

Interview with Greg Sonnier
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Interviewed by: (Bryan Recile, Asha Thomas)
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Abstract: Greg Sonnier is the head chef and owner of Gabrielle's in New Orleans Louisiana. Born and raised in Louisiana (Bucktown, Westbank, and New Orleans) chef Greg Sonnier is a well known staple of Louisiana cooking, who has been nominated for several awards including a James Beard Award for "Best Chef: South/Southeast". After losing the original location of Gabrielle's after Katrina, Chef Sonnier became the executive chef at Kingfish restaurant in the French Quarter. 12 years after the storm chef Sonnier finally was able to reopen Gabrielle's (his daughter's namesake), and bringing back, in his words, " an injection of Louisiana" into dishes foreign and familiar.

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[00:00:33.27] Bryan Recile: So, I guess I want to start ... I guess with tell me a little about yourself, kind of like where you grew up, and what peaked your interest in being a chef.

[00:00:34.17] Greg Sonnier: I grew up in New Orleans. I was born and raised here and I lived in several different places in New Orleans. I first lived in Bucktown which is out by the lake. My dad had brought a small little house. He was a physician and ophthalmologist in New Orleans and is retired now obviously, but that's how he started after going to Tulane and majoring in French and became a doctor going through medical school and stuff like that. I started living in Bucktown and after that we moved to the Westbank which was on the other side of the river and then after that we lived in uptown New Orleans. I went to school at a couple places. I started out grad school at a place called Roy Gardens Academy it was on the Westbank and then after that I went to Christian Brothers School and that's in city park. And I was in a class with a lot of famous people from New Orleans and I was really happy to go there. It was a fun school very small. After that I went to De La Salle high school right on St. Charles Avenue. And then after that I went to Loyola believe it or not and graduated from here with a B.A in Criminal Justice. My goal when I was in college was to be a lawyer or an FBI agent. I thought it would be really neat to learn forensic science and criminal stuff that goes on in the crime scene lab, but I always enjoyed cooking and learning to cook,.

When I was a kid I used to always make meals for my family and barbeque outside and learned a lot from my mom and my grandmother, and just different folks around the neighborhood who were really great cooks too. My sister talked me into going to cooking school. At the time there wasn't really major cooking schools in New Orleans there was only really trade schools. So I did go to Delgado community college and this was way back in the early eighties. One of the things to go this school delgado you had to become an employee of a restaurant or a cook of a restaurant, and it was hard for me I had no experience in the field to get a job in the restaurant and nobody really wanted to hire me. So I figured well why not just shoot for the top and at the time in the eighties the most famous restaurant in town was K. Paul's Louisiana Kitchen. So one day I went over to K. Paul's kitchen to see the Chef Paul who I always grew up watching on TV and God I thought he was an incredible genius as far as cooking and really knew food well, and his background was just so extensive with being chef of Commander's Palace and just a lot other places. So I went and talked to him and I think I kind of peaked his interest so I went and talked to him again for another interview. I want to say about after the fourth interview he finally hired me and so I started out making four dollars an hour and I was really happy. The money part I didn't really care about. It was just nice to learn a really busy kitchen. Or work in a really busy kitchen, and I really enjoyed that. Becoming a chef is really I want to say a long haul. There is no real definition of oh now you're a chef, and I think some people wake up in the morning and say that "Now I'm a chef," well you can't really do that. A chef is a person that really know every little part of a kitchen and how it operates and every little job and how it operates. For me to become a chef was really tough. It took a long long time and eventually once I became a chef I did know every part of the kitchen. I wasn't a chef at K. Paul's when I worked there and later on I became a sous chef which is kind of an upward latter of becoming a chef and this was at Brightson's Restaurant, and Frank Brightson was one of the chef's at K.

