's really simple to say but hard to do because again you've got to know your product. Without the knowledge of your product you're in trouble. You've got to know how to handle something, how it's butchered, how it's done. You've got to study and learn. Then you've got to know what to do with it and that's from up here. Then you have to have that passion that makes it come together and marry on the plate. So when it gets to the palate it should be perfect. I think when you look at food, when you look at a menu, when you look at whatever you ordered, you get a quick mental impulse when you look at a menu or you go to a certain restaurant you pick for a certain experience. This is my conjecture, but I really feel this is true. So you get that impulse and then you are going there for that experience, and our job is to give you that experience. That experience, whatever dish it may be, is that we deliver it and deliver it well and that you get what you are looking for. So if you order that dish and it's got so much on it that you don't know what you ordered, we've overpowered your experience.

LW: Can you give me a brief overview of the restaurants that you have in Houston and kind of a timeline?

TV: Sure. I started with my own restaurant in 1965 and that was Tony's where the Galleria is now before there was a Galleria. Then I moved to Post Oak seven years later in 1972 to Tony's

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that became pretty well known. I was there thirty-three years and then a little over nine years ago, I moved to Greenway Plaza where I am now. In the meantime, I opened about in the... I opened Anthony's which was my first time to open a second restaurant in the Montrose area a long time ago. It was kind of like a more casual dining experience that was the first downturn in the late 70s and I wanted to be ahead of the market and come in with a neighborhood style restaurant with great food but casual and lower prices.

I followed that with the Grotto, which was a Neapolitan food of my childhood, a Neapolitan home-style restaurant, very casual, excellent done food, imported product from about... doing all my importing from Italy and bringing in great product. And then I was in Milan and I got the impulse... I saw a restaurant that I fell in love with and that's why I opened La Griglia. La griglia means the grill and it was a grill I went to in Milan and it was absolutely gorgeous to look at. It was delicious grilled foods and that's when I opened that restaurant. And that was a little bit more upscale. It was between Grotto and Anthony's it was right in the middle. It was casual but a little bit more upscale. It was more grilling type of foods, fishes and all that. I bought a rotisserie and wood burning ovens in Italy and brought them back. I did a lot of rotisserie and [redacted] (19.05) cooking and then pastas of course always pastas. From there and then later I opened a second Grotto and then I opened Vallone's Steakhouse, which was fish, steaks, and pasta. After that and also I had gone into catering. I had Tony's Ballroom. I had a separate building where we had ballroom catering where you could have functions for weddings and all that, bar mitzvahs and all that type of thing.

Then I had some very serious health issues, and I sold everything but Tony's to Landry's because I was slowing down because I had very bad health at that time. I didn't know if I was going to make it or not. So, luckily I survived and then I started building again. That's kind of a

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real quick history. Now we have Tony's and we have Ciao Bello, which is our casual Italian in the Galleria area and we are getting ready to open a modern version of the our old Vallone's which will be steak, fish, and pasta in Memorial City in the Memorial Corridor which will be opening in about a month or six weeks. Does that sum it up pretty well? I don't think I left anything out.

JP:: Vallone's, Tony's new restaurant is one of the most talked about restaurants in the United States right now. I have people calling me from. ..

TV: It's going to be really pretty.

JP:: We just submitted a press release to national media. I have people calling me from New York, from California. It's going to be a big deal.

LW: Of course. I read that Saudi Arabia friends once described Tony's as the world's finest restaurant.

TV: Where did you read that?

LW: An article.

TV: We've served Saudi Arabian princes. We've served seven American presidents. We've served dignitaries. When Cossiga was the president of Italy he came to Texas to see NASA, he only had one meal in the state of Texas and they took over, they closed the whole Tony's. He took over the whole restaurant, and it was wonderful because CNN covered it, and my family...I didn't even have a chance to tell them. By accident they saw me on international television. So they were really proud, which made me proud. When Baker, we had the summit here. The only place all seven ministers went outside the hotel was Tony's restaurant. Secretary Baker brought them all. I thought an army had descended. I never saw such security. I thought we had been invaded. The security was incredible.

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JP:: With meetings like that they had more security than actual attendees.

