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Interview with Rod Mowery

Rod Mowery

Leah Sokolofski

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100 W. Wiggin St. Gambier, OH
Co-workers present: none

LS: Leah Sokolofski
RM: Rod Mowery

LS: This is Leah Sokolofski talking with Executive Chef Rod Mowery of the Kenyon Inn Restaurant. We are at the Kenyon Inn in Gambier, Ohio and it is November 13th, the year 2000 and the ascension number for this tape is ELFS-LKS-A111300.A. So, what is it exactly that you do as the executive chef at this restaurant?

RM: I write all the menus. I oversee all the production of the food, take care of the bar. I do all the staffing, do all the ordering of all the items in the restaurant as well as the hardware and the food. And I do all the bookings of all the parties, catering events, as well as executing and overseeing them. So I do, I do quite a bit.

LS: Yeah. How much catering does the restaurant do as opposed to how many people come into the dining room?

RM: Catering a year, right now we're probably up to 150,000 to 200,000 dollars. But the restaurant, I don't really know the balance on it. I haven't really given it that kind of a look, I guess. The business in the restaurant, I should say this year alone, I've been here since October of last year. We've tripled the business in the restaurant, as well as tripling the catering business. So as far as the number of, where last year they were running a somewhat good system as they were, but I've tripled them. So,

LS: Yeah, that's great.

RM: They both really are running hand-in-hand right now, the catering and the, uh, dining business.

LS: Do you know why the numbers have tripled? Is it the quality of food, or the type of atmosphere, the menu?

RM: I think a lot of it was, I had a bit of a following from a few of my past jobs. And, uh, that just kind of bloomed in the area with, it was like a buzz when I got here. Just wanted to come out and see what was going on in the business. I had come from the New Albany Country Club, which is like right on the edge of what's going on in the culinary world. And it was private so a lot of people didn't really get to experience a lot of the things that went on there. And I brought a lot of that flare to this restaurant, and I'm more sociable with the people. I go out and speak with everybody. I like to be in touch with my clients, and know what they want and give them everything they need, make

them feel like they should be comfortable here. And I think that's really important, that's really showed that people come back. You know, they know that I'm not afraid to come out and talk to them about, they know they're going to get a high quality product, they know they're going to have an enjoyable time. There's no place in this area where you can go and get as good music, great food, and a great cocktail and really have you know, a great atmosphere to enjoy your food and guests. I think, uh, just the combination that I put together has been very successful.

LS: Yeah, definitely. Could you tell me a little about, about your menu? How often do you change it? What changes, or what factors go into the changes that are made?

RM: It changes probably three to four times a year. I go for four times a year to, to keep things seasonably, but sometimes my time schedule doesn't work that way. Since I've been here, I've changed it four times. One of the main considerations that go into it is the availability of the food, the seasonal products. I like to be able to get things somewhat locally. A lot area foods, as well as, you know, I still, I do indulge my people with things that you can't get in the area. Things like, you know, truffles. Like we're doing white truffles now and chanterelle mushrooms are just two very seasonal things that are fantastic. And, really when I write a new menu, I don't plan it very much. I just do it off the top of my head. I don't, you know, look at books and I do, I read a lot and I watch a lot of television, you know cooking, TV cooking and such. But, a lot of times it's just whatever's on top of my head, whatever, whatever flare I've decided to, to go with. It generally works out real well, I go on a spur of the moment, spontaneous inspiration and it just keeps me alive, keeps me on the edge of myself, you know, can't lose that edge.

LS: Umm, what sorts of, you talked about availability a little bit, of umm, products. How, is that mainly with fruits and vegetables or, like with the truffles, does it depend on whether you can get them in or not?

