



ViewFinder: One on One Profiles – Biba & Paragary – Transcript

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(*Viewfinder* theme music)

She's an Italian immigrant who brought a taste of *la dolce vita* to the River City.

He's Sacramento's most successful restaurateur; with a string of successes going back more than 30 years.

Their names – Biba...and Paragary – have become synonymous with fine dining. Join us as we go One-on-One with these two culinary giants to hear their personal stories of struggle...and success.

Hi, everybody, I'm Jack Gallagher, and we are outside Biba, on the corner of Capitol and 28th. We're about to go inside and meet Biba herself, and hear her truly amazing story. But first, I understand that she, uh, needs me in the kitchen for something so...we'll just start there.

Jack!

Biba.

Oh my god you have grown since I saw you last time. You're too tall...

It's nice to see you.

How are you?

I'm very well how are you? I'm going to help apparently.

You are going to be my pupil.

Look at that

Today...let see if I can do it.

This can only work out well for me since I have very little cooking experience.

Well I have a lot, so it balances

So I understand, I heard that about you

Do you know what we're doing today?

We're making uh...gnocchi.



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He said it so well I can't even repeat it.

Gnocchi.

Perfect, perfect, gnocchi.

What is Gnocchi?

Gnocchi actually means lump.

It means lump?

Yeah, yeah a lump a piece of something

So now I would hesitate ordering that cause I didn't know how to knowchi, knocki?

Canoki, no gnocchi.

So can I say lump?

Uh no, cause nobody will understand you

It doesn't sound very good

So now, lets say, to make the gnocchi,

Okay

We have the ricotta, which is in this bowl

I'll take my watch off

Take it off. I have a little bit of salt.

Salt

So we have three ingredients, ricotta, salt and flour

That's it?

That's it.

Oh it's very easy



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Yes. We put some of that

Alright

And now I'm going to add about half of this, because I kind of cut the recipe. You're going to work with your hands, and what I'm doing here, oh kids would love to do this

Yeah

...Because just like if they're playing with Playdoh

Very tactile

Very tactile.

Now put your hands into this.

Just like that

You want to stir it; you want to blend it all together....

How can you tell that we need more flour there?

After you do it for 20 years you'll know, I'm kidding.

So I'll come back (laughs) in 20 years

Okay now, I'm going to do this. And I'm going to really kneed it, but it is not needed. So you see, this is going to be a good dough, because it is sticky, but it is not dry. okay so now.

Okay so show me again, you...

Put your finger, it is a little sticky.

Oh okay it is a little moist.

Now we are going to put this into the refrigerator and we roll it out, in about an hour an hour and a half. (and) cut.

And in that time you and I will drink wine?

Yeah

Okay, so this is the dough that we made before, and it was in the refrigerator for a couple of hours.



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It looks good.

It looks, very good, you see still sticky.

Yeah

And that's why we have a little flour here.

Alright

Let me put in front of you. Just in case and I have some too. So this is what we do...I used to teach this many years ago, even for men...and I tell you.

What do you mean even for men?

Well, because they had no clue (laughs)

Cut it about 1 inch thick.

Ahh...see I'll take one of this, roll it up with one finger...and let it go down. So on one side you have the indentation of the fork, and the other you have the hole.

Oh, yeah

Now why are we doing this? Not because somebody woke up one morning and say, I have nothing to do, I'm going to play with the gnocchi. It's

That might have happened though

Tell me why?

It could've happened

No.

Uh, it helps it cook more because you have an indentation on it?

Good idea, but not. The sauce! Where is the sauce going? The sauce is going to stick in the hole.

Oh look at that, it sticks on the indentations as well?

Okay. And now after you do all this work, you put it in a tray, and this one, each one is an order.

Oh, okay



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Then you get a big pot of boiling water, you put your gnocchi down. When the gnocchi come back to the surface

Is that how you tell, on the surface?

Yes.

It surfaces, now gnocchi, the gnocchi is saying I've had enough.

If they don't like you they stay down there.

Oh all right.

When they come up and they're beginning to swim upstream...you take them out, you put your favorite sauce...

Oh

And look, how divine.

May I?

Oh well that's why we made it.

I'm so excited, I almost dropped my fork.

Okay, this is a simple sauce. And the gnocchi look fabulous. And you did a good job, you had a good teacher.

I had a pretty good teacher; I'm just going to have one more.

Please go, and then you know what we have to put here, which we didn't, Parmagiano...that would be wonderful.

Well this has been fun. Now...let's sit down

Okay

Because I want to hear how all of this came to be

Came together

Yeah...

