

Interview with James Cullen
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6363 St. Charles Avenue
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Interviewed by: Katie Walters
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Abstract: James Cullen may have started working in the service industry later than most, but his list of accomplishments is never ending. He has worked in a large variety of restaurants, including many fine dining establishments. He has created numerous dishes, and takes a lot of inspiration from his Italian heritage. Outside of the kitchen he spends his time writing and doing photography, both things he has been commissioned to do. Having attended Boston College, a Jesuit school, Cullen places concern in social justice issues, and spends his time trying to give back to the community. His light hearted humor and easygoingness is reflected in the interview, where he discusses the positives and the negatives of kitchen life.

Service Industry Collection
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Katie Walters: [00:00:10] So thank you for your time today. How's your day going?

James Cullen: [00:00:13] My day is wonderful. We have a little interesting weather outside but nothing unusual for southeast Louisiana this time of year so.

Katie Walters: [00:00:20] You know there's a tornado watch for the day right? Isn't that crazy?

James Cullen: [00:00:23] I do. I'm just hoping my house doesn't get destroyed, but yeah it's that time of year, so.

Katie Walters: [00:00:30] So I wanted to start by getting a little background. Can you tell me about yourself?

James Cullen: [00:00:34] Ok. My name is James Cullen. I'm 46 years old. I'm the executive chef of Upperline restaurant which is in uptown New Orleans on Upperline street between St. Charles and Prytania. I've been cooking professionally for about 15 years. I didn't start as young as a lot of people in my position. I had a few careers, I graduated from Boston College in 94 and I worked as a paralegal for six months and didn't care for it all. And then I worked in industrial construction for almost 10 years because my father was an electrician, a union electrician, so I did that and then right after September 11th, I'm originally from New York City area, I decided I wanted to do something different so I didn't really know what and I was watching The Japanese Iron Chefs one night, late night TV, and I'm like well this looks fascinating. And so I went to the French Culinary Institute Manhattan, I graduated number one of my class and I've been at it ever since. I spent the first half my career in New York City and the second half here in New Orleans.

Katie Walters: [00:01:55] So what brought you here?

James Cullen: [00:01:59] My wife is from here. She's from New Orleans and, actually she liked New York City better. I came down here a few times and I'm like, now let's come and try it. Let's give it a try. So I am now. So we've been here ever since, 7 years now, so.

Katie Walters: [00:02:22] Is she a chef too?

James Cullen: [00:02:23] No she is an event manager. She manages Latrobe's in the French Quarter which is an events space, they do wedding, corporate, high end private parties, also things like that. So yes we're both in the service industry.

Katie Walters: [00:02:40] So who cooks most the time at home?

James Cullen: [00:02:43] If she didn't have to walk through the kitchen to get to the front door she wouldn't know where it was. So I cook exclusively pretty much, but we've never home. So if we are home I'm doing the cooking. I do all the holidays for sure, and yes, all the cooking.

Katie Walters: [00:03:02] So you mentioned you grew up in New York. How was that.

James Cullen: [00:03:04] I grew up right outside New York 30 miles outside New York City in New Jersey, and actually a very small town that was largely a farming town when I was younger. Now it's kind of cut a lot of subdivisions and such but you know it was great. I mean I was in the city all the time but I lived in the country so I got a little bit of both. I mean New York is, when people think of the city New York as a city they think it's the biggest, most diverse, fast paced, most interesting; I mean actually no one is probably the most interesting, but New York has everything. There's nothing, you know if you want to go to an Ethiopian restaurant, a Malaysian restaurant and a Vietnamese restaurant the same day you can probably do it within a five block walk. So it's a lot, it's very stimulating, it's very expensive now and it's one of the reasons that I decided I wanted to make a change. I mean the cost of living for, chefs don't make that much in New York but the cost of living is very very high so, and also I just

wanted to see a different part of the country. I lived my entire life in the northeast up until I was around 40 so.

Katie Walters: [00:04:16] Do you like the weather better down here.

James Cullen: [00:04:20] I like the mildness, the weather down here is a little crazy. You know I miss the winter sometimes, the winter's are cool for like two weeks. You see snow, it's cool, it's cold out. It feels Christmasy, but after that it can drag. The, you know the weather down here I love from like October to February where you have that milder, cooler but still easy on the joints humidity. From April to September it can be a little rough with the heat but I mean that's every, yeah that's everybody feels the same way I'm pretty sure. You know it's always 95 degrees and rainy at Jazz Fest, so.

Katie Walters: [00:05:04] So you mentioned that you went to Boston College. Can you tell me a little bit about that.

James Cullen: [00:05:08] Yeah I was a literature major. So you know I can still recite the first 35 lines of "The Love Song" J. Alfred Prufrock, I did a thesis on Milton, but one of my areas of concentration is on Southern literature, Faulkner, and I think that's also what drew me to the south because Faulkner lived in New Orleans for a time, he lived primarily in Oxford Mississippi. But I had a real interest in Southern literature so that's what I studied and I think a Literature major's pretty good because it kind of teaches you empathy, because when you read you get into other people's stories in other people's lives and mindsets and so, it's not the most practical degree but it gives you a good worldview. So that was my time at Boston College.

