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Summary: MH-10-05-D1 Kurt Levasseur at Cote's Market, 5/2/10

Maggie Holtzberg [MH] : So it's May 20th, yes? Tell us where we are right now.

Kurt Levasseur [KL]: right now we're in the back room of Cote's Market. Basically this is where we do most of our cooking. A huge percentage of our business is home-cooked food. Just stuff made from scratch. Years ago the store used to be a little bit different. In the old days it was all big families, so it was all like huge orders of pork chops and beef and everything was sort of gathered up. Then they would make runs to all these families' houses. So everybody had standing orders sort of every week. Or they would have an order every week. In the old days, like I said, they rounded up all the stuff and my father had a big beach wagon, and they would go around to all the different families and drop off all their food. Every family had their own corner store.

MH: What neighborhood are we talking about?

KL: In Lowell in general. All over Lowell that was like what they called the Associated Grocers Stores of New England. They called them the AG stores. Our of I think 75 or so AG stores, we're like the last one I think in existence. All the big supermarkets came and wiped out all the smaller food stores. Now most of the convenience stores exist because of beer and wine and lottery and things like that.

The reason why we exist without that is because of pork scrap and the Lowell's famous baked beans. Pork pies. So we have a little niche that has kept us in business since 1917. And we're working out of a building that's well over 100 years old. So with everything, we're sort of grandfathered in every which way as far now if you open a business, you have to have stainless steel everything. There's so many different things, but we're so old that we're literally grandfathered in. It's considered historical, this store.

MH: Who started the store?

KL: It was my grandmother's dad. So it would be basically my great-grandfather. His name was Alphage Coté. [pronounced Coty]. And he had a daughter, Gertrude Coté. He opened the store in 1917. Basically everybody had their corner store. This neighborhood would go to [Bodwin's?] Market and everybody was loyal to their own little corner store. Then he ran that store for years and years. He had a daughter named Gertrude, which is my grandmother. She met my grandfather, Wilfrid Levasseur. He started working at Coté's Market, so basically his girlfriend, he's working his girlfriend's father. So he ended up marrying his girlfriend, Gertrude. So his boss became his father-in-law. It's kind of fun to have your father-in-law as a boss, probably. But that worked really well and he ran the store for years and years and years, and then he ended up giving the store to my grandfather.

So my grandfather took over the store, but never changed the name from Coté's Market to Levasseur's Market because it had already had such a good name for years and years and years. My grandfather ran the store. My grandfather actually had a printing business. He had a lot to do with the stock market. He was on the board of directors for Associated Grocers of New England. He was into so many different things. He was always ahead of the curve. He actually pioneered self-shopping. The way we shop today in every supermarket. Because years what happened was like [I] said, we used to deliver groceries and everything, and my grandfather figured wouldn't it be easier for people to come in and pick what they want off the shelf and bring it to a cashier and

then self service. So he turned his store to self-service. This is years and years and years ago and he thought that would work better. The guys that started DeMoulas' Market Basket? The DeMoulas brothers. They told my grandfather he was crazy, that it would never work. And that's how we shop today in every store.

So my grandfather knew that years and years before that was even the way shopped. He was always ahead of the curve. He bought stocks in telephones because he knew telephones was a necessity that would keep compounding. He always really knew what to do. Him and my grandmother, they were married 63 years. They had a beautiful marriage. He relinquished the store to my father, when my father was about 30 years old. Around the same age as me. And my father would run the store. My grandfather would take off and go on three vacations a year for a week. They would go to Hawaii, Puerto Rico. They've been all over the world. It was really nice because my father would pick up the slack and that's what I'm trying to do now.

My father is 62 years old. He's worked really, really, really hard his whole life. I've watched him work, watched the sweat roll off his forehead to give us a good childhood. He worked hard, so I want to give back now and take care of my mother and father just like he does with his.

MH: What's your earliest memories of being in the store?

KL: My earliest memories is making beans. I remember we used to literally he would make the beans at night and I remember we would be little, so that time at night would seem really late to us at night. He'd make the beans about 7, 8 o'clock at night. But I remember sometimes helping him scoop, pour the beans in. I remember literally having the whole thing in my hand and trying to make the beans. I started like I say when I was very, very small. In the summertime we'd come here and we'd stamp bags and do little odd jobs, me and my brother. We would ride our bikes in the parking lot and Dad would basically baby-sit us until my mom would come pick us up in the afternoon. So I've been here, in this store, since I could walk. And I've been living and breathing this store.