A lifetime of work



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We're going to start at the beginning.

Yeah I'll tell you.

Good, delicious.

Well I was trying to think of people in Sacramento who are known simply by their first name.

Oh my goodness

And I couldn't think of anyone other than you. Don't you think that's quite an accomplishment?

You know it took me 25 years to figure that out, and then when I got it I said that's it.

Biba?

Biba, that's it.

But I mean, you know when you say Bruce you think Bruce Springsteen, you know Cher. Bono from U2.

Because my name, my name is weird, it's really my nickname.

Oh is that right?

Uh huh

What is your real name?

B: Oh gosh...Binilday.

Binilday...I'm not going to try...

Binilday, and yeah it's very complicated, and when I was very very young, maybe one year old, a very bright man said to my mother, you don't want to call her Binilday, she's just a baby. So she came up with Biba

Well it's interesting that someone who was born in Italy and grew up in Italy, would become, Biba the one name in Sacramento. Don't you think? Take us back to the beginning. You grew up...

Oh my goodness, do you really want to go through that? Okay I'll talk very fast so nobody will understand me.

(laughs) Then we'll have to run subtitles.



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Yeah, subtitles...like you say 23 years of my life I lived in Bologna. Northern Italy, Bologna is the capitol of food in Italy. So I grew up in a family, like all the other families, cooked and ate good food. And then, I met my husband who went to medical school in Bologna, was born and raised in New York, by Italian parents and then we got married and went to New York. And then all that was fine. And then we got our first daughter, in New York and then my husband decided that he wanted to leave New York because it was a rat race, and he always liked California.

And he picked Sacramento?

Well he picked Sacramento out of many other possibilities. And when he called me from here he came to check the place out, he said can you get on the next plane, I want you to see the city, it's really nice. So I said, how is the city, and he said, oh, there are fabulous trees with oranges. Oh I said oh great, I was born and raised in the city, big city in Italy, big city in New York. I said, how is the city, you will like it, it's very nice. And when I arrived I said, where is the city? (laughs)

He was being slightly evasive.

Slightly evasive. So we moved here, he was very happy, my life changed.

Yeah, now he was very happy

Very happy

What about you?

I had a little girl, and I...

You knew no one.

How do you move from that, to a restaurant? There had to be some middle step?

It took a long time. At that point I had another daughter, so I had two girls. And I kept cooking out of my kitchen, and then I went as a cooking teacher to William Glenn, and then I taught.

Oh you were teaching?

For 17 years.

Oh wow

That's when I started on television and little things here and there. From that moment on, I became obsessed with the food of my country. I never realized that I could be so, uh much in love with something. I love food; I love what it does to people. Even then, when I had friends in the house and they would rave about it. It was great, it's great. And you know that Italian table, like many other country, is the center (right) is the life, is the center of the home



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Right.

And we were there fighting, crying, hugging each other. Like every other Italian family. And then Vincent and I, my husband and I, always thought one day we would open a restaurant, just because we still cannot find anything here. In tomato country

Right

You would have people would by tomato that were not edible. I mean all these wonderful natural ingredients that we have in the Sacramento Valley, there was a time when people opened cans when you didn't have to. And, um, so we always thought about opening a restaurant, so I opened the restaurant when I was 49 years old. 18 years ago.

Wow

Long time ago. And uh, I had no clue, I had no idea what I was doing, I only knew the food. And my husband encouraged me and he said the most important thing, you know the most important thing, you know the food.

You know the food

But did you bring someone else into help, or did you just, kind of figure it out as you went along. Because that my big question is, someone that cooks, that's great. My mom cooked and was a great cook, but I can't see her opening a restaurant. Let alone a restaurant

You're right, you're right

That becomes and institution.

But we understood enough, we understood that I need to have a chef, I needed to have a crew. People with experience, because I had no idea. And even with all that, the first year I almost died. Because the food that came out of my kitchen, honestly, I wish I could say, I could, I wish I didn't have to say this, but the first year the food out of my kitchen was not Biba's food. It was horrible. And I took two young people who were line cooks. Don Brown who was just a wonderful, wonderful natural cook and the other one, and I sat them down and I said, I want you to be my chef, and you to be my chef. I'm going to be your teacher. I teach you everything I know about Italian food, you teach me everything you know about the back...of your job. They are still here.

Now let me ask you, what would've happened if you would have stayed in New York do you think?

I probably would have tried to open a boutique...I just wanted to be independent.

But a move that you probably weren't thrilled about making, if I can make an assumption.