Paul's that opened up his own little eatery too and so I went with him and there I started out as a cook and eventually worked my way up to a sous chef. A sous chef is basically pretty close to being a chef. He knows a lot and everything of how the kitchen operates but he's right below a chef where he's not really in charge but he also knows can step into every little place there is to fill in that gap, and I really enjoyed working for Frank and learned a tremendous amount. At K. Paul's I really learned how to cook Cajun food and at Frank Brighton's I really learned how to cook Creole food in a professional manner. There's two different things when you start out in cooking. You know you have your home cooks who really cook great and then there's the professional side where you're in a commercial kitchen and you have to produce a lot of food at once. And that's very much different from the home cook to the professional cook.

[00:06:07.09] Bryan Recile: Did you ever feel in those early stages, was there any time where you were like wow this is a lot of pressure? Like more than I expected, like working in a kitchen and that environment as compared to like cooking at home and stuff like that.

[00:06:07.09] Greg Sonnier: Absolutely. You know starting out when I did start out. First cooking professionally at K. Paul's, literally every day before we opened up for service and for service means when you open the doors and let people through, literally before every day before you opened up there would be three hundred people in line to get in the place. So when you opened up the doors to this hundred and ten seat restaurant it would be filled right away. So the pressure would be enormous to produce a tremendous amount of food on your station or what your responsible for was enormous. I want to say after you kind of fed that first turn, we call it, the first number of people to come in you would kind of get in a rhythm and go from there. Obviously when you work in a kitchen there's all sort of little things that could happen.

Gosh, there's one I'll never forget. Sometimes your deep fryer was a fry cook to begin with working there, your fryer could go out or your fryer would have to be changed so you would have to do that in the middle of service. So yeah it was a challenge every single day. Sometimes a challenge each hour, but it was a matter of you getting through that and also satisfying the needs of the guy that's above you or the chef that is above you. I think we did a great job doing it. Obviously when you finish the night, and each night you finish, and even today when I'm finished you feel the gratification that "Gee I accomplished this." and that kind of takes away the pressure I want to say.

[00:08:00.01] Bryan Recile: Was there ever like in those early stages, because I know you said there's no moment where you feel like you've become a chef necessarily, but was there ever a moment where you made a dish and you remember being extremely proud that you were able accomplish the dish so well? Was there ever a moment like that?

[00:08:17.24] Greg Sonnier: You know part of being a chef, one of the things that really goes into becoming that chef or saying I'm a chef is creating your own dish, and the way I do is I kind of take stuff from what I've learned before at other places and even around town or reading books, like cook books, and stuff like that and kind of mix them together and use my

interpretation of this is how I think this dish should be and absolutely you become very proud of that. I can give you some many examples of different dishes that were yeah take a little bit from this place and little from that place and kind of put those dishes together and mix and match and test it out and see how it works, and evolve the dish to where I'm like yeah this is a great interpretation, and I'm very proud of it. And yeah sometimes you'll get it recognized through the press and through people that eat there. There's one particular dish that I could never get rid of on my menu which I'm very proud of and that's our duck dish.

[00:09:26.25] Bryan Recile: I know you said that you...speaking of the food...that you grew up in a Bucktown and then you moved to the Westbank and then uptown. Do you think that this had a huge influence on the style of food that you cook? As in coming from Bucktown and seeing all the seafood around there and then going to the Westbank and seeing the type of food out there. Do you feel that going to all those places helped you become such a great chef?

[00:09:52.23] Greg Sonnier: It definitely contributed to it. You know I want to say my- I was very fortunate to grow up in a family where my dad really loved to eat out. That was his favorite past time. He worked really hard as a physician, but then on weekends he liked to take us out to different restaurants, and yeah when we lived in Bucktown we used to go eat at different restaurants and eateries in West end and that had all nothing but seafood, and the same thing when you went uptown and you went to a little higher class restaurants and things like that. So yeah definitely that exposure that you get and remembering some of the dishes that you had when you were a kid contributes all they way to being a chef.

[00:10:37.22] Bryan Recile: Well speaking of Uptown too- I know that you opened Kingfish uptown in the French Quarter and then used to have a restaurant in Mid-city. What is the difference I guess with what people's expectations are when they go to the French Quarter? Do you find that it's different than when they go to a restaurant in Mid-City?