RM: Yeah. It really does. There's a lot of times during the year, there's products that aren't available. Like, for instance strawberries, I could buy a flat of strawberries in the summertime, early summer to late summer, for anywhere from nine to fifteen dollars a flat. If I get strawberries right now, they're forty-five dollars to fifty dollars a flat. Same thing goes with raspberries, they're sixty dollars a flat right now and in the summertime, they're fifteen dollars a flat. So it's always available, it's just much you're willing to pay for it. And how close the product has to, how far it has to be flown, how fresh it is. So, yeah, a lot of it is your fruits, your vegetables. I guess those are the main specialty things, like your mushrooms. Different times of the year, in the Spring you're gonna get Morels. You know and the, in the fall you're gonna get things like Chanterelles, know things, people in this area probably don't even know what they are. But being able to educate people in the food is another thing that I find fascinating. People come in and they're like, "what's that?" and I, "You gotta try this you're gonna love it, just trust me, enjoy yourself." You gotta keep things fresh. Nothing like going to a farmer and knowing he picked stuff that day. You know, it was grown right there in the area. You save a lot of money that way too.

LS: Where do you get most of your foods from? Do any of them come locally or how much do you work through a distributor? How does that work?

RM: I do, I do both.

LS: Okay.

RM: I mainly get the majority of my food out of my distributor, it's U.S. Food... in Cincinnati, Ohio. It's a ways a way, but they're one of the only companies that has a good majority of the specialty foods that I use. I got a lot of things locally through Lanning's Meats, which a lot of their beef, even some of their produce has taken locally. I use bison, there's a local bison farm here.

LS: Yeah, I noticed that on the menu. Umm, do you get it from the Leaning's?

RM: No, I get it from a place called Hopewell Bison. It's over on Hopewell Road, right outside of Gambier.

LS: Uh huh.

RM: And he grows the animals right there on sight, totally organically grown. It's just a wonderful thing to know that I can get something, that you know, that I can get it fresh that way. It's kind of unheard of in this area, unless you find, stumble on a thing like that. So, I get things here and there. Every now and then, I buy off the guy that's out here on Middle Path. Just 'cause he's always got some really interesting things. Just uh, wherever I can get things is...I get it through several companies, but a lot of the stuff gets flown in through a distributor and then it gets brought to me, so. U.S. Foods is I guess my main...on food.

LS: So, one of the things that we're looking at is local food systems and interest in local foods in the area amongst the residents. Do you think that this community has an interest in foods that are produced locally?

RM: You know, honestly, I think a lot of people don't care. I really don't think that they give it that much consideration. That's why people go out to dinner, so they don't have to think about it. They're gonna sit and they're gonna eat. And there's a few people that are gonna give it to consideration, 'cause you always want to keep the dollar in the community. So I think the money right in the area where you're living, which is a good thought. But uh, no I guess honestly I don't think a lot of people really care or give it much consideration. If I go out to dinner, you know, I'm not thinking, you know, "where'd you get these peas at?" Whether it's some farmer down the road, or they brought from, you know, some farm down South.

LS: So do you think, like the bison example, is it the fact that bison is sort of a novelty more than the fact that it's here in Knox County or is it the combination perhaps?

RM: I think...the combination. When I put it on the menu, I like to speak of it being locally grown and it just intrigues people to taste it, you know, to see, you know, what it's about. 'Cause, you know, you go out West you see bison pretty, pretty regularly. There's quite a few farms out there and there's not very many in Ohio, or in even this area. Within a hundred mile radius I don't think there's very many bison farms. Yeah, I wanted to put it on, 'cause it's different. People like that. I want people to come to my restaurant and know that it's gonna be neat. You're gonna get that, you know, out of the way thing. But uh, yeah, I don't know, I guess it's kind of a toss-up as to whether they'll get 'cause it's locally grown, or they'll get it just because it's the uniqueness of it.

LS: You work with some farmers and some distributors, umm, is there a way that within the local food systems there could be an enhancement or an improvement that would give you more interest in getting things more local? Fresher foods or umm...?