TV: I mean I had presidents that didn't come with the security these people had. The summit. So we've had a lot of important...all the stars. We get just about everyone. I think the reason...Just like when Bocelli came to town, he always eats with us when he comes to down. This last time he ate with us three days in a row. We even made the food for his plane to go back. They had a meeting, a big luncheon at his hotel before he got on his plane, and we catered the luncheon at his hotel room and suite and made food for his plane. But he is a wonderful man. Pavarotti, they have all eaten with us.

LW: Princess Margaret?

TV: Oh yes, with John Connally. They had a red wine cellar and John Connally had a beautiful string band, and they had them do a Texas song. It was all strings, so it wasn't easy to do, and he showed her how to do the two-step in Tony's wine cellar, the Texas two-step.

JP:: I love it. It was all string band?

TV: I mean it was violins. It was just a great evening. One night Lynn Wyatt. There was a great charity going on, and John Connally was there at that time it was Donald and Ivanna Trump, they were there. President Nixon was there. John Connally was there. John Connally and Nellie were being honored, and they had all come to Tony's at the same time in the same night. Trump. It was quite a night.

JP:: Was Trump here because of one his business deals?

TV: Well because Lynn Wyatt who chaired it was a friend of Ivanna Trump and Joan Schnitzer, another socialite, were all friends of Ivanna Trump so they all came in. The power you have never seen in the restaurant at one time.

JP:: Have you eaten in any of the restaurants?

LW: No.

TV: We'll have to get you in.

LW: Another question, so what do you think the fine dining industry in Houston has contributed to the city culturally?

TV: A lot. I think the reason we have gotten so much recognition being one of the top four or five food cities in the country, and we definitely are, is because we are still an entrepreneurial city. It is not run or controlled by the chains, which can hurt a city. We have the spirit here. We have creativity. We work hard. We go to any restaurant, any level, you see the owner working and you know you are at a good restaurant. You cannot run a fine restaurant from a social arena or an office in Cleveland or a golf course. You need....You have to be there yourself. When you see an owner not just there but actually working there in charge, you are in a pretty good restaurant. He will care. Restaurants should be driven by the owner not by the chef because the owner is more conducive to giving the customer what they want. Chefs are very important but they do so much on their whim. You want to have food that your customer that you are delivering the experience customer is expecting. That is very important.

LW: So if the chef is the owner what should the chef do?

TV: Same thing then he needs to wear two hats. The chef and the owner. The chef hat gives you creativity, but the owner's concern gives that little touch that makes the creativity really go across because I'm giving you what you want in as fine a manner that I know what to do.

LW: So fine dining establishments, maybe it brings in internationally important artist?

TV: Of course.

LW: Businessmen.

TV: Business people

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LW: Politicians?

TV: Business people, politicians, artists, everyone, or just a regular person because you know yourself, you are going to go out and you are going to spend whatever amount of money, little or whatever you want, to experience for that dollar. You want to be fulfilled and satiated in a wonderful relaxing manner and that's to me what it's all about that attention to detail. The service, the food, the presentation, the eye appeal and of course the harmony on the palate.

LW: How do you think Obamacare has affected our industry in Houston?

TV: We don't know yet.

LW: What do you think it will do?

TV: I'm worried about it. I really am. We definitely need some type of healthcare. I'm all for that. I don't think this one was thought out well and I don't think they know what they are doing yet, but we do need it. So I can't speak to that because we don't know and I don't think anyone can speak to that because we just don't. But I'm definitely in favor of health care.

LW: Do you think the recent government shutdown is affecting is going to affect the restaurant?

TV: It's too soon to tell. We've never faced this before. We don't really know. We've had a couple of dates of shut down, we don't really know where this is going. I think we need harmony in Washington. And I think both sides are wrong in the way they approach, too partisan. And I think they need to learn to work together again and learn to love our country more than our party, but I don't want to get into politics.

LW: Yes.

TV: But the direction is good. I don't think the approach is good.

LW: What do you see for the future of Houston's restaurants?