Katie Walters: [00:06:12] Obviously Loyola and Boston College are both Jesuit schools, so I was wondering if that played any impact in your life or if it wasn't really important to you.

James Cullen: [00:06:20] I thought the, I mean, I grew up raised Catholic. I thought that the Jesuit worldview is kind of interesting, it's not a particularly strict doctrinaire kind of, and humanism is very important in Jesuit education, and yeah I think so. I do. You know we did have to take religion class like probably you do here I would think but, it wasn't dogmatic, it was really, it was kind of an expansive way of looking at the world. I enjoyed it. I mean I like I like philosophy, I like literature. I like the humanities in general, I think that that's one of the overlooked things about the college experience now is too many people think college is supposed to be this hard job training and that's not really what it's for it's to make you a more well-rounded person, a better thinker, a more. I mean that's why they call it the humanities.

Katie Walters: [00:07:24] So carrying on with the kind of Jesuit thing. Something that you mentioned, I stalked your Twitter a little bit, and something you mentioned was that you're happiest when you're helping other people. What kind of stuff do you do to get back to the community?

James Cullen: [00:07:38] Well I think one of the things that is lacking in today's society is mentorship, is very, everybody, because of the kind of economy we work in and the state of the country in general, everybody is very focused on protecting what little thing they have instead of sharing their knowledge, sharing their talents, and I think there's a little bit of selfishness and greed in the world, a lot quite honestly. And for me I've never been one that if you want any of my recipes I'm happy to give them to you because you know the most important ingredient anywhere in any recipe is the mind and the hands of the person making it. So you can, I can give it to you, your food never gonna taste like my food. And you know, that's fine, but just taking the extra time, I don't care how busy it is, if we're in the middle of a service and I see something being done incorrectly or not the way I'd like to or just in a way that makes it harder than it has to be I'll stop and be like look you know let's do this and this because it's important to nurture people's interests and to be supportive. Kitchens can be fairly rough places. There's a lot of pressure. So you have to find ways to take time to let people know that you're interested in them and you want to see them grow professionally and personally. And also people that might not get as many opportunities. I mean it was funny because before I started working at Upperline, I

interviewed at Banna, and they said, well, we have another candidate that, you know, we were looking at and the chef goes you're more qualified. I said Aha. I said well tell me a little bit about the other candidate. And he goes well, you know "he's a young guy, he's just got out of the military, you know, African-American". I said "hire him". He goes "what do you mean?", he goes "you don't want the job?". "So well I think you should hire him because I'm gonna get an opportunity somewhere else. I have, you know, a long resume. I've worked in a lot of places, I said, but he might not have this opportunity again. So you know if I were you, I would hire him, because he's hungry for the job". And I think it's important to think about other people and not just about yourself because, one of the big problems in the world right now is selfishness and greed and just a myopic vision that a lot of people have, so. For me it's about finding ways to give back when you can, I mean a lot of times we have food left over. So I tell the staff "look you know on your way home, stop under the Claiborne bridge, drop this off to people under the bridge", you know do what you can to help when you can. We can't save everybody and you can't help everybody but everybody can do something and that's kind of my philosophy in life, so.

Katie Walters: [00:10:49] That's awesome. That's really cool. So you mentioned how important mentorship and guidance are. Has anyone in your family kind of guided your journey to being a chef.

James Cullen: [00:10:59] My family? You know my grandmother was a wonderful cook. My grandmother was from Sicily and I don't know if it was conscious guiding but she was, I always watched her cook and I always enjoyed her cooking. You know I mean when people ask you "oh if you could have one thing again" I'm like "it would be anything she made", you know, because she was really talented and resourceful because she lived through the Great Depression so she could make bread from scratch and pastas from scratch and can and jar and do all that stuff that is kind of a lost art because, generationally somewhere cooking kinda, there was a break. Probably between my grandmother's generation and my mother's generation because, you know, in the 60s and 70s and 80s convenience foods were really, really popular and kind of almost thought as superior like you can save yourself time. You know, now that 20 minutes that it was going to take you to cook a chicken breast you don't even have to do that, you can just put it in a microwave for. So, I admired, and my mother was a good cook

don't get me wrong about that, but my grandmother was an exceptionally good cook. But no conscious guiding, I mean it really, they're probably still mad at me for it, you know, they wanted me to be I think a lawyer or, you know they spent all that money on my college and I work in a kitchen. But it's, you know like I said it's a hard job, it can be a very rewarding job, sometimes, you know, you wake up and you know, what am I doing? Because, especially when you work in fine dining like I do, most of the people that come in are really well off so sometimes you feel like you're performing for really well-off people as their entertainment but, I'm getting tangential, but as far as direct guidance, not really. I've had a lot of people in my career though that have mentored me. I used to have one of my teachers at the French Culinary Institute was the best French chef. And he was from the Basque region but he moved to France, Sixto Alonso, a really interesting guy. He was a hunter and he taught me how to butcher whole animals, like game animals. He used to call me really early in the morning in his hotel. He goes, "James, are you awake?" I'm like "no it's 4:00 in the morning, I'm not awake." He says, "come to the house, we have a deer." And I'm like, "okay great." So, but he was very generous with what he knew and his time and that always made an impression on me, so I always try to be generous with what I know and my time, so.

