Q: It’s April 19, 2011. This is Judith Weinraub, and I’m at Tom Colicchio & Sons downtown.

Good afternoon.

Colicchio: Good afternoon.

Q: Let me ask you just to start out by telling me something about where and when you were born, and what your parents were like, your early education.

Colicchio: Sure. I was born August 15, 1962, in Elizabeth, New Jersey, at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital. I am the second born to Beverly and Thomas Colicchio, an older brother, Michael, and a younger brother, Phillip. My father, when I was born, he was a barber. He had a barber shop. I think when I was around eight or so, he sold it and he became a correction officer in the county jail. My mother was a stay-at-home mom until I was around twelve or so, and then she took a job in a school cafeteria, managing a school cafeteria.

Q: I read that. I thought it was interesting. Did you ever go to the cafeteria with her?
Colicchio: To eat or to—

Q: Just to look around.

Colicchio: I was in there school there, so I’d stop in.

Q: Oh, it was at your school?

Colicchio: Yes. This was in Elizabeth High School. I was there for sophomore year and senior year. I didn’t spend a lot of time in the lunchroom, but occasionally I would go there.

Q: Did people know that the person [unclear]?

Colicchio: We had four thousand kids in our school.

Q: Got it. Okay. What was the atmosphere surrounding food in your home?

Colicchio: Food was always important growing up. We had to be at the dinner table every night. It’s not like it is today, I think, where it’s kind of maybe you get there, maybe not, but we were obligated to be there every night whether my father was home or not, didn’t matter. But food was important. My mother and father were both pretty good
cooks. My mother had her standard twenty recipes that she would cycle through, and my
dad would go out and come back home and try new things. I think, looking back on it,
my mother was a typical mom who would cook and make sure everybody was served and
taken care of before she would sit down. It was her way of showing love and showing
that she can take care of her family, how she took care of her family.

Sunday was always really important. Sunday was Sunday gravy, growing up
Italian American in New Jersey. We called it gravy, and macaroni, not pasta.

Q: Why don’t you explain what gravy is.

Colicchio: I will. I will. Sunday gravy, you know, there’s a lot of discussion whether
it’s sauce or gravy. Marinara is a sauce. The second you put meatballs and sausage and
braciole and pork butts into sauce, it becomes gravy. The actual definition of gravy is a
sauce made with meat drippings, and so I think that qualifies as meat drippings.

But Sunday, we would go to church and get home around eleven o’clock. My
mother would save us some of the fried meatballs before they would go into the gravy,
and so we would always have that. Occasionally there was bacon and eggs in the
morning, well, more than half the time. We would do that and then go to church, or vice
versa, we’d come back and have bacon and eggs, but always have fried meatball. Then
we would sit down and have dinner around three or four o’clock. There were always
other relatives that would stop in. But it started off with macaroni and a sauce and then a
big platter of the meat and stuff. Then we would have a salad afterwards. But that was
every Sunday. It was like a religion.
Holidays were always pretty big. My grandmother would do Christmas Eve and it was always fish. I took that over and I do it now. There was always fried smelts, baccala two or three different ways. My grandmother would fry it. Well, I never knew if it was my grandfather or my grandmother who was actually doing the cooking. She would also steam it and flake into a salad with just olive oil and parsley and some garlic. There was a beet salad that I still do to this day that my grandfather would make. It was beets and celery and artichoke hearts, sheer black olives, hot cherry peppers, anchovy, parsley, garlic, olive oil, a little red wine vinegar, and jardinière, the canned jardinière. I make that every Christmas Eve. I think he also would buy canned beets. I’d make everything. It’s a favorite of my brothers and I. We have to have it.

Q: Where did he come up with that?

Colicchio: You know, I’m not sure. I don’t know. I don’t the origin of that dish. I thought it was my grandmother’s, but I was corrected. It was my grandfather who would do it. I really don’t know. They were born here, my grandparents, my mother’s side of the family. I don’t know the origins and my mother doesn’t know, and they’ve both passed on, so I don’t know if we’ll ever get it straight.

Q: In Jewish homes you’re used to beets, but I didn’t know they had made their way into—
Colicchio: Yes, it did. We’d have pasta with just garlic and olive oil. So I do that dinner now. It’s a two-day prep job for me, but I expand on it a little bit. I still do the baccala salad and I still do the beet salad. I have a lot of other things I do, a cacciucco, which is a big fish stew. I also have some crudo, plus I also do fritto misto when people are sort of showing up. So it’s expanded a bit, but some of the dishes that my grandparents did were there.

My mother would do Easter, and she would make homemade manicotti and she would make the crêpes and make that. That was always a real treat. So, yes, food was really important. It was my father, when I was fifteen, who suggested I become a chef.

Q: I’ve read that, but what was it about what your participation in the kitchen was or your interest?

Colicchio: I started cooking at home when I was about thirteen and just found that I just enjoyed it. I remember one of the first things I cooked at home. My cousin Patty had a beauty salon, a hairdresser, and I remember going to get my hair cut and my mother going as well, and I was sitting there waiting. I picked Cuisine magazine. Cuisine magazine is long defunct. I remember picking it up and I read this article on Cajun cooking. Now, this was long before Paul Prudhomme. I was thirteen years old. This is thirty-five years ago. I remember reading about this particular kind of food and how it was typically done by women who worked in people’s homes, and they would keep the tradition going on, and how this sort of was a combination of slaves that were brought over to work in the fields, but also a population that emigrated down from Acadia in
Canada down to New Orleans. So it was this amalgamation of different cuisines that created this Cajun—it was Cajun cooking; it wasn’t southern cooking.