But I've also gone off on my own. I wanted to be a little well-rounded before I took over the business. So I actually worked as a chef. I worked as a waiter. I worked at a couple of fine restaurants. I worked at the Top of the Hub in Boston, at the top of the Prudential building. I worked for Tosca in Hingham for a few years, which is a very well-known restaurant on the South Shore. It's still where all the celebrities dine on the South Shore. I had a lot of high profile clients when I was there. And also most recently I worked at the Stonehenge Inn, which has the second largest wine cellar in the country and the 7th largest wine cellar in the world. I was handling bottles of 1940s, 1950s bottles of Bourdeaux. I think one day I was doing inventory. I was holding a bottle of 1945 Chateau Margaux. I mean this is first growth, grand cru Bourdeaux. I'm literally at the top of a 30 foot wine tower counting these bottles. So I have a background in food and wine now. And also customer service.

Waiting tables it makes you like a pro at customer service. You need to know to let so many things roll you. You need to be very diplomatic. Very tactful. The way you talk to people. You can't let people hear you, things you say. So you have to be very, very careful and it hones your skills, I think, for being a good person in general and having patience. Just here you have to have patience. And being a waiter taught me patience. Everything I did, learning in these restaurants, I wrote down everything that I ever came across. I kept everything that I ever came across. I'm that type of person. I document everything. Take pictures of everything. So I learned

so much about wine. I'm not a Court of Master Sommelier yet, but I know a great amount about wine. But my knowledge in food really took off when I got into these high-end restaurants.

MH: This is interesting that you would do that and then come to this family business. Talk a little bit about who your clientele is here.

KL: Basically our clientele is neighborhood folks. People that have lived in Lowell their whole lives, that have just shopped here their whole life. There's a big elderly complex. We have elderly people that have been shopping here 60, 70 years. Women in their 80s and 90s that have literally been coming here since they were kids. So that's amazing in itself.

We cater to everyone, Lowell being a multicultural city. We have the spinach pie. We had a Spanish rice. We try to be multicultural as far as our food too. We try to carry some items that would cater to the Asian community. We really try to be very multicultural. We have people that have moved away, 45 minutes to an hour and a half. Every Saturday they come back and get their beans. They'll make the hour and a half or two hour, three hour journey to come and get their brown bread, their beans, and they'll probably stock up a little bit maybe, but they'll still come even though they've moved away.

Recently we had one woman who was moving to California. Not out of choice. And she was beside herself that should could not get Coté's beans every Saturday. It was something that she came and did as a child. It was something that's ingrained in her French-Canadian roots, and she was literally in tears. She was like I'm not going to get to come here every Saturday and have my hot dogs and beans. She was going to California and everything out there is sort of fake and plastic-y, so she actually asked us if sent us pre-paid boxes, if we would send out the same beans and give her the exact recipe so that she could try to duplicate them at her house the best way she can. She likes my grandfather's homemade sauce that we make here. We sent her off -- When she went off in the plane with like 6 quarts of sauce, I think she had more food than luggage. Her name was Patty. She still sends me little thank you letters and she really misses the store.

This is something that's not just a regular store. We will bend over backwards for people. If someone comes in and they want potato salad, but they don't like onions, we'll whip them up a little small container of potato salad with no onions. No place will do that for you. We have little ladies that have been totally abandoned by their family. It's kind of sad. That live in the elderly complex, Jaycee Place. So they call us. We shop for them. We add it up for them. We call them right back. We just tell them how much it is. They tell us I have change for a \$20. We bring it over. And even if there's heavy gallons of milk, we'll take them out and put them right in the fridge for them. What store will do that for you now? We've tried to kept that going. We deliver to some people that are invalids that can't out. My dad even gets tickets on his car when he goes to deliver to these poor people.

MH: Can you talk a little bit about what makes Coté's beans so special?