Katie Walters: [00:13:43] That's really cool, It's so important, and like you said in this day and age to be really helpful to other people, especially people who look up to you. Talking about your family. Do you have a favorite family recipe?

James Cullen: [00:13:57] My grandmother's fried meatballs. Yes there, a lot of meatball recipes have three meats in it. Veal, beef and pork. But she just did hers with beef. But she fried them in good olive oil and like this little skillet, and they were just delicious. And there's really nothing, It's probably like, let me think of it. So it's beef, parmesan, pecorino romano, parsley, bread crumbs, and salt and pepper and that's it. That's the whole thing. And she'd like made them in balls and flatten them out a little so they's cook quick and they've got this lovely caramelization in the pan so they were just delicious. I used to snack on those like crazy. Her Italian wedding soup too which also features little meatballs in the soup. And lasagna I still make, I do my take on it but I still make the lasagna Christmas every year

because that's what we had at Christmas every year. We had a turkey, we had a lasagna, so. Those are things that, any of the Sicilian-Italian things that I grew up with, yeah. My uncle, actually my uncle, my uncle Charlie, and I'm not really sure what he does for a living and I'm pretty sure he's in the mob but at any rate he makes the best sopressata and he actually he gave me the recipe last year, he wrote it down from me but, and our family's is almost more like a Spanish chorizo. So it's a little spicier. It's got a little bit more paprika and it's very good. So that's probably, those are my favorites. Yeah.

Katie Walters: [00:15:42] And then do you have a staple ingredient that you cook with or?

James Cullen: [00:15:45] A staple ingredient, salt.

Katie Walters: [00:15:47] Salt?

James Cullen: [00:15:48] Definitely salt. I mean, it can't be understated how important salt is in the kitchen. Salt is everything. You can cure with salt, you can season with salt, you can clean with salt. When you have cast iron skillets the best way to clean them is to put not olive oil but oil and salt in there, and then take a brown paper bag and rub it out and we get everything out. But yeah, good kosher salt because it's a coarse flake so you can see it, so you can see the seasoning, you don't want over season with it. Good oils for sure. I like to have a good olive oil always in the kitchen. I like good vinegars. Basically your pantry staples but I mean, salt and seasoning is one of the hardest things to teach because it's got to be right there where it's not too salty but you know the seasoning brings out the flavor. That's really what the, salt is the only, besides MSG, the only ingredient in the kitchen that actually intensifies the flavor of what you're cooking. So that's why it's so important, and it's important to have a good one. You know, not table salt for food because, though for certain things that has its uses too. But yeah I would say that's the one thing I'm always looking for, whether I'm making brines or seasoning meat or even like, just a little finish on a salad. It will make the dressing a little bit more alive so.

Katie Walters: [00:17:35] So I'm really interested to learn from you because I've always wondered what the difference is, like, on different seasonal menus. What makes a meal better for spring and another one better for fall?

James Cullen: [00:17:47] Well part of it's a consideration of the weather. Part of it is the growing seasons now, Louisiana has kind of an all year round growing season, it's not as in the Northeast in the spring asparagus come up. It's one of the first vegetables that pops up in the spring, so. It's a delicate vegetable, a really pretty vegetables, it's one of the ones I really miss getting fresh and, so what makes things better in the spring? Well everything's in bloom in the spring. So you have things blossoming. You have edible flowers, you have zucchini, you know you have. So there's also a lightness about it. So spring dishes you want to make lighter, and you want to use the things that are coming up fiddlehead ferns, asparagus, certain lighter proteins are nice and light pasta dishes. Now in the fall that's the harvest. So that's where you're getting all your apples and your the heavier fruits and vegetables like beets and all that. And you want more of a hardiness and a richness. It's a good time of year for stews. It's a good time of year for braises, like a lamb shank or something like that. So really you're just thinking about what's available to you at different times a year and then pairing it. I mean I used to love in the spring just poaching an egg and lightly sautéing some asparagus. Put the egg on top and just hit it with a little hollandaise and like that's breakfast and that's just a nice, kind of light meal with a poached egg. The egg yolk becomes like a second sauce, so. But in the fall, I mean that's where you get your, like really hardy dishes like your Coq au Vin, your beef bourguignon, your braises and your meats that are going to take a little bit longer to cook like shanks and short ribs and stuff like that. So it's you know it's also about place too because different things grow in different places. So what I would put on a menu in New York is different than what I would put on the menu in New Orleans because like, the growing seasons and the varieties are different so.