But there was a dish. I read this article, and I said, “Oh, this is great.” I remember looking at this dish and saying, “Oh, I think I can make this dish.” I was a thirteen-year-old kid. Because there was a picture of it. It was an eggplant that was cut in half. It was roasted, hollowed out, and then stuffed with eggplant, zucchini, onions, peppers, and shrimp and spices. You put the whole thing back into the eggplant and then bake it in the oven. I was, “I can do this.”

I probably would have been diagnosed with ADD if I was a kid today. I had a hard time reading through recipes, but this particular one, I didn’t realize it was an appetizer. So I made it and put it on the table, and my family was like, “Okay, where’s the rest of the meal?” So my mom had to bail me out.

I was very interested in food. It came very easy to me. To me, it was a very simple thing to do. I would read through books and just try things. My dad was very supportive. In fact, I think when I was about fifteen, he came home with a stack of books, probably from the jail library. I’m not sure exactly where they were from, but there was a *New York Times Cookbook* and *Joy of Cooking* and things like that. But one book in particular stuck out; it was Jacques Pépin’s *La Technique*. It was a picture book. I remember reading the foreword, and Jacques talked about how techniques and methods are what’s important, not so much recipes. I latched onto that because I had a hard time reading through recipes. I would look at them and go back and went back and back, and I couldn’t really follow them. I could read through them, but it was just like you get confused by them. So I remember reading the foreword, and the last sentence said,
“Don’t treat this book as cookbook. Treat it as an apprenticeship.” And I was like, “This is great.”

He talked about knife skills, and I would go home and buy celery and just practice knife skills with the celery and throw the celery out. It’s a cheap way to do it. I would make chicken stock and then make consommé, and it all kind of worked. I’d make creampuffs. I remember he had a recipe for actually showing how to make a creampuff swan, and I would do it just to see if I could do it. There were some silly things like take an olive and make a rabbit out of it, and whatever. That was kind of amusing with your friends. But I found it was easy.

During this time, fifteen, sixteen, I was a very good swimmer when I was young, when I was eight or nine years old, and it came very easy to me, but I got to certain point I stopped practicing and stopped working hard, and the kids who I beat when I was eight to thirteen, they were beating me. So I kind of promised myself if I found something else that I really loved to do and that came easy, that I would work at.

Q: That’s very disciplined for a kid.

Colicchio: Cooking became that thing for me, although I was never disciplined. I don’t know why this particular thing I gravitated to, because I would never categorize myself as a disciplined person.

Q: Were you competitive?
Colicchio: Yes. Growing up with two brothers, yes, we were all very competitive. But for me, I think partly it was a love of food. I think part of it was not expecting the sort of affirmation from my parents that I got. My dad was not a very talkative person. In fact, when he would take me to swim practice in the winter, we’d have to drive about forty minutes, and it was a horrible forty minutes because it was two or three words spoken the whole time. So it was like one of those things that you can’t wait till you get there. On the way back, at least we’d talk a little about practice.

So when he took an interest, I think it was important, and I think he did that with my other brothers as well. My younger brother played a little basketball in college and was really into ball, and he’s a coach, and actually very good at what he does. A couple years back he won Metro, New York Metro Area Coach of the Year for high school. My older brother was very much into numbers. He was an accountant, CPA, then went on to do other things in business.

So it was this interest, and then when I was about sixteen or so, fifteen, sixteen, somewhere in there, my dad suggested I become a chef.

Q: What do you think made him so open to this fairly unusual idea?

Colicchio: I think that my dad was a correction officer and almost certain he derived zero joy out of that job. Nothing at all. I mean, think about that job. So I think that he instilled in us, “Find something that you like to do and do it. Don’t worry about money. Just find something that you love. You’ll probably be good at it.” I think my mother and father’s idea of what a chef would be, that I would stay in New Jersey and end up at some
Italian restaurant somewhere. My family, cousins and stuff, were just like, when I said, “I’m going to be a chef,” they were horrified.

Q: I was going to say, did anybody tease you?

Colicchio: No. No one teased me, but my family was one of those families that they would all talk behind your back, you know, immediate family, cousins and stuff. And I’m sure they’re all going, “This is a crazy idea.”

I also decided not to go to college. My brothers were all in college and my cousins, and I think they were all kind of concerned for me. They really just got this vision of sitting in a kitchen somewhere in a wife-beater T-shirt, with a cigarette hanging out of my mouth, stirring a pot of sauce. I mean, I think that was the vision of what I would sort of amount to. So I certainly had no idea what it would turn into. That wasn’t the point. The point was I love food.

So various things just kind of happened to get me into a kitchen. The first job, I was about fourteen years old. My parents belonged to a swim club in Clark, New Jersey, and the guy who ran the food concession, the snack bar, hired me one summer to scoop ice cream and [unclear] the cash register or take orders, and he was going to do the cooking. Within one week, I was doing all the cooking. He was scooping ice cream. Best job I ever had in my life.

Q: What kinds of things did you make?
Colicchio: Well, he would pick me up in the morning because he lived in the same town I did. So he’d pick me up in the morning, we’d go and buy some provisions, we’d get there and get the shop opened up. We would make things like grilled cheese sandwiches and hamburgers and steak sandwiches, and sometimes I’d make barbecued ribs. You know, snack bar kind of food, very simple stuff.