KL: The thing is, the recipe was handed to us from Frankie Rochette, who owned a couple different businesses in Lowell. He sort of pioneered the Rochette recipe, the very simple Lowellian type of bean with just the salt pork, ketchup, water. That's it. I mean very simple. The recipe is so simple, but what's special about is the bean, the California small white beans. It's in the aging. Frankie Rochette once said it's just quality. You always have to have the highest quality ingredients. So we have the highest quality beans from California that have been aged. Some of them that we use have been aged for up to 3 years, so like I said, the seed coats get very

hard and the cooking time sort of gets extended. But the beans stay nice and firm and they don't mush up on you, especially when you reheat them. They stay nice and firm.

Also we use salt pork from Canada. It's extremely fresh. We get it probably once every couple weeks, we get a shipment of probably 20, 20 pound boxes, of salt pork. About 400 pounds. We cube it and put it into 3-pound and 1 ounce containers. So it's very specific. It's 3 pounds and 1 ounce. Maybe the 1 ounce is for good measure, I don't know. But it's 3 pounds of salt pork. And then the beans, it's two scoops of our special scooper. We have a certain scooper that just works. It's like an heirloom. The thing if gosh, if I lose that scooper it would be World War III. That thing has to have a GPS on it, really. It's like an heirloom. And then water. And then a squirt of ketchup. That's it.

MH: Just a squirt. They're not really sweet?

KL: For a whole entire pot of beans, you would literally go [whoosh]. Like that. That's it. It's just basically for color and for a tiny bit of taste. But what really flavors the beans is the pork, because the beans are like a sponge.

But we also make the dark sweet beans where you put molasses, dried mustard, and brown sugar. That's basically it.

MH: Is that what people normally think of as baked beans? Boston baked beans?

KL: Boston baked beans. Yup.

MH: They're sweet. Where did that come from? Why is there the sweet and the non-sweet?

KL: Basically the dark sweet beans, that's the Boston baked bean recipe. The light beans [recipe] is native to Lowell. When people think of Lowell's beans, they don't think of dark beans. That does not come to mind. It's the white beans, the light beans. Then other people that aren't from Lowell, when they think of the light beans, they think of those little jars of Campbell's pork and beans. And that's basically sort of what it is, but ours is obviously much more refined.

MH: Did it originate in Canada? In French? Like cassoulet or something? The white bean. The lighter, non-sweet bean.

KL: To be honest with you, I don't know where it originated. I know that maybe my father can answer that. But I know Frankie Rochette was the one that actually gave us the recipe and he would actually come in and check on the beans. He would come in on Saturdays and check on the beans, make sure that we were doing it the right way. Even this is years after he had sold us the recipe. So we carried on that tradition.

MH: Do you supply diners, too, in the area?

KL: We supply a few convenience stores and diners, yes. There's Dracut Family Diner. Family Affair. A few different places like that. We used to do a lot more as far as convenience stores, but a lot of the convenience stores got out by different people that could not manage the bean business very well, so a lot of those have fallen by the wayside. So a lot of the businesses now just come back here. Also, Jerry's Beans? There's a guy named Jerry or whatever. I don't even think his name was Jerry. Jerry's Beans was a competitor and a lot of times I think people would

say oh, yeah, those are Coté's beans. He would try to play it off that they were Coté's beans? But they were a little bit sub-par because the beans are a little bit bigger and they didn't taste as good. Because you have to use probably more salt pork or better salt pork. I don't know what he used. Whatever, but he stopped recently. A few months ago he just quit. He just doesn't want to make them anymore and nobody wanted to take over. So Jerry's Beans is out of his existence. You used to go into Hannaford's and all the big grocery stores and see the Jerry's Beans, so all those big grocery stores called us and they wanted us to provide them with beans already put up so they could sell them. So we'd have to buy all new, tons more--I mean a lot more pots. It would be a lot more work and just to keep the customers over there? So it didn't make any sense. It seemed to our benefit that those people, if they went to the store to grab beans, well now they're going to have come over to Coté's to buy beans. And while they're here, they might discover some of our other different items that we have that are unique to the store. [Demonstrates cooking techniques]

MH: Now you're draining the potatoes so they don't overcook.

KL: Everything here is -- We make steak and cheese sandwiches and it's just as if you would make it at your house. Most sub shops, the steak comes frozen and they sort of ball it up into individual little amounts and they weigh it and then they put it aside and it sort of turns black and brown and then they throw it on the stove that's been cooked with a million other things.