Katie Walters: [00:20:16] Sorry. Do you have a favorite meal that you invented?

James Cullen: [00:20:20] Ooh a favorite meal that I invented. Probably one of the dishes that I really like that I used to do is, it was a play on the New Orleans style barbecued shrimp but I'd do it with mussels. So I would start the muscles in white wine, shallots, garlic, cognac, a little fresh thyme and steam open. In another pan I would use Creole mustard, heavy cream, Worcestershire, a little hot sauce and some seasoning and like kind of make like a pan of barbecue sauce and add a little bit of the cooking liquid into that. And that was really nice. I liked it. I did a play on shrimp and grits. But I did it with a green Thai curry. So I took, instead of grits I used polenta and I made it with lemongrass. So it was lemongrass polenta and a green Thai curry with sauteed shrimp and it had shaved jalapenos, micro greens on it. It was, I think it was micro greens. I liked that one a lot. I'm trying to think, you know I've written I did, I had these crawfish empanadas which I really really liked that I did at Treo, which was a gastro pub I used to being in and I, when I was at St. Lawrence I had a few. I had, I did a fried Oyster Bombay which was really really good. And people tell me my fried chicken recipe is the best I've ever had so I don't, you know that. But I didn't invent that one. You know I just, years of poking my head into old ladies kitchens and asking a lot of questions you know, so. Those are things you know, I like to cook satisfying things. I mean, you can be too precious sometimes on a plate and there's a place for that. But that's not my style. My style is a little bit more accessible.

Katie Walters: [00:22:41] The weather is angry at us.

James Cullen: [00:22:43] It's God calling. Go ahead.

Katie Walters: [00:22:48] So I was wondering if you have a chef who you kind of look up to, who's your role model?

James Cullen: [00:22:53] Leah Chase, without a doubt. Someone who to me epitomizes, just hard work and dedication. I've gotten to know her and we've become friendly over the years and I try to visit her, at least, once a month. Go have lunch and then go in the kitchen and talk to her. But, you know she's overcome far more than, you know, she's overcome the Jim Crow South, she's overcome being a

woman chef, she's overcome, you know, so many, having a restaurant destroyed during Katrina and she still perseveres. She's in the kitchen every day. She still does a decent amount of cooking, so yeah, her. Definitely. Daniel Boulud very much. I got to meet him once when I was a line cook in New York City and the amount of respect he showed, because I was in the profession, he took us in the kitchen of Daniel and I mean he was just very much a gentleman. I liked him a lot. I think Eric Ripert. I've never met him but I just like the way he works and his style very much. Jacques Pepin who was one of our deans at the French Culinary Institute who taught me the proper way to clean an artichoke and he was another guy that stopped what he was doing and took time out of his day for me, so. I have a lot of regard for him.

Katie Walters: [00:24:24] You mentioned the Leah kind of overcame being a female chef. Do you think it's the media that kind of pushes men more into the spotlight or do you think it's a societal issue?

James Cullen: [00:24:35] A lot of it I think is the work itself. It's strange. The quantities and the sizes of things that you have to work with in the kitchen, I mean it's nothing to have a stockpot that's you know a hundred twenty five pound stockpot that you have to move, or 50 pound bags of flour or. It's not what is advertised on TV, which is like this genteel kind of environment where everybody's stirring things in little pots and you know you're. It's kind of it's gotten less so, but it's kind of a rough and tumble job. And I don't know the exact reasons, I mean there's plenty of top notch female chefs but I think the work itself sometimes isn't that attractive. You see a lot more women in pastry typically but that's leveling out. You know it's hard to say because my restaurant experience certainly isn't typical or indicative of what goes on a lot of the industry but I'm sure there's definitely an old boys club mentality. But I think a lot of it was because in France, most fine dining and modern American cooking came from like France and Italy and that's how kitchens are structured over there. They're fairly male dominated. So I think that influence might have been carried over here. Because the first chefs of note in America were always Europeans. That was the sign of a good restaurant if you had a French chef or an Italian chef. It wasn't until probably the 60s maybe 70s and 80s where American chefs started to get their own note, like Larry Forgione or Paul Prudhomme, so. But you know it's an interesting question, I

mean. And I definitely think, you know, in some ways I'm sure there was lack of opportunity. I mean it's the same reason that you don't see many African-American head chefs. So your kitchens are full of, you know, African-American cooks is because a lot of times no one took the time to mentor and also its perception of what people want to what they want to advertise a chef to be. So I don't really know the answer but I think there's a lot of factors involved. And I think probably you know for a while people were just discouraged by their families from getting into the business in general, so. That would be a good question for Mary Sonnier. You should ask her when she gets here. But because, like I said, my career path I've actually worked for a number of women chefs and women owners. So it's been a little different. So I can't really speak for everybody on that.