But I was known for making these great grilled cheese sandwiches and just figured out a way to do them. This stuff came easy. I was a short-order cook when I was fourteen years old. When we’d get busy, I’d hold down a line and have like ten tickets up. Then we would also do picnics and stuff for around the Fourth of July and Labor Day, Memorial Day.

I would work in a pair of cutoffs, no shoes, maybe a shirt sometimes, it all depend, and no socks, and he was paying me $275 a week under the table. I was fourteen years old. It was the best job I ever had. It was great. But what that job did, really, it taught me how to use heat and how to cook, how to work a line. That lasted, I think, two seasons.

Then second job I had—well, actually I should take a step back. The first job I had in food, my uncle ran a vegetable stand in the outdoor market in Elizabeth, New Jersey, my Uncle George. When I was ten, on Saturday mornings I would go there and help him. So that was my first job in food.

Q: Was it big, the market?
Colicchio: No, no. It was a block long. Actually, I think it was a little larger. Years back, there was a live chicken market there. But it was just basic produce, nothing special. It was in the Italian section of town. He sold potatoes and string beans and broccoli and cauliflower and potatoes and apples and stuff like that. So I would go there and help set up and then I would sell stuff.

Then I remember there was a diner, a little sort of lunch counter or something right near where our stand was, and I would go there and get coffee. I was actually drinking coffee back then. My uncle and my aunt would let me drink coffee at home. That’s why when I was there I would drink coffee and get an apple turnover, and that was my breakfast. I remember that. I hated it when it was cold. The other thing I hated more than anything was the smell of rotting citrus fruit, because people would just take the stuff at the end of the night, the stuff that was rotten, and throw it in the street. It was just horrible. It was all soft,

Anyway, so, move up now, the second cook job I had, not so glamorous. There was a Burger King opening up in town, so two hundred kids show up to apply. I know I’m getting this job. I’m the only fifteen-year-old with experience cooking, so I’m getting this job. [laughter] And I did get the job. It didn’t last. It wasn’t my favorite thing in the world.

Then I start working weekends in a restaurant in town called Evelyn’s. It was a seafood restaurant. The original one was in Belmar, New Jersey, and it was bought and then they opened a second store in Elizabeth, where I grew up. My father’s friend did the air conditioning for them, so I got a job working as a busboy, as a busser.
Q: This was a tablecloth restaurant?

Colicchio: Not really tablecloth; it was a big seafood restaurant, everything from fried dishes to broiled dishes to lobster tails and king crab legs. It was before Red Lobster. It was that kind of restaurant. The original was actually quite nice. There was a woman who owned it, Evelyn, who opened up a little shop making fish dishes for the construction crew. They were building a bridge over the Shark River Inlet in Belmar, New Jersey, and so she opened up right there, and it was very successful. It was a mainstay of Belmar, New Jersey. I think it’s closed now. So I got a job bussing there.

Q: This was after school?

Colicchio: Only on weekends. Fridays and Saturdays I would do it, and sometimes Sunday lunch, depending. Yes, it was fine. It was all right. I was making some money. I started working there right out of high school in the kitchen. So I graduated high school in 1980 and took a few months off in the summer. I think it was towards the end of the summer I start working in the kitchen, and I start working in the prep kitchen. It was just hard, long hours. I mean, I worked minimum eighty hours a week, and it was peeling shrimp, chopping up king crab legs, cracking lobsters.

I remember one of the first nights I was there—see, it wasn’t like I was new to the restaurant. I knew everybody because I’d worked there before. So I started working in the prep kitchen, and the prep guys would give me a hard time. I’d go downstairs. After working eight hours, they’re like, “You got to do this before you go home,” and they’d
put a tub of a hundred pounds of shrimp in front of me. They’re like, “That’s yours.” I’d start peeling. I think I fell asleep over the tub and one of the waitresses came down and woke me up. But that went on for a while. It was like the hazing thing you kind of go through. It was fine. I was a seventeen-year-old kid.

So eventually I got out of the prep kitchen. Step back for a second. There was one guy in that restaurant who was—there was a whole cast of characters. I remember them all. Bob Donnelly, who passed away a little while ago; and Alfred, who was the chef, Molina, I think his last name was; Stuart Stoltz, who was like the GM of the restaurant; Ellie, this cast of characters. Ramone, who worked what they called the bench, which was where they started all the orders. He was the head oyster and clam shucker.

Then the fry station was really amazing because you would get the orders in, someone would pass you the orders—really an organized kitchen—someone passed the orders down for fry station, and if you were working the batter, the area, there was usually two people who had to bread everything to order. They actually bread everything to order, so you had these bins of different flours and stuff, and you had your bins of seafood iced down, and so if they called an order for a fried seafood platter, you knew it was two scallops, two shrimp and whatever. You’d throw in the flour and then you passed it over to the cook, who was sitting where you’re sitting, or standing where you’re sitting, and he’d pan it and then he would fry it. So it was this whole production. So I was eventually able to work the line. When I first started out, I was really bad at it.

Q: This was how old?
Colicchio: Eighteen or so. Let me move back a second. So, cast of characters, but there was one guy in the restaurant, his name was Slim, and Slim was an older African American gentleman who was from down south originally, and would tell me stories. He was very, very quiet. Everyone in a restaurant would run around, you know, busy restaurant. He would never move fast, just steady, slow. But he was the head prep guy, but he was the one who did all the cooking, not the cutting and the chopping. So he made all the sauces for the Lobster Newberg and Oysters Rockefeller and that kind of stuff, and made the stuffing for the stuffed crab, all the more advanced cooking. They had this recipe book, and he just kind of brushed it aside and did his own thing.