RM: My father's a farmer and he grows, he has an acre and a half garden probably, maybe two acres, and he sells his produce out in front of his house. And uh, he always does it at a good cost. And he's always real reasonable and his product's always really good. And he never really wants to take anybody, you know. He always wants to make sure everybody's getting a good value. And I think I see a lot of the, uh, the local vegetable farmers around here, and they're really, for what their prices are and what their product is. I'm seeing a lot of the product I get from out-of-town, from let's say a professional zucchini farmer and that's all they do. They have, you know, they have four fields. Two zucchinis, you know, and maybe two yellow squash and some other varieties of squash. And that's all they do. And they do their chemicals and they've got a perfect product and the color's right, the consistency is right. You get a lot of product around here and it's a lot of farmers that do a lot of different things and a lot of times their consistency is off. Their prices are higher, and you know, for the same amount of money I can, you can get something from different area and you get a, just a better product. So I think a lot of it's, it's the value sometimes that I see that I've received for the product. But you know, there's a lot of them that really do a good job. Like, I'll stop at, you know, those little roadside places and buy three dozen sweet corn or whatever. But for instance, the uh, in Mount Vernon, right in front of the Burger King store on the corner of Newark and Martinsburg Road, they have decent product there, but their prices are high. You know, I mean for your normal everyday, you know, housewife to stop in there and get a couple pints of strawberries and something for the evening meal, is great. But as far as the volume that I use a lot of times, it's really not worth my time.

LS: Are there seasonal changes with the number of people that come into the Restaurant, or is it more dependent on Kenyon events or local events?

RM: Anymore it's been rather consistent like you've seen since you've sat here. You walked in the dining room is empty. Like, all at once, whesh, it fills up. And that's just what happens. A lot of times if there's stuff going on around campus, I'll see an increase in businesses where a lot of my local clients can't get in, because they didn't expect that and didn't make reservations and it's filled with, uh, surrounding Kenyon people. But uh, the majority of the time, if Kenyon's not doing anything, I've got my reputation built to

where I've got a great local following. So we stay busy now pretty much no matter what. We've got our slow days and nights. Monday evening would probably be the slowest night. People don't eat out on Monday nights, unless they just don't cook at home. (Chuckle.) A lot of people who come in here, because of the price and because of the type of dining it is, you know, it's an upscale, it can be casual, but it's an upscale, you know. I would expect to see people in here in a tie or you know, not as far as a jacket, it doesn't go that far. So a lot of people, it's a special occasion thing. It's not just a "let's go out to dinner, you know, can we go to Burger King or should we go to the Kenyon Inn?" (Laugh.)

LS: Do most of the people come in, when you speak locally, people from Knox County or do you get a following of people from Columbus that...?

RM: It's starting to come from that direction. Word's kinda getting out. I've talked to some people that, minimal advertising in the Columbus area, just had some people in. Can really spread word of mouth, a few attorney friends that I have and people that are really kind of in the community that, you know, talk to people about where they've been and what they do. Some restaurant people in here that go to their restaurant and talk and then those restaurant people talk to other restaurant people. And so, yeah, the Columbus folks are coming. We get people from Newark. A few couples from the Coshocton area that like to come in. The Mansfield area. But a lot of, yeah, Knox County folks come in. They just kinda come out of the woodwork. Those people that just quietly have money and like to get out, you know, and enjoy themselves. That's uh, it's been really surprising, the amount of business I was able to drum up with just a little imagination.

LS: I've heard that the College has recently purchased the Kenyon Inn.

RM: Please don't make public knowledge of it.

LS: Okay.

RM: I don't, I can't say that, uh. I don't want that to go out. Publicized.

LS: Okay.

RM: But yeah, they have purchased it. The Kenyon Management Company bought the Kenyon Inn...

LS: Oh, okay.

RM: Which is a subsidiary part, it's an actual part of Kenyon. But it's not, it's more like the accounting department for Kenyon College. It's, which is, separate from the actual college. But it does have, the College does have say in who the trustees, you know, have the last word on what goes on here. Things like that, but as far as the actual Kenyon College owning...I just don't want that to be out. I think people just assume that, that there's a lot of B.S. involved in it.

LS: But there's not a whole lot of threat that you feel to the Restaurant?

RM: But for, why would I feel threatened?

LS: Just in terms of having control over the Restaurant and how it runs..?

RM: I wrote that in my contract.

LS: Okay. (Chuckle.)

RM: (Chuckle.) Full control over that.

LS: That's great. Great.

RM: All they do is fund me. But in turn, I can fill their pockets back up, so. That was an agreement right off the top. I wasn't gonna let anyone tell me what I could or couldn't do in here. And it worked out really well.

LS: Well, you seem to be doing a great job. The menu looks wonderful and I've heard really great things so...