Here we make steak and cheese sandwiches, we have a small pan like you would have a your house. We use a beautiful eye round, cut right out of the plastic. Slice it on the slicing machine to make that really thin shaved steak. It goes right in the pan. We put a little salt, pepper, garlic, and we cut it up with a little fork and knife and then to put the cheese on, let it melt, and then we either toast the bun, just like you'd make it at home. And when people taste the sandwich, it tastes so much better because it's fresh steak. It's never been frozen. So that's why people say wow, this is really good. It takes a little longer. We're not making an extreme amount of profit like the sub shops, but we are making a profit and we are providing a really good sandwich.

And we are making people happy. A lot of it is about making money, but it is also about making people happy. Keeping tradition alive. And things like that. It's not always about get it done, throw it out there, and hope it sticks. Sometimes you have to slow down and make sure things look good. We cook so much food that sometimes something might get passed over and something might a few days old, and it might be just a little out of date or something, and if there's anything wrong, if a customer comes back, we will always without question make good and give them what they have or give them their money back. Whatever they want. Give them something for free. It's just about treating people really well. So that's what my dad taught me and that's what my grandfather taught me. My grandfather unfortunately, he passed two years ago.

MH: Was there something about who was the king of beans? What was that terminology?

KL: Frankie Rochette was definitely the king of beans. Him and his brothers owned diners in Lowell. Frankie had a son that was an invalid. Frankie took care of his son for years and years. He was an outstanding gentleman. Most people would put their son in a home at that age. He was 90-something years old, still taking care of his son. So that shows the devotion he had towards his son. He was a great man. He died. I think he was 95 years old. But he used to come in here

every two weeks. I get emotional because he used to buy a case of no-salt chips for his son. He son had this thing. He would always just eat no-salt chips. So he would come in here and pick up that case every couple weeks and we'd see him. He'd come over he would try the beans. His hands from working were almost like, you can see from mine how my fingers are starting to turn? He had arthritis so bad his fingers were all turned like that. And he was kind of hunched over. But you could just see the years of hard work in those hands.

MH: Did he have a market or something?

KL: He had the High Hat. Him and his brothers. There was like a roller skating place. He and his brothers had a few different diners years ago and he had that Rochette recipe and then gave it to us years and years ago. But he passed away probably about 4 or 5 months ago. My grandfather was basically the next in line, but my grandfather, unfortunately, like I said, two years ago, he fell down a flight of stairs. He was in perfect health at 85 years old and just fell down a flight of stairs and passed away unexpectedly.

So basically my father has become the king of beans now. Roger Levasseur. Which I guess would make me the prince of beans. I don't know if I want that title though. I don't know if I would like to be painted with that brush.

MH: Thank you this is great. We might come back with a few more questions.

[interview resumes]

Roger Levasseur [RL]: We make them. We have them cold in a case like this. Monday, Tuesday, Thursday. So what's left over from last Saturday. And then we'll make them hot Friday and Saturday. I actually make them Friday night. Before I leave, I put them on and I come in early Saturday. I mean, Thursday night and I come in early Friday. They cook a minimum of 9 hours. Minimum. You can force them and make them and make them a little bit faster, but we don't. So we make them in 9 hours.

MH: So in the old days I heard up in the St. Lawrence Valley there were communal, no that was for ovens. There were communal ovens for baking bread.

RL: Yeah. There used to be here right in Lowell at one time. There was a [Brat?] soda company right over here. People would come in and bring their pot all set up and they'd charge them 10 cents to put them in their oven. Of course, that was way, way back. But they would charge them 10 cents and it was right over where the parking lot is now, St. Joe's [former St. Joseph's Hospital] parking lot. Of course they knocked that whole section down. So at one time the Brats soda cracker company and they would use their ovens.

[Kathleen Pierce asks him to make a statement for Folk Festival's Facebook page]

Well, I'm Roger Levasseur. I've been doing beans since forever, almost. It seems forever. First we started buying them from Frankie Rochette and I was just a kid then, and then he took in my father, who was like a son. So he said I really like yours, so can you do the beans? Because you have keep the same way. He says don't ever change the recipe. And always keep my secret. Of course the secret is pretty obvious. The secret is use the best ingredients and you'll be business 30 years from now. That's what he told me. So he says if you always use the best stuff, you'll always stay in business.