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At the beginning no, absolutely not.

It turned out fairly well for you.

Absolutely, and you know what, I am so in love with this city now, because without Sacramento I would have never done this, never in a million year...And when people say, you've been here almost 19 years, in August it is 19 years. Oh what are you going to do? I said I'm going to be here until I can't walk. And if I'm on a wheelchair, I will wheel to the tables.

Well you like what you're doing here

This is my life. I love it, I love it. I love the people, I love what, it makes people happy. You see, my husband takes care of sick people, and that is very sad, but hopefully he makes them better. I take care of healthy people

Nice balance

I and I hope I make them better from the food.

Lets talk about that for a minute. Something that you needed your spirit to help you through a few years ago your diagnosis with cancer?

That's true, I almost forgot.

Good, that's a good thing isn't it?

It is, it is

When you can actually, you know you were diagnosed with breast cancer. And you're a cancer survivor.

Yes

How many years now?

Four years in July.

Congratulations.

Thank you, just out of the blue, I was out in the garden one day, and uh something fell on my breast and I did this, and I just felt something, and I said oh, I don't like this. And instantly I knew that it was something that shouldn't be there. And it was a Sunday and my husband came home, he had gone to see some patient, as usual, and uh he checked it out, he said well tomorrow morning we are going to see what it is. And sure enough it was cancerous. But, we had surgery immediately, two days after I was in surgery, and luckily enough it didn't spread, we got it immediately.



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But there was a period where you went through?

Then I did the chemo, because in spite of everything, my husband wanted me to have chemo radiation as a safeguard. And, chemo is not a walk in the park. It's a pain.

Right. And I know from the research that I did from the reading that you...the energy goes to nothing

Absolutely

And but you again?

Well, uh...by having a doctor for a husband sometimes helps. (Laughs) he knew, he knew of course what I had and my, I was very anemic, so they put me on a, they put me on a medication, which worked very well for me, and uh, and then. He insisted that I needed to get out of the house, which very eagerly I did, because I didn't want to stay there look at myself in the mirror and say what if? This has been my salvation, this restaurant. Do you know when I did the chemo I lost all my hair, obviously, and uh..three people in the kitchen shaved their head. My bartender, one day I come in and I have all these people who are bald. And I started crying, because I don't cry when I get something that is bad in my life, I want to fight it. I cry when I see acts, of kindness that are so wonderful they just touch me so much. And, and so I worked through the chemo.

And you started to work, for other cancer patients too?

Yes.

...With nutritional stuff. Tell us a little about that, because you lose your taste first.

You lose your taste, absolutely.

For almost everything right?

Yes, I mean for me, I love food so much, I couldn't taste anything, everything was metallic, not even the wine, I couldn't even have wine, because I had to spit it out, excuse me it tasted bad, and then I started with the help of my husband I started well what if I change, he said change anything you want in your recipe, just eat healthy food very basic, very simple and so forth. And that's what I did. And for this reason I came up with the ten recipes, which they're going to put in a little booklet and give it to a lot of cancer patients but it's also very simple. Because you have, you're tired you don't want to go into the kitchen say what the heck am I going to do now. Ten minutes or fifteen minutes you organize dinner. And uh, the most important thing, I feel also, it was for me, surround yourself with a bunch of people who love you, friends family. And the uh, the immediately, you will feel, you will feel swept away by all this consistent love that you have around you. And so, that's why for me coming to work was amazing. My family, my daughters, uh just wonderful.

Well thank you very much



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Sure

Continued success

Thank you so much

And more importantly continued good health

Okay

And uh I love eating here.

Thank you

And now that I know the story more I'll be back more and more (laughs)

And I will make you gnocchi. I know you like those.

When it comes to restaurants, Randy Paragary's got the Midas touch. His eateries pepper the downtown landscape, catering to everyone from casual diners to gourmards. And as his business has grown, so has his role in the Sacramento community. Though his newest establishment – Spataro's – was just weeks from opening, Randy found the time to sit down with us and talk about his remarkable career.

Well, thank you for having us here. Today we're at the Esquire, which is one of your many restaurants – a very successful one. Now when you say the name Paragary in Sacramento, or in this region, it means restaurants; it means entertainment. Was that something that you always aspired to? Did you set out to do that as a kid?

No, I don't have any recollection of, as a young child, wanting to be in the restaurant business.

So how did it happen? You grew up in Sacramento...walk us through that just a little.

Moved to Sacramento in the 4th grade. Went to elementary school, well, all the way through high school. Went to McClatchy High School, Sacramento City College, Sacramento City College, and McGeorge School of Law. I have a JD degree from McGeorge – passed the bar.