He would tell me stories about working in hotels and working down south and how he came up, and took me under his wing a little bit. I always remember him tasting everything, constantly. He was the closest thing to a mentor that I’ve had, and I’ve worked for some pretty good chefs over the years, but I don’t consider anybody to be a mentor. But he was a special guy.

So I ended up working through every station of that restaurant. I worked on the line. I never did get to work fish broiler. That was a deep position. I worked the fryer, I worked the breading station. You went from the bench, opening clams and oysters and setting everything up, and then eventually worked on the line, worked fryer. I worked in the bakery, paste for the bakery. It’s a horrible job. I hated it. I used to make, like, twenty cheesecakes a day and these lemon chiffon pies. The oven racks would always fall. I’d have my cheesecakes going and start rotating them, and the racks just would
always cave in and destroy my—I mean, it was just so frustrating. But it was, I think, a great place to start working.

From there, I ended up going to a “red sauce” Italian restaurant called Chestnut Tavern in Union, New Jersey, owned by a woman. Her name was Dee, and her son just ran the restaurant with her. Her one son Richard had some kind of culinary degree from the local community college, I think. He also taught there. But he wasn’t really the chef. There was a chef in the restaurant, but he was running the place. The younger brother was kind of a screw-up who just preferred to golf, and he’d always come walking in after golf and he didn’t do much in the restaurant. There was a tight kitchen crew. I was hired to take the place of an older guy who was retiring and he was quite slow, and I was a fast kid, so I got all my work done.

Quick thing about that job, the food was okay, but the great thing was I learned to butcher there. We would butcher, I think, eight to twelve legs of veal a week. When I say legs of veal, we’d get the leg of veal and we’d break it down completely, seam it out, break it down, and then it was all pounded for veal cutlets or we would use the tenderloins for Veal Scaloppini, whatever it was. So I learned how to do that, break down legs of lamb.

Q: Who taught you that?

Colicchio: There was one guy—what was his name? I think his name was Stan, maybe, who would do that in the morning. It was actually a good lesson, and I found later on that it was something that you don’t really get to learn in restaurants. A lot of restaurants,
the serving comes in portioned, or someone’s doing it and you don’t get to see it. So that was a great lesson.

From there, I took a job at a restaurant called—I think this is the sequence, yes—40 Main Street. Forty Main Street was in Millburn, New Jersey. Danny Cannizzo was the owner of the restaurant. I’m still friendly with him. In fact, he texted me a little while ago. I answered an ad for a sous-chef, but it was already taken when I got there, so I took a cook job. Sous-chef was a guy named Jerry Bryan, who I’m still great friends with, and the chef’s name was Jim Smith.

It was the kind of place where we would change the menu every day. It was kind of neat because we’d all come in at twelve o’clock in the afternoon and we would sit down around a table, and I was a cook there, but I was allowed to sit there and participate. In fact, it was the whole kitchen staff. He would say, “Okay, this came in today. We’ve got some mushrooms. What do you want to do?” And we’d all just talk about food. Then we’d go and prep it up and do the menu. Every day it changed, and it was great. Some things were repetitive and we’d see them over and over again, but it was a lot of fun. We got three stars in *The New York Times*.

Q: That’s serious.

Colicchio: In New Jersey. Yes, it was a great little restaurant. It was a busy little restaurant too. I mean just crazy busy.

I eventually left and I took a job at a hotel in Secaucus, New Jersey, the Hilton Hotel in Secaucus.
Q: Where were you living when you were at these restaurants? Were you living on your own?

Colicchio: Yes, I was, actually. When I was about eighteen, I moved out of my parents’ house and I took an apartment in East Orange, New Jersey, and that’s where I was living, with my girlfriend, actually. We moved together.

Q: So you moved to the Hilton?

Colicchio: We moved, yes. The Hilton Hotel. I was one of the youngest cooks in the kitchen, and within two weeks they give me the night chef’s position. I was in charge of the kitchen at night. The chef usually would go home around eight o’clock at night, the chef of the hotel. He was busy with banquets and everything. So my job, my real job was to run the gourmet restaurant. There was a coffee shop. But that was my position. So there was a menu that I’d have to execute, and I was allowed to come up with specials on my own. I did that. A lot of it was I’d read books and try to do the dishes. I’d read Frédy Girardet and Paul Bocuse and stuff like that. I couldn’t do his dish. I wasn’t really good enough, and so I knew I didn’t want this job. I had to back and learn some more. So I worked there for eight months or so. I quit. They offered me a lot more money. I was like, “No, I can’t. I’m leaving.”
I stayed in touch with Jerry, who was the sous-chef at 40 Main Street. He worked in New York for Leslie Revsin at Bridge Café, and he would always tell me, “You’ve got to go to New York. You’ve got to get to New York.”

So after the Hilton, I was like, “All right. It’s time to go.”

Q: Did you know what you needed to learn or wanted to learn?

Colicchio: I’m wrong here, I think. I’m wrong. I went from Chestnut Tavern to the Hilton Hotel and then to 40 Main Street. That was it. That’s right. Going 40 Main Street, and that’s when you started hearing New American cuisine. That’s what we were doing. That’s kind of what we were focusing on.

So from there, Jerry and another guy, Bill Rogers, who is now the chef at Keens in New York, they were like, “You’ve got to go to New York.” So I got my résumé together and started making appointments.

I remember Quilted Giraffe was a restaurant that was really high up for me. I remember reading a bunch about it and what Barry was doing there, and it seemed very exciting and very different.