So that was the secret and we took over and he checked on me for 10 years solid. Ten years he was in here five times every Saturday. Helping me water the beans. Doing everything. At the end of the 10 years he says, and I think you go the hang of it now. After 10 years. So I said well, we kept on going. And like I say, we've been doing it ever since. And like I say, that's one of the major reasons why we're still here and we haven't been knocked out of business by the big competitors. It's all our cooking. My father had a lot of foresight. He says we got to do some cooking. Like hamburger. This whole thing, from here to there, was meats, red meats and pork and chicken. From here to there. And then at the end of the day there was 5 pounds of hamburger. He'd throw them in the freezer. We had boxes in the freezer that high, boxes and boxes of hamburger stock, and he says hey, we don't have to do that. Let's make some meatloafs. Let's make some Chinese pie. Since that day on, we never had anything left over. All our pork went in for our [wd?] scrap and pork pies. All our beef went into meatloaves when we started meatloaves and Chinese pie.

MH: What's Chinese pie?

RL: And chicken. We started cooking chicken and making chicken salad. Chinese pie is shepherd's pie.

MH: Why is it called Chinese?

RL: Because in French we call it tarte de chinois, which is translated Chinese pie. Every nationality, every single nationality does the same thing and calls it something different. So we call it Chinese pie.

MH: But the French called it that?

RL: That's right.

MH: I'm curious. I was asking Kurt about why the beans here, using the light bean and it not being sweet. Did that originate in Canada or in France?

RL: Well, Rochette's. That's how they made their beans in Lowell. And that's why when James Earl Jones wanted to do a special on us and you have the tape? [An American Moment 3-minute piece on Lowell's Famous Beans; ABC TV; c. 1995--MR] He came down here knowing that our white beans were famous, but when they got here, the producer that was here didn't want to hear anything about it. He wanted the recipe for the dark beans. So on that tape, I give the recipe for the dark beans. I sold 60 pots of light and 2 pots of dark, and he wanted the recipe for the dark because he said it's going nationwide. Nobody knows about the light. Well, so anyway on that tape I gave the recipe for the dark, but all you have to do is substitute the ketchup for the molasses, brown sugar, and dried mustard. So then you have the same thing.

MH: So they're more savory. And that's what people like here.

RL: It's the pork. See, beans are a sponge. Whatever you put in the pot of beans, you're going to taste. You put some extra pork. Pork taste. If you put a little ketchup, you'll get that hint of ketchup. If you happen to put an onion, which we don't, you put an onion, you're going to taste

the onion. So it's like a sponge. So whatever you put in there, you're going to taste. It depends what you put in to make it taste like our beans.

MH: So are you proud of your son?

RL: Yes, yes. Oh, he's a smart boy. He has a photographic memory, you know? He's very gourmet. We went over his house on Mother's Day. Oh, he put on a meal like you get at Top of the Hub or Stonehenge Inn. He's very, very smart.

MH: You're passing this business down to him?

RL: Yes. It'll be the 4th generation. Fourth generation. Yes, four generations. My daughter's a teacher, so she knows better than to work 110 hours a week, I guess.

MH: Mention the hours. What would be a typical day?

RL: Like this morning? I came in at 4 o'clock and I'll work till whenever. I'll work till 5 if I have to, even after that. But now that I have my son here, I can leave at 3 or 2 or whenever. Then on Fridays I'm here at 3 o'clock in the morning. On Saturdays I'm here at 2 o'clock in the morning. And I work till usually 5. So you add up all those hours. And then on Sundays and Wednesdays, I'm unusually here [points to picture?]. Yesterday I had an accident. I had a stone in my eye. I sliced my eye. I didn't wear glasses when I was doing my stuff. What is it with the machine there? I didn't wear glasses. I was weed whacking. I hit a stone and it went in my eye. Fifteen minutes later I'm in the eye doctor's. He says eyes heal within 24 to 36 hours. It will heal itself and he gave me antibiotics. [Talks about Kurt taking Maggie into the back to see the beans in process--for photographs/visuals. Talks more about the James Earl Jones piece. RL says "history that is there to be tasted."]