Katie Walters: [00:27:58] Do you think because of that kind of power dynamic do you think that could be why there's a lot of sexual harassment?

James Cullen: [00:28:05] Oh I absolutely. And I also think you know the kitchen culture in general is very odd compared to normal workplaces. You, I mean the amount of physical contact you have with other employees, not even because it's intentional, but because you're in a space that's this big and you're working with three people and you're constantly bumping into each other. You know it's like a really ugly ballet where. But that's why we have our own set of words and communication kitchens of like behind, side, shoulder, this so people always know where you are because it's really easy to hurt somebody. There's knives, there's hot stuff. But yeah, I mean I definitely think the power dynamic, when Escoffier created the brigade system is very militaristic. So there was already that kind of abusive militaristic setup if you will. I'm trying to think of the word but. So yeah I think there is definitely bad systems in place but it kind of perpetuates itself because for so long nobody really, no one knew who the chefs were. It was kind of a very cloistered circumscribed kind of thing. And there's more interest now in cooking culinary than there ever has before so. And I also think people from different walks of life that used to be in the kitchen are getting into it, that worked in different jobs like, you know, no kitchen I ever worked in up until the last few years ever had an H.R. department. But you have people that are, a lot of people that are in different careers that decide they want to change careers and

become chefs or pastry cooks or this and they go to culinary school and they come from corporate world and, the culinary world's very very different you know. Very very different. So a lot of the things that happen in kitchens that I don't even think those of us that have been there for a while like give two thoughts to. And I'm not talking about aggressive harassment but just you know, stupid jokes, crude humor, stuff like that. You know, that's just kind of always been there. So I think you know I think it's good. I think we should reexamine what we're doing. Absolutely. You know, I know there's been like a lot of high profile Batali, the best group in New Orleans. Charlie Hallowell in San Francisco. And you know some of the stuff it was eye opening, even for me, because I'm like well, you know, we joke but like this was never a staple of any kitchen I've worked in. You know where there was harassment. But it's, I mean, obviously prevalent in the industry. You know I was lucky to work for good places with good culture. So I think I didn't get exposed to a lot of the stuff that other people did but, yeah I mean, personally I love having women in the kitchen which I think it changes the dynamic very much so it makes it a little calmer, it's less ego driven, and I think, in general, the industry could definitely do with more female chefs, more African-American chefs, just a little bit more diversity, so. Not to say it is not a diverse place because especially up north you have a lot of Latin immigrants and everybody, but it can be, diversity of thought sometimes in the kitchen isn't so great if that makes sense.

Katie Walters: [00:32:04] Something else has been kind of prevalent in the media is the mental well-being of kitchen staff especially after the passing of Anthony Bourdain. How would you say mental health is treated in the work place?

James Cullen: [00:32:16] You know, I'm not sure Bourdain is the best example because he was so far removed from the daily life of anyone who worked in a kitchen at that point. I mean you know, he had a pretty enviable job. And I think he had just other things going on his life which pushed him to that unfortunately. I do think it can be a very very isolating place. Working in culinary can be very isolating because you tend to spend almost all your time at work. I mean I usually get into work around noon I leave around almost midnight. So that's five days a week, and I'm lucky I'm only working five days a week now. You know that used to be six or seven days a week for me. So it can be very isolating. It's

hard on relationships, it's hard on friendships, it's hard on family. I always tell people, in some ways almost like a vacation like becoming a priest because you really have to have dedication. It's Kind of beyond normal tolerances to do it. But I definitely think that the mental health of kitchen employees is something that Americans in general but kitchen employees specifically yeah. It can be it can be a very depressing place because. You get, just an example, where you'll make a dish and you're really proud of the dish and then like, you wake up the next day and somebody just Yelped about it and said how awful it was, how awful you were, how awful the place was, and it's one of those things where you pour your heart and soul into stuff and a lot of times it just doesn't turn out exactly the way you want it to. So you've got to have a thick skin but. It can definitely be one of those places, or like one of those businesses where people do get very depressed that you don't see your family much, you hardly ever see your friends. It can be, you know in some places it is abusive. You work with people that you don't necessarily love and you're there every day stuck in the same situation with them. The pay scale isn't the greatest in the world. So I think that it's changing a lot more as more people, you know, want to fight to improve the wages and the conditions. Will be interesting to me is to see if the industry can bear it because the industry has been set up so long where the customer, you're tipping basically pays half the staff. That way prices on the food can be kept kinda artificially low. If you actually had to pay for everything in the restaurant, you know that, without tipping your meals would be, you know, a hundred dollars apiece. So but like I said I'm getting tangential again but yeah I think mental health is a huge issue in the restaurant biz. I mean I know I've been really depressed before and I know I'm not alone with that. It's one of the downsides of the business really.

Katie Walters: [00:35:33] Is it's something that's openly discussed within the industry or is it very hush hush?