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TV: I see Houston continue to evolve as predicted in three years will be larger as Chicago, we will be the third largest city. If that happens it's not so important as it is that we grow culturally in tandem with the growth of the city, we grow culturally in tandem with that, and I think we will because Houston just keeps emerging. We are such an international city. We are almost...I forget the exact number but it's like 95% of all the (29:00) in the state of Texas in the city of Houston that shows you what international trade we have here. We now lead the country in exports. We are now the second largest port in the country. We have the largest medical center in the world. We are the petrochemical capital of the world. We have so much going for this wonderful city. So we need to continue our growth and grow culturally with it. Food is a big part of that cultural growth. So I think our palate will keep expanding. People are more affluent. They travel more. They go out, they learn, they read. People are cooking at home. The supermarkets in Houston are really, have really expanded. I mean I have never found any city that has a finer quality of supermarkets than we do here. I have searched those out pretty much. So I think we are growing and I think we keep evolving, and evolving is a better word. Houston does evolve. Houston is a can-do city of arts and opportunity.

JP:: Tony was recently one of luminaries CultureMap Houston did this wonderful series "Predictions for Houston in 30 Years" and they had the mayor and they had the prominent and Tony was the restaurateur and it was really interesting to see what he said. If you like I'll email it to you.

LW: I would love that.

TV: Do you have a card?

LW: I'm sorry no.

TV: Your address.

LW: Yes of course.

TV: And a phone number too just in case.

JP:: I bet she is as much of an email person as I am. You know, I talk to you on the phone. You know, we only talk when we have something really urgent to say. It's never, I never talk on the phone anymore.

TV: I think if I didn't have to have a phone. None of my kids have house lines anymore. I told Donna if we didn't have to have it for the alarm system I would get rid of it.

JP:: Thank you! And I'll just shoot you an email and I'll send that to you. If you have any follow up questions that you need answered, if you need any more information from Tony I'm the person to ask and I can get that for you.

LW: Thank you.

JP:: That's what I do.

LW: More questions.

TV: Let's me see what this is.

JP:: What's your career path? Do you want to own a restaurant someday?

LW: Yes that's my dream. I love food. I want to touch food every day, and if I own a restaurant I will definitely spend at least some time in the kitchen. That's what I want.

JP:: Is your family into food, like did your family own restaurants?

LW: No.

JP:: So how did you get interested?

LW: My mom is a wonderful cook. I grew up eating amazing food.

TV: I love Asian food, especially Chinese. I love Chinese food. There is a restaurant I go to that I really like. I don't know half the dishes because I don't understand them but I've never

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disliked them. There's such variety to the Chinese kitchen, tremendous variety. See Italian food is the same way. We have tremendous variety also.

LW: Is there anything else you would like the article to show?

JP:: No, I think that Tony speaks more than anybody else in the city to Houston's restaurant legacy. No one's had the longevity that he's had but no one's, and I really mean this when I say this, and I eat all over the world. No one has is as up to...as *au courant* as Tony, what is going on in the food world, and I think that is a unique. There is a lot of restaurateurs in the world but a lot of them are still resting on their laurels or resting on their legacy and you don't see that about Tony and I think that's his greatest lesson. He did a radio interview the other day, and you were joking that what would your advice be to the young Tony? He said, "No he was joking when he said, 'Don't become a restaurateur.' There's nothing else I ever wanted to do and there is nothing else I could ever see myself doing."

TV: I really believe the day you quit evolving is the day you should get out of the business. You have to always evolve and learn. Learn and evolve. It's fun.

LW: Do you travel a lot to get ideas?

TV: I do. And I think I'm at the top of my game right now. I think you should keep evolving. Yeah I do. I spend a lot... the main place I go is New York and Italy. I bring back ideas with me constantly and I read constantly. I go on the computer. I do a lot of research.

LW: What do you see in New York and Italy on your trips that you maybe recently have brought back?

TV: I bring back ideas all the time. Most of my buying is out in New York. Because that is where everything from New York stops first is from New York so I have a lot of purveyors that I deal with. And I go out there and talk to them and see what they are doing. I only go to the

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finest restaurants because I consider that our competition. And our genre and I want to see what they are doing to make sure that we stay in line and that we are evolving as much as they are. I think that you can eat at Tony's restaurant, you can eat as well there as you can anywhere in the world. And that's my goal, and I want to keep it that way. Mariani he said, that John Mariani was a nationally applauded food writer, he said that I will put my food up against anything in the country, which is a great compliment because it is not easy.