[00:10:58.23] Greg Sonnier: You know I think in working in the French Quarter and then working in other places around town. People that go the the French Quarter are normally just tourists. There are very little locals that go there. Tourists are a lot easier to satisfy because if you have someone that's coming from I don't know up North that doesn't have our type of cuisine at all and is not really familiar with it they are very much fascinated right away. So I want to say they're a little bit easier to please and they're a little bit wowed by the food and stuff like that. Where as when you have a restaurant away from the quarter and do attract a lot of locals, which we do, it's a not a lot harder to please, but it makes it more of a challenge to say hey this guy is pretty good or to have the customer leave with a smile on his face. It's easy to do in the quarter. You know you always want the customer to leave with a smile on his face. It's a little bit harder to do outside of that.

[00:11:56.05] Bryan Recile: When it comes to cooking in the quarter, have you noticed that with that do you feel that you changed the menu to fit like more a New Orleans style for the quarter?

[00:12:05.05] Greg Sonnier: Yeah absolutely. You have to make your menu so it's not so complicated so that you have things or items on the menu that can be explained by a waiter very easily. If you make your menu a little bit too complicated I want to say your customers don't really understand it. And I think that for the French Quarter and people that visit us and in New Orleans as a whole, you really should simplify things. Although not to say that you don't have to make it to where it's just so basic it's just basic gumbo you can always just make it just a little bit more fun or a little bit more complicated.

[00:12:44.29] Bryan Recile: Is there any- because I know you said your mom included you the most in cooking, do you find that there's any dishes that you have on the menus or that you've had on the menu that you feel has been influenced by your mom's cooking?

s[00:13:05.12] Greg Sonnier: That's a good question. I want to say you know that when I cook or when my mom taught me how to cook, she actually showed me a lot of recipes that I really never wrote down, and I always wanted to run this one dish that I never wrote it down and she showed me a couple of times how to make it and she learned it from her mother-in-law actually. It was a chicken dish with rice and onions and it was really good. It was almost smothered like, and I tried to duplicate it one time and it wasn't the same thing, very very tough. But I want to say my mother did influence me and the way maybe not technique wise, but the way to taste food and things like that. Almost like the basics of cooking. Which obviously a lot of people that go to cooking school I don't even think know the basics of cooking or even any kind of terminology and stuff like that. In a professional atmosphere terminology is way different than a regular residential kitchen. Just naming pans and pots and things like that.

[00:14:12.25] Bryan Recile: So you felt like.. kind of like... an upper edge when you started because maybe like... because you guys did that?

[00:14:20.07] Greg Sonnier: I think it was really good. My mother always loved to cook. My grandmother always loved to cook and also a lot of my dad's family who were Cajuns really loved to cook. We would go there on every holiday, every Thanksgiving, every Christmas, and there would be a big spread of food. I remember as a kid with just a tremendous amount of different dishes within the spread of food. I remember as kids we would just eat it all up. We just enjoyed it. All the relatives that we used to visit I want to say we're just Cajun connoisseurs of food. They just really loved to eat and they really showed it because they all weighed about over three or four hundred pounds, but they certainly enjoyed themselves and had the best time of their lives. And I want to say as a kid I'll never forget going there and smelling the smells that you would smell and seeing the dishes and the food and stuff like that. Really just you know you just kind of remember and you remember. It's something that will live with you all the time.

[00:15:25.24] Bryan Recile: Have you ever had someone, like if someone says they don't like your food, how do you take that and grow from that I guess in a way?