James Cullen: [00:35:37] It's being discussed more but no it's not really. You know that's why you have a lot of self medicaters in the restaurant industry. You know people that are heavy into drugs, people that are heavy into alcohol. I mean it becomes a lifestyle in and of itself. It's like that rock and roll lifestyle in the kitchen. There's a lot of similarities actually because, you know, I have a lot of

friends that are musicians and they're always on the road, they're always away from family, they're always feeling the pressure to perform. They're pressured to perform, be perfect every day. Like there's very few jobs that you're not allowed to have an off day at. Or you know you're not allowed to call in sick too. I mean we work through stuff that other people would never work through. You know burns that would send other people to hospital, you spray Pam on and you just keep working. You know it's so it's a, it's definitely a very very different kind of job and most people couldn't do it. I would say 90 percent of people couldn't do it because you have to be able to be incredibly calm. While all hell breaks loose around you, pretty much nightly, so.

Katie Walters: [00:36:52] Would you say kitchen staff are like prepared or know how to support their colleagues who do have mental health issues?

James Cullen: [00:36:59] Me personally?

Katie Walters: [00:37:00] Or just generally do you think kitchen staff know how to support their colleagues if they have mental health issues? It's kind of a loaded question.

James Cullen: [00:37:11] I mean, I think everyone in the kitchen's crazy. Yes. I think the better places are the places that understand the work life balance more. The more active a chef or an owner is in the place, I think that makes more compassionate workplace. The bigger places, the seven day a week places, the big restaurant groups, I think they can be tough sometimes because you're just a part of that machine that has to be there every day, so.

Katie Walters: [00:37:49] So you mentioned earlier about how a lot of people self medicate for depression and stuff like that. And research actually suggests that the food industry leads every other industry in terms of alcohol and drug abuse. Is there something that's discussed in the workplace or is it again very taboo?

James Cullen: [00:38:09] I would say it's something that's encouraged in the workplace, not really discussed, you know it's. But I also think there's a little self selection going on. I think a lot of people that work in the industry kind of want to engage in some of this behavior so they self select to be in the industry, if that makes any sense, because it's one of the last workplaces on Earth where as long as you do your job, your personal life is not terribly scrutinized. If that makes any sense. You know very few places drug test. I mean they didn't until recently, some do now. But, you know there's some, we try to look out for each other, if you see someone going down a path that's too bad you know. But a lot of it also is the it gets started with the camaraderie of, you know, "hey let's go out for a beer after the shift", you know. And sometimes that beer becomes 10 beers and then you know if and for some people it becomes a downward spiral I mean, and it's definitely something that needs to be addressed. There needs to be more resources probably. You know just like they have a musician's health clinic in New Orleans they should probably have, you know, a chefs and cook health clinic because the kind of behaviors you find in that lifestyle you also find, you know. That's why I always try to make myself available to anybody I know and say look if you need a ride, if there's something going on or something bad is happening and you have my number call me. I'll always answer the phone, so. But yeah it's a real issue that needs to be addressed.

Katie Walters: [00:40:04] Would you say there's any separation in the workplace between people who abuse substances and people who don't?

James Cullen: [00:40:11] Oh absolutely. I mean there's always, you know, there's some people that need it to function at work. They come in, you know, after a few drinks or whatever. But you know there's a lot of people that just do recreationally, so. It is a lifestyle thing. And I won't lie and say that it's, because I mean you can ask any of any well-known restaurant, you'll hear the stories, so.

Katie Walters: [00:40:48] How does that kind of affect what place mentality?

James Cullen: [00:40:50] It makes everybody crazier. No doubt. You know it's one of those things where you really have to, have to be careful and manage it, make sure that, you know, it's not happening often and if it is it needs to be addressed immediately because, you know, you never want to see anybody get hurt or hurt anybody else or. But I mean you know. It really honestly depends on the kitchen. The more professional the kitchen, the less issues the kitchen has. The more rogue the kitchen is, the more issues. But I mean you can research a lot of chefs that are in AA and I want to say Sean Brock, I think that's his last name, who's a James Beard Award winner, you know. But he was drinking so heavy I mean his employees actually called going out "getting Brocked". So you know he recovered and, but it's one of those things because the pressure's so intense that there's a lot of escapism because you're expected, like I said, you're expected to be perfect every night and that's a hell of a burden to bear because almost every job gets a pass. I mean if we held our politicians as accountable as we hold the people who cook our food for 11 dollars an hour it wouldn't be a hell of a better country you know. But it's definitely, I think, is getting better as far as the industry goes, as you're getting more people from other fields that are getting into our industry their expectations are different, so. But if you've ever read Kitchen Confidential that's fairly accurate, you know, or was fairly accurate for a long time, so.

Katie Walters: [00:42:51] Is there a lot of gossip in the kitchen?