JP:: And he is not an easy guy. He is not an easy customer.

LW: What are the challenges that our industry faces?

TV: Challenges? Labor is always the main challenge. Teaching and labor. Cost. Rising food cost, that is always a challenge. It could be Obamacare, we just don't know. I can't speak because no one knows. The major challenge is labor.

LW: Do you think the changes in people's taste can be a challenge?

TV: We just tell them we are doing a special. I am running a table as we are talking. Do I think what, I'm sorry?

LW: Do you think the changes in the public's taste preference present a challenge for restaurant owners?

TV: No, that's something we should welcome; that's wonderful. That's what keeps our passion flowing. That's what fires our passion because customers the more they know the more they travel the more they want to do that's what pushes us to do even better. I love it when someone comes in and says, "I was just in Milan and I had this." Or "I was just in Rome and I had that. Can you make it?" I mean I love that. Or they will say, "I was in Emilia Romagna, Bologna" (one of my favorite food towns) and they will say, "Can you make this like they did?" or, "I want to tell you what they did with this dish." I have a lot of customers wherever they eat,

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they send me back pictures and comments of what they are eating right then and there from the restaurant from all over the world. And I love to see what they are doing. It gets my juices flowing. It gives me ideas. I have people say, "What can I do? I'm going on a trip. What can I do? What do you want?" I said shoot me back pictures and comments and they do right there from their table. It could be anywhere in the world or in the country. I love that.

LW: That's great.

TV: There's nothing better than a culinary challenge. The day that you don't welcome a culinary challenge you need to look for another job. Is that too blunt?

JP:: No. That's one of the things I love about your cooking is that it challenges and I mean I'm an informed palate.

TV: Very informed.

JP:: But it challenges me. If you and I one day won the lottery we would just sit around and talk about food all day.

TV: One of the things we had great chemistry when I first met JP., the first food writer that I came up against that I could talk food at any level and he could stay right there with me. And I was so used to them not knowing and a food writer that writes and doesn't know what they are writing about is the worst thing to happen in any business, but he knew. I could drop dishes towards him and he would expand on it and I was totally flattered.

JP:: He tests me and it was fun.

TV: He knew *sartu*. Very few people knew *sartu*.

JP:: I mean we talked about earlier.

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TV: It's a Neapolitan probably French origin but way, way back. Neapolitan risotto dish that very few people know, even in Italy if you are not from that area, and he knew right away and not even his area.

JP:: It just, Tony is such a vibrant food personality and when the downtime, not that we have a downtime together. We are together working, we are planning, we are writing, but when we sit down or when I bring my wife into the restaurant, we just want to go head to head and talk about food and, how do you make this dish and how do you make that dish. And I think that's the greatest lesson, you know, what he just said about the culinary challenge. You know, it's like the mathematician that doesn't have purpose in life if he isn't solving any problem or the doctor if ... Tony really takes it to that level. And it becomes an expression of the human experience. It's not just the social compact of I need to eat. I need someone to make me something to eat. It transcends that.

LW: Another question. Wine. How has the wine industry developed in Houston and it's relationship...?

TV: Houston is a great wine city. Pairing wines and food is art form. There are no rules. In the old days you had to have white with fish and red with meat. And many people adhere to that. There are no rules. It's what you like, number one first and foremost. We had a conversation, actually JP: did with someone else I was listening to about Moscato. I was surprised at the ignorance of that question because you were so right on. Moscato is a wonderful early morning or even mid-day (41.04) to drink. But wine should first of all please you. There are no rules. We have grown wine and this is a fabulous wine city. Wine is important. It is important that you get what you want. That you get the product that you want. The type of wine that you want. I don't like wine snobbery whatsoever. I don't believe in having to discuss its

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geography for twenty minutes before you drink. I think you should be able to enjoy the wine.

Stay within the neighborhood of price and all that you are comfortable with and stay within the realm of wine that you like. I have certain preferences for wine. Some people like the old style wine. Some people like the new. Some people like the combination if it's going to be fruit driven or power driven or super Tuscan versus the Italian that is so popular now. There are so many different ways to enjoy wine. So it's a personal thing. Wine is big in Houston. We are very lucky. It's a great wine city. Wine helps not only with sales but it helps the overall enjoyment. The whole experience. If you have this beautiful food and this beautiful canvas.