[00:15:40.29] Greg Sonnier: You know that does tend to happen. Some people and even today at our restaurant, some people don't like the style of gumbo I have which is a dark roux kind of Cajun style gumbo. Some people like the lighter, softer, butter roux type gumbo. Mine is made with you know fat gumbo. Or the roux is made with fat. So that yeah some people like it, and there's really nothing I can do to make them or to make that I would have to change the entire dish for them to do that and for a lot of times when that does happen in a restaurant. When someone doesn't like it, certainly the person are not going to pay for the dish and you know I kind of take it with a grain of salt and make sure that, and you know I always make sure that the waiter comes back and says hey I want to see the dish that the guy didn't like just to make sure it tasted fine and things like that, but I want to say it always happens, and I think in every restaurant people's taste are way different. Maybe there expectations are way different. So that in a restaurant environment you really just had to do the best you can with what you learn and make sure the wait staff who really the wait staff in a restaurant are your sales people. Those are the people that are if you would go in Saks Fifth Avenue are the people who are sitting there saying hey can I help and what can I help you with. Well these are the people that approach you and say hey let me tell you about this let me tell you about that, and that's kind of how I go about it.

[00:18:06.19] Asha Thomas: So, Mr. Sonnier let me just make sure I have everything right, so, you and your wife own and operate Gabrielle?

[00:18:13.26] Greg Sonnier: mhm

[00:18:13.26] Asha Thomas: Ok. And so that's Uptown? Or is that Mid-City?

[00:18:17.15] Greg Sonnier: Actually it is in Treme today.

[00:18:18.23] Asha Thomas: Really?

[00:18:18.23] Greg Sonnier: Yeah we're in Treme. I wanna say we're very close and maybe a block and a half down from Dooky Chase. Which everybody knows Dooky Chase. And then we're right around the corner from Willie Mae's Scotch House. Which I think everybody knows where, or who Willie Mae's Scotch house is. A Willie Mays restaurant. And uh...were in that little corridor that's really a gateway to Midcity. And a gateway to the French Quarter and right next door to the Lafitte Greenway which is probably one of the biggest up and coming roadways in the city of New Orleans.

[00:18:52.05] Asha Thomas: So that's a perfect spot then. That's really good. So you're also the executive chef for Kingfish?

[00:18:58.24] Greg Sonnier: No I worked at Kingfish and actually I was the starting chef. You know when you open a restaurant and there is always the starting chef or the guy who opens the restaurant and kinda builds a theme from the ground up and then if you leave somebody else has to take over, well everything is already started systems are already in place the kind of

mindsets are already there so to speak. So that's the hardest part of any kind of restaurant is to actually become the opening chef and making sure all the logistics and everything's kind of worked out and it's a little bit more challenging then for somebody to just walk into a place and just take over.

[00:19:41.23] Asha Thomas: Ok that's very interesting because I was looking at the article they had about you on Kingfisher's website and it was very interesting. But am I correct in assuming that Gabrielle is your daughter?

[00:19:54.21] Greg Sonnier: uh huh.

[00:19:57.05] Asha Thomas: Ok and so I was looking and I saw that y'all are really family owned and operated like is she at the front in center? Like her fiance's in there?

[00:20:02.14] Greg Sonnier: She is. Well one of my goals is to have her really own the place one day and run the entire place one day and be in charge one day. So that she can carry on her legacy and yeah it's her namesake. So that I think she takes it a little bit uh...I wanna say if I had a restaurant named after me I'd be a little bit flustered and flattered but also I always want to make sure I'm on top my game and make sure I'm having the place run well.

[00:20:34.02] Asha Thomas: So she knows she wants to take on the restaurant?

[00:20:38.05] Greg Sonnier: She did, she graduated from Lake Forest college and with an arts degree. And then she wanted to stay in Chicago and work and I found her a job at a place called the Purple Pig and I know the chef there and this was a brand new place opening up it hadn't opened up yet and she was the first hostess of this place and it's right on the miracle mile it's a very busy eatery kinda great hip food. And the thing is there's no reservations so being a hostess is a little tough for someplace where there's no reservations. And after that she came down and did a couple of other stints between that and then became the general manager of Gabrielle.

[00:21:37.02] Asha Thomas: That's so cool though, you should be proud. I'm sure your very proud.

[00:21:40.15] Greg Sonnier: I am and I guess it's a little hard to adjust to working with your daughter and to have her tell you off and stuff like that.

[00:21:50.08] Asha Thomas: Ok, So that happens?