James Cullen: [00:42:53] Oh God yes. That's the one thing I can't stand, is drama in the kitchen. You know and I lay that one down. But yes they all talk about each other, half of them probably slept with each other. It's a very incestuous little field of but I mean like it is your guys family. I mean because that's really what it's like. When we put out our staff mail at the beginning of each shift we call it family mail because that's what it's like. These are the people that you spend more time with than your family. There's anything that you would see in like a family or a friendship, you know it's magnified in the kitchen because the amount of time that is spent there. So yeah there's all sorts of gossip and intrigue and, I mean sometimes actually quite funny you know. It's gonna make a great novel one day, so.

Katie Walters: [00:43:46] Do you think you'd ever write a book?

James Cullen: [00:43:49] Oh. I write scenes every day in my head I'm like. You know I just think I have to wait for some of these people to die.

Katie Walters: [00:44:01] What would you call your book?

James Cullen: [00:44:02] I have no idea. You know, I really don't have any idea because, I would probably take a line out of some classic. Like "Sound and the Fury" did with Shakespeare but. I don't really know because, to me, it would have to be funny because kitchen life is funny, but have to be sad because kitchen life is a kind of sad, and there'd have to be an element of a little tragedy and redemption because all those things happen on a daily basis, like you know. It's funny you know when someone gets their belt loop hooked on a ladle and like, pour sauce down their leg, and then it's sad because now the sauce is on the floor and we burn the fish because we were paying attention to that but, you know. And it can be tragic when the customer writes that bad review but ultimately it's redemptive because no one died at the end of the day and we persevered. So there's always, I always have it's like a one, like, it's like a three act play every day, you know, from pre-shift to service to post-shift and you got to laugh at a lot of this stuff because it's just not normal, so.

Katie Walters: [00:45:27] Do you have any gossip you can share or is that confidential?

James Cullen: [00:45:31] Where is this interview being aired?

Katie Walters: [00:45:34] Wherever you want it to be. It'll be on the Loyola Vimeo but.

James Cullen: [00:45:37] Gossip. I don't know. I don't really deal in gossip. You know just because rumors have a way of perpetuating themselves so nobody needs, there's enough problems in the world as there is without. I mean if you're having a good gossip like news, do I have any news? But you know,

out of respect, there's a lot of things I know, but I respect other people who work in the industry that's, that's kind of our business. If that makes sense.

Katie Walters: [00:46:12] What about funny kitchen stories.

James Cullen: [00:46:15] Oh. Funny Kitchen Stories. I mean. Yeah, I have to think of them because so many of them happen in the moment. But we have a dishwasher who is from Honduras and his English isn't great but he likes to he likes to sing kind of like to himself. And the other day I caught him, he's back there trying to do the "Who Dat" chant after the Saints game, but he couldn't get it right. It was just it was it. But he knew he couldn't get it right and he started laughing and I started laughing. You know, I was working with a food runner once, Dominique, who, a nice kid, a terrible food runner but a really nice guy, who's walking past a steam table full of sauces, caught his belt on and poured all the sauce down the back of his pants, all over the floor. I get that, I think it was funny at the time, I don't remember but in retrospect, yeah it was really, really funny. There was a time when my bosses in New York City got drunk and took money out of the register to go across you to buy a drink and the wind blew and all the money went all, hundreds of dollars all over Cornelius Street in New York City. Blowing in the wind, she was trying to pick them up. We thought that was kind of funny at the time but, she had, that's that's veering towards gossip but, I mean there's always something funny going on. I mean just the everyday, everyday banter just back and forth. You know kitchens have great dialogue because there's a lot of communication that goes on for necessary reasons, sometimes for unnecessary reasons, sometimes just to kill time because, there's lulls in service sometimes. Sometimes it's really busy and you don't have time to talk and it's just business. But other times you get to know a lot about people, because you spend so much time with them, so.

Katie Walters: [00:48:30] Can you tell me a little bit about the kitchen you work in generally?

James Cullen: [00:48:33] Sure, so Upperline is a restaurant that's been nominated for a James Beard award last year. Won "Restaurant of the Year" in the Times-Picayune. It's modern Creole fine

dining. Joanne Clevenger is our owner and she's been there for 35 years, so, and she's a very very hands on owner. Our kitchen is about the size of the area we're sitting in right now. It's very small. It's got 10 burners, a little grill, and one fryer and we put out a lot of food at that kitchen and we do it with three cooks, so. It's a fairly intense operation but overall it's a nice spot. It's like anything, we're very experienced cooks which is good because I've been there quite a while, so, you know like anything there's always personality conflicts. But overall I'd say it's a pretty unique place because in the restaurant industry thirty five years is a lifetime. It's a very very long time and to have a restaurant that's been consistently good for 35 years and well reviewed that that's pretty tough, so. But I mean it's funny cause every kitchen's so much the same but so different, so. I would say this is one of most tight-knit kitchens that I've ever worked in. Probably the only other one that compares was a place in New York City called Pearl Oyster Bar, where I worked for a number of years and, you know, you really - it's good that we're closed two days a week, let me put it that way, because by day five we're all on each other's nerves, so. But I try to be the cheerleader. That's my job is to keep everybody in a positive mind frame and doing the right thing and I like to reduce the tension. I like to use humor in general. I'm not, if I have to raise my voice I don't like that. So I'll try to slide up beside you and be like, "so tell me how many of those are you going to burn tonight? I just need to know so I can tell the front of the house when we're going to run out." You know, or like use just subtle, you know, just try to diffuse the situation because kitchens can be very tense. I've seen fights break out in kitchens before so, you know, and everyone has knives. It's not a great, it's not a great situation. So yeah I try to keep the tension very low, as low as possible. Because like I said, when it's really busy and everybody wants their food it can get a little hectic, you know, and you still have to make sure everything's prepared properly and goes out right because you don't want it coming back because now you're doing it twice and you're taking twice as long, so. I know that's a tangent of what you asked me but yeah it's a very much kind of like a family vibe with all your crazy uncles and aunts and everybody else at work there, so.