And do you still practice?

No, I never really did.

A little busy, are you? (laughs)



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I was already in the restaurant business as I was going to law school, so I didn't really have a chance.

So at what point did you get sidetracked into restaurants?

Going through college and getting an education, I did make the commitment I was going to continue through and get my law degree.

Okay...

But in the meantime, I had opened my first bar, and then another restaurant, and then another one.

Okay, hang on one second: how do you open up the first bar? You skipped that! I've never opened a bar, so what was the impetus? You had friends and wanted a place to hang out?

Well, it was sort of interesting. I was 22 years old. It was 1969. I was a hippie. It was that era, and there weren't places for people like me and my friends to go to. I recall at the time some of the more popular bars or places to listen to music were bowling alleys.

Is that right?!

It was a different sort of times, where we wanted to create a place that was more...more woodwork, and funkier, and mismatched chairs. The tabletops were those PG&E spoons.

Oh, yeah! All right.

You'd put resin on and a table base. Did all the work ourselves, and it was one of those kinds of things: "Wouldn't it be great to open a bar, or a restaurant?"

I've had those conversations...

Yeah! People have those...

I usually go to sleep and in the morning...

You kind of wake up and go, "Hoo...I'm over it. Glad I didn't do that one."

You actually did it!

Went through the process, found a spot to rent. Pat Powers and I were the partners. It was called Parapow Palace and Saloon, which is Paragary and Powers. And then after the second year opened a place called the Arbor at 28th and N Street, which has been several restaurants; now it's called Ink.

So you went from this, I'm assuming, beer and...

Right. Beer bar, with peanuts thrown on the floor – very casual type of place – to the Arbor.



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So the Arbor was the first foray into a more...

...a real restaurant. It had a kitchen. Our first place, no kitchen – just a beer bar. Second place, now moved into much more serious, much riskier, much more effort taking place to open the restaurant. But, looking back on it, that apprenticeship that I had operating the Parapow Palace Saloon was a very good lead-up to opening a restaurant.

And how long was the Arbor open?

For about ten years, a little bit longer than that.

Really? Give me the time frame again?

That's 1974 now.

So '74 to '84...

So now I'm in my third year of law school. And then my final year, 1975, is when we opened a place called Lord Beaverbrook's, and that's where Paragary's is today.

So now you've got two places that are running at the same time!

Operating the Arbor and Lord Beaverbrook's at the same time. Beaverbrook's is phenomenal; that was a "fern bar" was what they were called in those days. Tiffany lamps, leaded glass windows, Victorian settees, round oak tables with cloth feet, press-back chairs, very... In fact, it was kind of funny because when we opened that place, I thought, "This can never be topped."

(laughs)

"This -- how could this ever go out of style? This is going to last forever. You know, I'm really set."

Yeah, how long did that last?

And, uh, it just doesn't work that way.

(Jack laughs)

I mean, especially in a bar, the loyalty... I mean my gin and tonic isn't that much better than the next guy's, or my Budweiser, so people in bars, you know, generally go for the latest and greatest look. So it was a very good lesson.

So let's jump ahead a little bit, and let me ask you: at this point, your track record is unbelievable.

Three for three. Three for three.



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In a business – don't most restaurants fail within the first year?

Yeah, statistically, I think it is one of the most difficult businesses; I think you're right.

So what's the secret?

I've grown slowly. I mean, I haven't been a meteoric rise of opening restaurants every six months, that kind of thing. So I've been patient and taken my time, and tried to be thoughtful. I think a big part of it is that I've stayed in Sacramento.

And you've become a big part of the city. When the arenas are mentioned, your name is mentioned with that too. What's that like? I mean, you're a local guy who started out with a beer joint.

Right.

Now you're running with the big dogs.

Sure! I appreciate, you know, that type of confidence the leadership has in me to get involved in those kind of things, and ask for my advice. You know, when it comes to things like arts and entertainment, I think I'm respected. And I also know a lot of the players on all sides. Because I'm in the restaurant business I get to meet everyone. I mean, that is one fun thing about my business; it's a catalyst for meeting people.

Let's talk a little bit about – you work with your wife, she's an integral part of the business.

Sure.

How did that start? Where did you meet her? Was it through the restaurant business?

Well, I met her at Paragary's. She was in with a girlfriend sitting on a barstool. Perfect!

You're the owner! Doesn't get much better than that, does it?

I've got the lines.

“Do you like my place?”