[00:21:53.03] Greg Sonnier: In a restaurant that's always happening. you know it's just a hot environment from the standpoint from working in the kitchen and working in the whole atmosphere and on and on and controlling your staff and things like that, that's just the tough part you have to be their friend but also be their leader. Without those two in place it really won't work.

[00:22:21.03] Asha Thomas: So has that been tough especially when you were starting out and everything? How was that a transition of you trying to figure out how to manage that working relationship?

g[00:22:31.23] Greg Sonnier: Yeah I wanna say I have a lot of experience from doing that from just running the old place that we had for thirteen years on esplanade and also having good teachers when i was first starting out. Chef Paul was a great teacher to show us how to lead a kitchen and how to manage people and how to tell people and talk to people that are your employees and Frank also carried that on to working for him and also kind of working with other people in the other stints i did after the storm. We all associate everything before and after the storm. And after the storm I worked with a couple of different people who had their own style so you kind of learn and pick up things like that. I really do enjoy the little family atmosphere of a small restaurant there's' nothing like it I don't think you can ever really find to many place that are better. You know when ever I go travel out of town I always ask where the small little family restaurant is to go eat at.

[00:23:37.18] Asha Thomas: Cool, and actually speaking of the storm y'all lost the first location of Gabrielle to the storm, and I know it's not a positive experience but what was that like?

[00:23:46.17] Greg Sonnier: That was tuff you know I can remember it like it was last month the storm was a hard thing to get over and kind of going through the experience I think that everybody was affected by it. I think everybody was really challenged once the levees broke. The storm I think we actually made it through, it was the levees that broke that killed all the businesses and flooded all the different homes and stuff like that. I think for that you had to take each day as it is and try to make through each day and eventually it got better and better. But still it was very very tuff seeing your place basically destroyed and then having yourself to clean it out and all that and just having to do so many different things that you weren't used to doing. It was a very tuff situation for many chefs that had restaurants to and everybody handled it in their own kinda way. One of the good things was we were a family restaurant so we had a lot of family to help us. The people that work for hotels and stuff like that were a little bit different in that they kind of worked for the big corporate places, and those handle things way differently than you would normally think.

[00:25:09.11] Asha Thomas: That's true... that's probably really essential. But did y'all ever consider not reopening the restaurant or was to reopen always the goal?

[00:25:18.23] Greg Sonnier: No we always wanted to reopen. That was always my goal and I knew it would take a long time to get back after seeing the devastation and stuff like that I knew it wasn't gonna just happen like I knew it wasn't just going to happen at the snap of a finger. it was always my goal and it was always my goal to have Gabby, that's her nickname, to work with us in some capacity. And I thought it would be great to get back and going and eventually have her working for us. I want to say in the beginning she really didn't like a restaurant named after her and I think later on she did.

[00:26:00.23] Asha Thomas: What was the cause of that change?

[00:26:02.27] Greg Sonnier: I don't know. I guess maybe some famous people came in and she thought "well their coming to my place".

[00:26:12.25] Asha Thomas: That's to funny. But you were talking to Bryan earlier about how you mix and match dishes and i was looking at your menu especially from Kingfish and you had some really interesting dishes like Shakshuka gator and all types of things. So can you kinda describe the creative process that goes into coming up with a very innovative dish that has a Louisiana foundation but is so new and creative.