Katie Walters: [00:52:07] Do you think you'll be a chef until you retire, or do you think you'll try something new?

James Cullen: [00:52:13] I, you know that's a great question. I don't know. I've never, I haven't thought ahead that far. I mean I definitely think about, like man in three or four more years when I'm 50, you know, am I going to want to be doing this? And I do have a lot of other very serious hobbies. You know I do write. I do photography. I get paid to do both sometimes. You know it's just that it's very hard to make a living at any of that. Especially now, you know, where there's not as much journalism work, because I did journalism for a while while I was cooking. And the people that have those jobs aren't giving them up anytime soon so I don't know, I mean maybe in a few years I'll take a crack and open up my own place. That seems to be the logical step, but then sometimes I'm like, "well maybe I'm just gonna get like a barbecue trailer and hook it up to my truck and drive around the country and just do it on the side of the road." I haven't really given it that much thought but there's a lot of things I would like to do. If money were no object there are a lot of things I would definitely do but, you know, I keep, there's a few times I stepped away from the professional kitchen and I always found myself right back there so obviously I like it on some level.

Katie Walters: [00:53:35] If you opened your own restaurant what style of food would you theme it around?

James Cullen: [00:53:42] I would do like, kind of like a classic New Orleans corner store. Po Boys, chicken, just stuff that's fun to eat and, you know, kind of the thing that used to be on every corner in New Orleans and now isn't there anymore because I love the traditional cuisine. And also I'd probably only, or a breakfast spot. I've always thought about having a breakfast spot because I feel like you can't get great breakfast a lot of places, so. Or a classic New Jersey style diner like where I grew up. There's really not any of that down here, so. But like I said, you know, you never know what life is gonna bring you so part of doing it is kind of just taking it one day at a time. Like I always tell people in the kitchen like, "worry about what you have to do today, and a little bit of what you need to do for tomorrow and you'll be OK. But don't worry too much because you might never get there" so, you know, don't, I wish I'd be a day ahead that's, you know. And obviously some days, some weeks more than a few days ahead but you know it's important to be in the moment.

Katie Walters: [00:55:03] What's your favorite New Orleans meal, if you had to pick one?

James Cullen: [00:55:08] Oh I love... I have two, I can't pick one. It's, maybe I have three, let me think about this. I love the fried chicken at Dooky Chase. I love the blackened redfish at K-Pauls, and I love the sherry-braised duck at Gabrielle. Those are my three favorites.

Katie Walters: [00:55:36] And obviously you know a lot about food. Can you tell me anything about pairing wine and food or?

James Cullen: [00:55:42] Yeah. Drink what you like and eat what you like honestly. You know there used to, there's certain wines that do pair better, you know. Tradition was always fish whites, you know, meats red, but you can have a nice pinot noir that pairs really nicely with a fish, if it's like a meaty fish and a strong, like a lemon fish cobia, something like that. A pinot is was wonderful with that. Definitely drinking wines from the region the meal comes from, like if you're eating a dish that was created in Burgundy, it's good to drink a burgundy with that because that's what. And if you're having a big plate of jambalaya it's great to be drinking Abita Amber because that's what, you know, was meant to pair with the food down here, so. Wine is a personal thing, it really is. And there definitely are some things that are just going to be awful together but I think there's a lot more latitude than people- it's not as strict as it used to be. It used to be, if you were eating fish and you know drinking red people do "oh". That's not the case anymore. But you don't want something that's going to overpower that's the thing. It's really about balance. So if you're eating something delicate and you're drinking like a cabernet, it's just going to overpower what's on the plate so that's really my thoughts are pairing wines and. But ultimately you got to enjoy drinking. Otherwise it's not going to work, so.

Katie Walters: [00:57:24] I'm going to use that advice in the future. Thank you for your time today. I really appreciate you coming and letting me interview you.

James Cullen: [00:57:33] Thank you. And when I heard you from Jersey I got excited because I'm from Jersey but then I realized it was England.

Katie Walters: [00:57:38] Old Jersey.

James Cullen: [00:57:40] Yeah. But it was a pleasure. Thank you very much for having me.