But Jams had just opened up, Jonathan Waxman’s restaurant, and I brought my résumé there and a few other places. When I went to Jams, the chef was a woman who I was told to see, and she said, “We don’t have anything here, but my husband, Alfred, is opening up, is a chef at the restaurant, Gotham Bar and Grill.” Back then it was called Gotham Bar and Grill, not the Gotham. “Why don’t you go talk to him.”
So I went there and he hired me. She didn’t say “my husband,” actually; she just said, “I know another guy.” I found out later on when I became friendly with her, and Alfred’s a good friend of mine—they’re split up now—I put it all together.

Q: Did you realize that could be a big deal?

Colicchio: No. Again, I didn’t know a lot about New York restaurants, and at the time, it was great when you first started. It was through the chef there before him, and the kitchen was in the middle of transitioning from one thing to another.

I was there a week when I got a phone call Barry Wine saying, “I want to interview you.” I went in for an interview, and it was kind of funny, like, Barry would have never hired someone like me, what he called a career cook. He hired career changers, he hired college grads who thought it was a cool thing maybe to cook. But as Barry told me later on, he had planned on opening a second restaurant. He knew he had to sort of hire what he called a career cook, so I was the first experiment, which kind of backfired on him because I was there for four months and he gave me the sous-chef position.

There are a couple of standout things. Wayne Nish worked there. David Kinch, the restaurant in California. But it was, I thought, a great restaurant. Barry always got a hard time from a lot of chefs because he wasn’t a trained chef. He was an attorney who left law, went up to New Paltz, opened a restaurant up in New Paltz, and then came to New York and did a version here. Barry was always smart. He always had a chef in the
kitchen. There was a chef before I got there, but when I was there, it was Noel Comess, who has now started Tom Cat Bakery after he left the restaurant.

Actually, it was very, very organized. It ran like the clock. Great thing about the restaurant, it was open Monday to Friday, so we were off Saturday and Sunday. And no lunch. Brilliant. It was like working in France. But the cool thing was, the same people were in the same position every day. So it wasn’t like a seven-day operation where you got to bring other people in because you can’t work seven days a week and people are in different stations. Waiters were in the same station every night. Cooks were in the same station every night. So the consistency was really amazing.

I was there about a year, a little under a year, and Barry had the reputation if you ever left Barry, he wouldn’t talk to you anymore. That was it. So I remember going to Barry and telling him I was leaving. The owner of 40 Main Street called me and offered me the chef position. I said I’d only do it if my friend Jerry and I did it together, because we were at the time kind of looking to do a place together as co-chefs. So Barry, I remember going in his office. I said, “I’ve got to talk to you.” And my car was just stolen in New York when I was working.

He goes, “Do you want to buy a car? What do you need?” I felt so bad because he was sincere.

I was like, “No, Barr, I’m leaving.”

And he was just like, “So, I can’t believe your leaving.” But we stayed friends.

I always said that, you know, I learned a lot about food there. Barry had a farm, and talk about farm to table, he was doing this before the word “farm to table” was out there. He had a farm in New Paltz, though. He kept his property there, and the cooks
would have to go up there and work the farm because he wanted them to see the connection between farm and the table. So he was, I think, really ahead of his time. He got a bad reputation for not being a chef at all, so he would go and travel and come back with dishes that he saw and put them on the menu. Everyone else was doing the same thing, but he was honest about it. He taught me how to run a restaurant. You saw the way he and Susan, his wife, the way they ran their operation. They were great operators. They really were.

After that, I went back to 40 Main Street, took the chef position there. At this point I knew I wanted to be a chef. Also, during the very beginning part of my career, my dad had brought me up to Culinary Institute, and you had to work in two restaurants before going up there, and so I started working with the idea that I was going to go to culinary school. It wasn’t until I got the call to Giraffe and they gave me the sous-chef position—I think I was twenty, maybe—I knew I wasn’t going to school at that point.

So then 40 Main Street, I did that. Part of the reason for going to New Jersey is I thought this would be a good way to sort of try to find a style out of New York, because I thought that was important. I think when you look at what chefs were doing, especially some of the French chefs, I could look at dish and go, “That’s Paul Bocuse’s dish. That’s the [unclear] dish.” You’d see, “That’s Alain Chapel’s dish.” You’d see the style, which was something that was a result of nouvelle cuisine, and that’s not what nouvelle cuisine gets credited for. You think about different vegetables and cooking things less. You think about different spices from world travel, things like that. But the one thing that it did was, prior to that, everything was served on platters and Russian service to a table.
So this is the first time the chefs were actually putting a personality on a plate, and so this was the era of the chef.

People think for some reason this was an American thing where chefs are on TV. All the three-star chefs did this. Paul Bocuse was famous, he had the famous line when he would travel around, he would say, “Who’s cooking in your kitchen when you’re not there?” His response, “The same people who cook when I’m there.” We all got a lot of mileage from that quote.

So back to 40 Main Street. I did that for about eight months, and the problem was that there were two chefs and the owner, and I think the actual owners of the restaurant wanted one of us to go, and we both said, “We’re both going to leave together.” And we did.

So I left 40 Main Street with the idea of I needed to go to France. Arian Daguin, who has D’Artagnan, her dad owned a two-star Michelin hotel-restaurant in Gascony, Auch, and so I ended up going up for three months.

Q: Did it make you at all nervous to go from place to place?

Colicchio: No. For me, it was one year and that was it.

Q: Did you think in terms of the future? Were you too young for that?
Colicchio: No, I was thinking in terms of the future. My feeling was, “I’ll work in a restaurant for a year and that’s it. Then I’m moving on.” My feeling is if you couldn’t see everything you need to see in a year, then what’s the point?