What better frame than canvas than wine? I think it's a so to speak a tapestry. When you see a tapestry you see all different kinds of components coming together in a collage on the tapestry, that's wine and food. They were meant to go together. Time immortal.

LW: What are your favorite wines?

TV: It depends on the mood and the food. I do enjoy super Tuscans very much. I enjoy Brunellos a well-aged Barolo. Most people drink Barolos too young. They have to have age. And there's a lot of less of the Italians I also like, it depends on my mood at that moment. There are some base wines if the grape is Agiorgitiko, which is an ancient Greek grape. I do like the Agiorgitiko in the afternoon. I also love cabernet sauvignon. It depends on what I'm having. It's hard to say my favorite. I may want with lamb want a different wine than I would with steak or *ossobuco*. It depends on the food.

LW: Or branzino?

TV: Or branzino. Exactly, well said. And you know sometimes you are drinking shell fish there is nothing, sauvignon blanc, it's hard to beat it. There are so many different wines we could talk about depending on the mood at that moment. In Italy now they are doing two grape wines,

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many of the whites that are giving them a little bit more body and variety that are really, really nice. They are not sticking to one varietal any more. I think what is going on in the wine world today. I really do. We have choices that we've never had before. Don't you agree?

JP:: We live in a renaissance of wine and Tony's, of course is 100% right. The most interesting time ever for Houston for wines. Look at the wine list at Tony's restaurants and how exciting they are. I am a wine... what I do primarily is write about wine.

TV: He's my expert.

JP:: I'm thrilled. There is more European wine available to Houston wine buyers than ever before and Tony's buyers have just dove in.

TV: The mecca of the wine center for Texas is Houston, and we have a 1,100-wine-bottle list and what we do, we are not trying to do everything everyone. We are very heavy in the three areas that we do best in: Italian, California and French. There I will put our list up against anybody in the country both in bottle format and varietals of grape and everything else, suppliers. We only buy good years. We don't buy an off year. Having said that, I have other items, other areas where wines come from. That's where we are really strong. That's where we are the strongest. I learned that from Robert **Chatham** (45.28) years ago and he and I would have our long talks, and he was a great wine reporter. I don't try to be everything to everyone, but excel at what I do.

LW: What has changed over when you first opened Tony's in 1965?

TV: We were talking about it right before you came in, exactly what types of wine did you sell in the early sixties and I told him it was like _____, Bolla, one of those, Gallo, American but it was a big wine in those days, Bardolino. Wines I wouldn't even buy today.

Those type of things. Asti spumanti, which some of those are really sweet back then. It has all

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changed. The complexity of wine has changed. The knowledge has changed. The availability has tremendously changed. People don't worry about. Now they order what they want. How they want. I had a man came in for lunch yesterday, I'll give you a good example. He said, "I really want to have a good meal today." It was lunch believe it or not. He said, "We are going to start off with foie gras we're going to do truffles." The Italian *castagne* (phonetic) the burgundy truffles are in right now the season before the black and white in Alba in Italy. So he said to me, "I had a very disappointing Sassicaia the other day and I really want to make up for it. So I said, "Okay, let's try it." That's how he led off to me. So we picked him out an '06 Sassicaia. It's had great ratings when it came out, it's even better now. It's aged so well. It's starting to have a little bit of age and we decanted it and let it breathe. He said, "You totally replaced my..." how did you say "it's credibility with me. Great bottle of wine, great meal. I'm so happy that I'm balanced, so happy." Then after lunch I sent him a Moscato because he was having a little dessert. He said, "I just want a little something to taste." I said, "I'll send that to you." I sent him a little Moscato. It's an Italian...I'm not going to call it a desert wine, help me here, it's in between. [speaking Italian] Anyway he loved it. It was light for lunch. I did a fruit-based dessert for him, a Moscato, a perfect finish. It wasn't expensive it was just a great wine to have. That's the wine experience. He's great at finding bargains. He knows his balance.

AW: Thank you I think that concludes the required amount for the interview.

End of interview.