RM: I'm pretty happy. It's been, been a slow progression coming into an area like this. And I don't know how long you've been in Knox County, but it's meat and potatoes to the max. It's been pretty slow-coming, getting a lot of the regular people that I knew were gonna come and a few people that were dissatisfied in the past come back. Try to get them interested. So I try to work at slow progression, as to not scaring people off you know. 'Cause right now I have like, I have raw Sushi Grey Tuna on the menu. I was to put that on there right off the top, people would've been freakin' out, not knowing what to think. So this kinda a slow progression is to try to get people more excited about the food and seeing what kinds of directions I can actually go in, instead of coming in with all my guns going. So, I've got a lot more things in mind too. To really, really bring it up to the next level. I've got about three levels now. And I want to get up about four or five more. Thinking about doing a gourmet, a gourmet food club, maybe six times a year. Where people can come in, possibly do a, just eight course dinner, wines included, you know, starting off with, you know, the Sparkler wines and ending with a nice dark port and some chocolates and just the whole, the whole slew of package. The good music and the good music and good food. All the people that know each other, could just, I think it would just be a wonderful thing. All the people in the food community for, just people from all around here... Unless they're driving fifty miles, they get five glasses of wine and then they don't want to drive home.

LS: Do you sense that people, um, that there are enough regulars that come in that they start to know each other, sort of through the Restaurant?

RM: Yeah, I think a lot of it, they know each other from being in the same somewhat social circles. Because, be it their level of income or the type of careers that they have. I do a lot of doctor business, a lot of hospital business, insurance agents, real estate agents, lawyers, things like that. Just people that just are rich just because their family had money, you know they just hang with all these other people. They're all country club people. So, it's a pretty small community. It's a pretty, somewhat of a tight bunch that get to do this kind of thing. So yeah, they all kinda know each other. They'll come in, talking and staying, drinking. ...really like to expand so I can offer more of that in this space when they get together and just cocktail. Just be able to enjoy the environment that they're in, that the...good music has everything to do with it. When you walk in that door, you see things, you smell things, you hear things, and you touch things, taste things. All the senses have to go together. If one of them's off, it doesn't work.

LS: That's great. Well, I think that's about all I have. Umm, is there anything else that you would like to tell me about or add?

INTERRUPTION. Tape off.

RM: Don't mention anything about the Kenyon Inn being anything having to do with Kenyon College.

LS: Okay, okay.

RM: Because that is not public knowledge.

LS: Okay. Well, certainly and we can even write that into the release form. So make an adjustment on that, if you like. Umm, so I guess that's about it. Was there anything else that you would like to talk about?

RM: No, um. I guess there's not. I guess if you are gonna speak of my little restaurant, I would hope you speak of it, you know kindly and highly. Because we've had a problem in the past with somebody interviewing some people, chefs and somebody got, got a persecuted in the interview.

End Side 1, Tape 1.

Begin Side 2, Tape 1.

RM: But, yeah I guess there's not a whole lot. You know our food here, everything is done fresh. Our wine list is of the best for where we are and what we've got to offer. It's very nice. And I guess the only thing I have to say about the food that I do is that I always try to be true to myself and to my customers. And if you always do that, nothing can go wrong. Just want to stay focused and positive...as possible. Just keep it real.

LS: Yeah, that's great.

RM: That's about the ending for me. Just keep it real.

LS: That's great. Thanks. Thank you so much, this has been great. I hope to continue talking with you, if that's okay.

RM: Yeah, that's fine.

LS: Just touching base as we go along with our project. If something comes up that maybe might be of interest to you. Hopefully we'll be doing some more work with farmers and restaurants or businesses in the community and trying to get more connections going.

RM: Did you call, did you talk to someone out at Lanning's?

LS: Yeah, one of my other classmates did.

RM: Talk with Sam.

LS: Uh-huh. Yeah so, maybe if there are other people who have specialty items, like the bison or something that they had or would be interested in growing, or I don't know. That might be a real niche in the community.

RM: Yeah, the bison's one of those things. It would be. It's interesting that they bought into this area, 'cause I just think it would be kind of a hard sell. Even though the area that renders, there are a abundance of close-minded people in this area. Not so much in the College and all. Kids that are here, 'cause they're all from somewhere else. But the main community is just...

LS: Great. Well, thank you so much. This has been wonderful. And I guess that's the end of the tape.