Well, she'll tell the story, in fact, when I was introduced to her, I knew the woman that she was with, and I was introduced to her and I didn't say anything about being the owner.

That's a good move.

And she tells me that was impressive.



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That's a good move right there. Yeah, you don't want to be bragging right off the bat. And now you work very closely with her.

We do. And she had recently moved to Sacramento from Oregon. So she was new to the area, and I recognize talent when I see it, and convinced her to be the manager at Café Bernardo's. So she managed there, enjoyed it...and took on more responsibility as time has gone on.

How difficult is it for you to go out to eat?

Well, let's say I'm going to someone's house. You know, there's this feeling of, "Boy, it must be difficult to, um, to cook for the Paragarys." So actually I see it sort of as a luxury just to go to someone's home and just have a barbecue or something.

So the second part of the question: is it difficult for you to go into a restaurant and enjoy yourself if you see something that you think, "This is out of whack"?

It drives me crazy.

Does it really?

I think when it comes to the service part of it probably more than the food.

I don't think if I were in your position I would ever eat out!

Yeah, how can you have fun, right? But in the restaurants that I go to, service is fine so I don't have to go through that.

Take us through a typical day for you. Start in the morning and walk us through what you would do.

Okay, all right. On weekdays, I have a four-year old son. He turns 5 on June 8th, and I take him to school everyday. He goes to pre-school, starts at 8:30 in the morning, so...

So far our days are very similar, but I think they're going to change pretty soon! (laughs)

Okay. And then, most recently, I drop him off at 8:30 and I'm at our new job site by 9. Because we're under construction of a new restaurant opening in about two weeks...

Spataro.

...called Spataro.

Which we're going to get a look at in a little bit, I understand.



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Right. Italian Restaurant, 14th and L Street, obviously named after Kurt Spataro, my partner. And now it's time for daily attention, because we're trying to get to the point where we can get our final inspections.

Wow.

Then I'll go to my office, which is at 28th and N Street, probably about 11 o'clock, at Paragary's. You know, go downstairs at lunch, you know, chat with guests and you know, see how things are going in the restaurant. Walk over to Bernardo's, see who's there, have some fun talking to different customers that are friends of mine, and getting to meet new people. You know, that's the fun part of this business. It's very social...

Right. I think we're going to take a walk to Spataro's.

Excellent.

So this is Spataro's...

We're here.

...and it's not quite ready to go. But it's getting there.

No, but it's getting there. Well, today's Tuesday. This is what it looks like on Tuesday and the plan is to have it completed by Friday, to have it ready for our inspections.

Now in your experience, Tuesday...we got four more days. You going to make it?

This looks like a four-day project to me.

Does it really?

Believe it or not, everybody always says, "How can it...?"

Around my house, this would be more than a four-day project.

Right, right.

Well, give us a little tour of what we're going to see here.

All right, we're standing in the main dining room. The kitchen's over here to the side. We have a display kitchen, so part of the entertainment of this restaurant is you can watch the cooks prepare the food.



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This room is our banquet room. It's a private dining room that's in the middle of the restaurant, which is a little bit unusual. A lot of times they're sort of tucked in a corner. This time we put it in the middle so if you have a private party, you're in the heart of the action.

So now we're entering the bar area, which is on two levels. We've got this lower level in this section that will have, of course, bar stools in front of the bar. There's a series of banquettes along here with beautiful wooden tables and upholstered chairs. Then we have a series of three booths over there in that corner there that are a scallop shape, and they have a drapery behind them and a really elegant light fixture. And a baby grand piano goes right here. We're going to have a piano player after work. On Saturday nights we'll bring in a trio, have a little jazz band playing in here, and try to get some entertainment going.

Thank you very much. This has been a real pleasure. I enjoyed it a lot.

All right, me too.

Good luck with this!

Thank you. We need it.

Adding to the empire!

I'd like to thank Biba Caggiano for opening up her kitchen to us, and Randy Paragary for giving us a sneak peek at his newest restaurant. We hope you enjoyed yourself, and that you'll join us next time on *Viewfinder* when we talk to two more remarkable Sacramentans. Who might they be? No idea; they don't really tell me that kind of stuff. But it'll be great! See you next time on *Viewfinder*...

...you know Jack what was funny was that when I turned completely bald, everybody said you have to get a wig. So I went and looked and looked for wigs and finally I found something that was okay. I spent a lot of money on two wigs, the first night I wear a wig, somebody hugs me spissuck, the wig (laughs) I'm not kidding you. So I said that's it, no more wig. So I had somebody, I had my wig all crooked on one side

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