Q: Interesting.

Colicchio: Now, meeting Alfred in such a short time, Alfred was—he wasn’t who he is now. He was just starting out, and we’ll get to the story, he hired me back again later on.

Q: So you went to France?

Colicchio: Well, let me think about this for second. Is this where I went to France? Yes, I think I did. Maybe it was after. No, not yet. No. After 40 Main Street, I ended up going to work at Gotham. Now, this is a couple years later. Alfred had a different reputation. He hired me. I remember going to the restaurant and having lunch, and he remembered me from when I was there. I guess I’d run into him at events and stuff. He hired me, not as a sous-chef, but—and it was the strangest thing too, because he was like, “I want you to come in and push my sous-chefs a little bit.”

I was like, “This is a terrible job to have.”

Q: [laughs] What a job.
Colicchio: Boy. I was also at a very bad point in my life. I had just broken up with a girlfriend who I was with for years, my childhood sweetheart. You know, having your own restaurant where you call the shots and then going to work for somebody else, it’s hard to do. So I had a bad, just a bad experience. Not with him. He was great. But I was having a very hard time. I was probably also living too much of the cook’s lifestyle sort of after-hours, if you know what I mean, which was not good.

Q: You mean partying?

Colicchio: Yes, partying. Yes, pretty hard. So that didn’t last long. I think I was there for about six months. We just kind of sat down one day and we said, “You know what? This isn’t working out.”

“Yeah, it’s not working out.”

“Okay, time to go.” And then I went to France. Came back.

Q: What did you do when you were in France?

Colicchio: I’m there for about three months. I worked in Gascony. It was a great little job. I don’t speak French. I don’t speak a word of French.

Q: But you knew enough Italian to—

Colicchio: No, I don’t speak Italian at all. I know kitchen French to get by.
You’re way out in the country, but there was one guy in the kitchen who spoke pretty good English, and the chef, Barneau, the actual chef de cuisine, who was the son of the fighter, he spoke English too. So there were enough people speaking English there. And I knew how to cook. A lot of these kids who were there really didn’t. At this point, I could butcher really well. I can work a line. I knew what food was, and I knew how to cook. So I actually started out doing a lot there. In fact, I got to a certain point where when the chef went on vacation and the sous-chef took his position, I took the sous-chef position, which the other cooks in the kitchen were not happy about at all. So I was there for about three months.

The other way I got by, too, was about a month into my stage, Kerry Heffernan, who is now the chef at South Gate, he showed up stage and spoke near fluent French and was American. So he really helped out. We became great friends and still very good friends to this day.

Q: So it was a stage. Were you not paying anything?

Colicchio: I wasn’t paying anything. No. I think there were tips that were collected for the back of house, a certain amount every night, and I think I got a cut of that. But, no, I wasn’t paid. I saved up money, and I lived in the hotel too. The only thing I really had to pay for was drinks at the end of the night and if I decided to travel or go anywhere on my days off.

So I ended up working there for about three months, and I planned on going and working another three months in Paris. I got into the middle of a family feud between
Arnaud [Daguin] and André, the father, and André turned around and told his son, “Fine, you take care of the America cooks in Paris,” meaning, “You get them jobs.” The fight was over a woman. It was silly. So I found this out much later,

We get to Paris, Arnaud, he goes, “There’s nothing here for you. I can’t get a job for you.” We found out later on that Andre called everybody in Paris and said, “Don’t help my son out.” [laughter] I mean, it was that bad. Arian told me this later on. But it was one of those things.

So I ended up hanging in Paris for about a month until every dime I had ran out, and I started getting cash. Somehow I figured out how to get cash on an American Express card until one day I walked in, they took the card away from me, and it’s like, “I’ve got to go home.”

I ended up going home. I remember it was the day before Thanksgiving when I got home and surprised everybody.

Q: And you were how old?

Colicchio: Twenty-one, maybe, twenty-two, something like that.

Then I got home and went to see Alfred, and he said, “Go talk to Chef—,” a guy I used to work with at the Polo, “Thomas Keller. He’s opening a restaurant called Raquel. It’s down on Clarkson and Carmine. Go talk to him.”

So I went to Thomas and he wasn’t open yet. He said, “I’m opening in about a month. Come back and see me.” So I went back to see him in a month, offered me a job as cook. I think I was there about four or five months and the sous-chef left, and I took
the sous-chef’s position there. That was really eye-opening. Everybody knows Thomas’ story and what he’s done and what he’s accomplished, but I think the one thing that most people don’t realize was back then he was very different. The restaurant was never successful, and so the stress of not running a successful restaurant was hard. His partner, Serge Raoul, ran Raoul’s, and I think wanted half the restaurant to be a club or a scene, downtown scene, and Thomas wanted a serious restaurant. So that was very stressful, I think, for Thomas because the restaurant was very somewhat schizophrenic.

But the one thing that he did that was really interesting, in that kitchen the only thing we talked about was food. So a lot of kitchens you walk in and you talk about the night before and movies, you talk about whatever it is. You walked in and the discussion was, “This is what’s in the house today. What are we working on? Let’s talk food.” It was only about food, only discussing what was going on for that service that night, who needed what, who needed help. It was just very, very collaborative as well. You were allowed to contribute. He would always tweak whatever you did, and if it ended up on the menu, you felt good about it.