[00:26:36.19] Greg Sonnier: It is an interpretation. I always think that and that's the one thing that I'm very fortunate that I grew up here in New Orleans and I want to say the whole state of Louisiana cause I have relatives all around especially in cajun country and Lafayette and New Iberia. I kind of grew up with that mindset of Louisiana food. And you know I always think of dishes of what's Louisiana in it or what can i inject Louisiana into it. And uh ... yeah if you look at Shakshuka, I want to say an Israeli dish, which i was always fascinated by this dish, and i first had it in a restaurant in Oregon... Portland Oregon and I thought it was so fascinating and so interesting with an egg in the middle of a ragu.I was thinking "what could i do to kind interject it into being somewhat of a New Orleans or Louisiana dish but have that Israeli influence", because that was where it was invented and so I thought alligator would be a perfect thing because their is alligator sauce pecan. This dish is very similar to a sauce pecan in the fact that it incorporates stewed potatoes and more of a ragu of potatoes in it and that's kind of how i came up with it. And figuring out how to cook the alligator meat so it would kind of be a tasty dish. And so i take things and think of it and actually try and make it. And while i'm thinking of the dish i think of the palate involved.You know when you first put it into your mouth what are you gonna taste? and then what's your kind of after taste. And you know when I kinda learned how to cook was with a layered flavors.So that you will have a whole bunch of multiple layers of flavor that are going on and I will never forget what Chef Paul always said, " It's like a party in your mouth going on". And so that's always what you want to have that effect. And it makes it really yummy and makes it real good. Obviously it takes a little bit of thought and a little bit of creativity. And a lot of people I hate to say dont have that and they will just copy the dish and just get it from somebody else.

[00:29:00.16] Asha Thomas: True, that's very interesting.That's actually a question I had were you ever nervous about how locals are harder to please in a sense? Were you ever nervous about how some of the dishes would be perceived by local mouths?

[00:29:17.03] Greg Sonnier: Uhm... not really I always thought that when I go to cook a dish, or when you go to present a dish, or when we go to or when someone orders a dish I make it so a couple of things have to happen number one is that the person is not going to make it at home or can't make it at home. Number two is that the person is kinda fascinated with the evolution of

the dish, or maybe the creativity of the dish so that they want to say, "wow I want to try this because this sounds really interesting. And number three is so that a person will come in and look at a menu in your restaurant and they will say "gosh there's so many good things on here I don't know what I'll get". So if you can put all those little things, or all those little pieces of the puzzle together, then all you have to do is make a really good plate of food coming out there and then you're really satisfying that customer. One of the things I always like to say to is... when I go up and say hello to someone..."well now you have to come back and try this and try that". And so yeah they can't eat the whole menu, even though we have had people try but still they still will have to come back and eat all those things.

[00:30:33.08] Asha Thomas: I love that would you say that eating at your restaurant is really an experience? That's what it sounds like. It's not like a run of the mill type thing.

[00:30:44.05] Greg Sonnier: Oh absolutely, I always want to have every dish very individualized and very unique in itself. And so that person says, "Hey I have a special dish compared to his dish". It doesn't always revolve around the same little thing. Kind of hard to describe it but in the sense that it's not like gumbo, it's not just normal mill of the gumbo, it's a little bit different it's got smoked quail in it, it's got fennel anise flavored sausage, so that it has little components that kind of complement it and it's a nice dark roux broth.

[00:31:33.23] Asha Thomas: One of my last questions, I was reading this article about you and this was just something that really struck me in it. You were talking about how for Kingfish you were thinking the decor was going to be more like art deco, very reminiscent of Huey Long and all of that but you said you did not want any white table cloths. Like what was the reasoning behind that? I'm just curious to hear why that decision was made in an upscale restaurant.

[00:32:01.17] Greg Sonnier: You know, I guess just looking at the prohibition era restaurant or something like that you wouldn't expect to have tablecloths. It was very much an industrial, I guess, an industrial type looking place. And you know to have tablecloths their I don't know if it would match the rest of the decor of the place. You know when I did work there it was very interesting that they would have a table say of a bunch of elderly ladies that were dressed up, and then at the very next table there would be tanks tops and people with tattoos all over their bodies. It attracted all classes of people which I thought was great. For the French Quarter, their again being in the French Quarter to, I don't think you need that tablecloth look people don't expect that I do think in today's world for the average tourist it doesn't really get the white table cloth thing certainly locals do and the older locals love it but I want to say if things have changed moving away from it a bit I personally love tablecloths and at Gabrielle's we have table cloths and their again it's kind of a family atmosphere.

[00:33:36.17] Asha Thomas: So it was almost like it was being democratized over there. Look that's really all I have, this has been a wonderful interview. We appreciate you so much.

[00:33:53.19] Greg Sonnier: Thank you.