I remember nights where I was working the fish side, he’s working meat side, and a VIP would come in, he would say, “Make a special kind of thing. Just make something.” Okay, you make something. And then he would make something. And he’d go, “Make something else.” And this is going on and the other orders, you still have to take care of other orders and stuff. It was great.

Q: Was it flattering or terrifying?
Colicchio: Not terrifying. It was flattering. It was great. Again, he wasn’t who he is now.

Q: But still tall. [laughs]

Colicchio: Oh, he’s still tall. But it was never good enough for him. That was one thing, push and push and push, which was great. It just made everybody better. But at the end of a busy night, he’s still pushing. At the end of a busy night and you’re scrubbing the stove, every little—I mean, he was a fanatic about cleanliness, and it was just like, after a while it was like, “Come on. How much do you want me to bleed?”

He’s like, “The answer is yes.” But that was him and that’s why he’s successful.

But it was—encouraged to do things. I remember there was a maître d’, Kenji, who didn’t work for us, but he was from California and worked for Wolfgang Puck, and he was coming to open a restaurant in town. He came in for his birthday, and I remember Thomas wanted to serve foie gras. There was like a party of ten. I took a whole foie. I said, “How about if we throw the whole thing in the oven?”

He’s looking at me like, “What?” He goes, “It better work.”

I was like, “Eh, it should work.” You know, roasted it, and it worked great. But that was the kind of kitchen. It was like you did anything. I remember him standing up on a milk crate putting a plate on another milk crate on the floor, standing up and letting beet juice drizzle off it to splatter. Like crazy—you know, anything, we did anything.

We felt so bad, I left the restaurant after about a year, and the restaurant never made it. Chris Gesualdi was a sous-chef at the time there, and I don’t remember too
many other people there, but we all felt we were doing something that was really special, and for some reason it just didn’t catch on.

But after Raquel, for a very short time I worked at China Grill, only because all the guys who were coming from California to open China Grill, they were good friends of my friend Jerry. Because while I was doing all this, he went out to California and worked for Wolfgang Puck on Main. So he came back, and I remember walking down the street after I left Raquel and running into one of the guys and saying, “We need help. We don’t know New York at all.” So I worked there for a couple weeks.

Then at this point, my friend Jerry moved back to Virginia. That’s where he was from. He and his wife moved back, and so he got involved in this very large operation and he asked me to come down and help him for a couple months. I ended up staying eight or nine months.

Q: What was that?

Colicchio: This restaurant was ridiculous. It was so big. It was a club inside of it. It was called The Max. It was in Portsmouth, Virginia, sort of near Virginia Beach, but near Norfolk. It had a breakfast area and this lunch business and dinner business with three different dining rooms. It was just crazy over-the-top. So I ended up helping him out, and I came back home.

Now, coming back to New York, I had planned on going back to France. I had a stage worked out to work with Alain Ducasse and Michel Bras. It was during this time my dad was diagnosed with lung cancer, so I decided to stay close to home.
Also during this time I was reintroduced to Dennis Foy, who owned the Tarragon Tree and a restaurant, Toto, in New Jersey. I’d met Dennis years before when I applied for a job and he kind of just looked at me and told me to leave the restaurant. It was very competitive between Tarragon Tree and 40 Main Street. They were a town apart, and a rivalry. So when he saw I was at 40 Main Street, he had no time, after I had waited four hours.

But when I came back from France, before Raquel opened up, I helped him out in his restaurant, Toto, for a very short time during the holiday season. So he was opening up Mondrian, this restaurant Mondrian in New York, and he came down to Virginia and said, “Hey, I’m opening this restaurant. I would like to talk to you about coming on board.”

“I’m going to France. I’m not going to be around.” But then my dad was diagnosed, so I decided to stick around. So I called him up and said, “Let’s talk about this.”

He offered me a sous-chef position. There was already another sous-chef that had worked with Dennis for a long time. I got there, and a combination of my dad, who was clearly dying, there was no treatment for him at all, that and I didn’t like the way Dennis ran his kitchen. His food was fine, but he’s ex-military guy. I didn’t like it. A lot of yelling, a lot of screaming. So I decided it wasn’t for me, but I didn’t leave the restaurant yet.

Then my dad passed away. I took about a month off. I came back and worked for a short time and said, “I can’t do this.”
I ended up going to France, worked for Michel Bras. I was there about two months when I got a phone call from the actual owner of Mondrian. His name was Robert Scott. A group of guys from Morgan Stanley actually owned the restaurant; they were backers in the restaurant. So Bob said, “Why don’t you come back. We want to talk to you about taking the chef’s position here.”

“Okay.”

Came back, and Dennis decided that New York wasn’t for him. He was going to go back to New Jersey, and they offered me the chef’s job. I was twenty-six. Took the job, called my friend Kerry Heffernan, who I met in France, to come on and be a sous-chef, put a team together, and very shortly after that I got three stars in The New York Times.

Q: How did that make you feel?

Colicchio: That was amazing.

Q: Did you realize how—you must have—how fast it was to accomplish something like that?

Colicchio: To me it wasn’t fast. I was eleven years in, so it wasn’t that fast. It’s overnight success and you find out it really wasn’t overnight. I was surprised at what it did. I was surprised when Danny Boulud starting showing up to the restaurant, and Jean-Jacques Rachou. These are guys who I had up on a pedestal. Gerard Pangaud. That’s
when I first met Danny. He started showing up, Danny Meyer. So, all these people. I actually met Danny years and years when I was at Quilted when he showed up to do a stage, and he looked like a twelve-year-old, and the rumor was he was opening this restaurant, Union Square Café, with the other guy, Ali Barker.

We were all laughing, “Oh, this guy’s gonna get eaten alive.”

I remember Jonathan Waxman, who I went to interview at his restaurant, he started coming. So all these people started coming in, and that I wasn’t ready for. We were doing some great stuff there. To this day, there are a lot of people who knew that restaurant when I mention it. That was a special place.

Q: Was the food basically what’s called New American?

Colicchio: I called it contemporary cooking, because for me, food, it doesn’t matter if you’re in Spain, you’re in France, you’re in Italy, wherever, contemporary food’s contemporary food.

Q: Could you explain what that meant to you in terms of the kinds of food you served?

Colicchio: Well, for me what it meant was, I was trained in French cooking, grew up in an Italian household, didn’t want to do Italian food for whatever reason, but there was always that influence sort of there, you know, an Italian influence there. But also what we were taught in American cooking was, the early sort of pioneers of American
cooking, the food had a certain rusticity about it. You think of Larry Forgione’s food.

These guys were breaking the ground for us.

I think my generation of cooks started going to France, and we came back and we wanted to do food a little more polished but still distinctly America, but without that rusticity, but you’re still keeping a bit of a rustic edge. It was just, again, trying to find my way.

The reason I wanted to go to Michel Bras is there was an article that Paul Woolford wrote about in him in New York Times Magazine and I saw the style. I was like, “That’s what I’m looking for.”

But getting three stars, it just—and right around the same time I got Best New Chef from Food & Wine magazine. And that was it. It was just like, “Wow, I got a career.” All these people that I looked up to now are my peers. Then for me it was about just keeping it and just maintaining it. I was afraid that it was all going to end somehow. I was afraid that maybe someone would decide that food wasn’t important anymore and not care anymore. So I just worked like a maniac.

At Mondrian, I was there every morning at ten o’clock. I didn’t leave usually until twelve, one o’clock at night, lunch and dinner, prepped all afternoon with the crew, did the wine list, wine consultant. I hired someone to do the wine list, didn’t like what he was doing. I did the wine list, and I sold the private dining room. [laughs]

Q: Oh, my god.
Colicchio: The problem with that restaurant, bad business deal. These five guys from Morgan Stanley made a bad business deal. [laughs] Irony.

Q: Not the first or last time. [laughs]

Colicchio: No, and I’ll put it into perspective. They opened an eighty-seat restaurant, they spent 3.2 million dollars, $36,000-a-month rent. It was back in the late eighties, and we were going through a little recession there too.

When I opened Gramercy [Tavern], 160 seats, 3 million dollars to build it, $9,000-a-month rent. So in ’91, through my best new chef, Mike Romano, Chef of the Year, [James Beard Award, 1997, for Outstanding Restaurant of the Year] [Union Square] Café gets the award and at the same time I met Danny. I met him in the restaurant, but now I spent a little more time with him in Aspen at the Food and Wine Festival. The following year, went back to Aspen, I had a lunch with him and I knew that my restaurant was probably—I was going to close it.

I got to a certain point where the restaurant seemed like it was successful, but every month the guys would write a check. I finally said, “This is not success to me. This doesn’t feel right, and I think we should close the restaurant.”

I remember they had a big meeting and they came back and they said, “Well, we’re going to throw a half million dollars into the restaurant. What would you do to change it?”

I said, “Guys, don’t do it.” I said, “If you want to do that, my concern is that we owe suppliers.” I think we owed about $100,000 in payables. Wine, I knew I could send
back to the suppliers. I got everybody together. I said, “How much is it going to cost to go bankrupt?”

The attorney said, “About $100,000 for Chapter 11.”

I said, “Fine. Give me that money.” What I did was, actually I said, “Give me $50,000,” and I paid everybody 50 cents on a dollar. I called all my suppliers up. I said, “We’re going out of business. I’ll give you 50 cents on a dollar, cash, tomorrow.” If we go Chapter 11, they have to wait years for that to work through the courts. Maybe they get 10 cents on a dollar. I said, “I’ll give you cash tomorrow.”

Q: There were many people who run restaurants who wouldn’t have bothered doing that. What made you realize it’s really important?

Colicchio: I had a great relationship with all my suppliers. I knew back then that raw ingredients, especially after working in France, that that was the key. You know, you’ve got to get great ingredients. I mean, coming from Michel Bras and going to Greenmarket and finding all the stuff there, bringing back seeds and saying, “Will you grow this for me?” And they did. So, to me, that relationship was so important, and I knew that I was going to land on my feet, and I didn’t want to [unclear].

Everybody but one person said, “Wow. This is amazing. No one ever does this. They usually just walk away.” One person gave me a hard time, and I vowed I’d never buy from the guy, and I never have. Every time I get a call from a salesperson, I say, “Go talk to your boss and ask him why I won’t buy.”
So July ’92, I know the restaurant’s going to close. I have lunch with Danny. I come back the following week, come back to New York, called him up. I said, “I’m closing the restaurant tomorrow.” And I knew he was a fan of the restaurant. He keeps coming all the time. I said, “I have a sense that maybe you want to do a second restaurant. Why don’t we talk about doing it together.”

He said, “No, I really don’t want to do a second restaurant. I’m busy now.”

About a week later, he called me up and said, “You know what? Let’s explore this.” He told me that he spoke to a wine supplier who I worked with named Robert Chadderdon, and Robert Chadderdon used to come into Mondrian a lot. He said—it was a baseball metaphor he used, and I think it was “If—,” I don’t know who they used. It wasn’t Derek Jeter, but, “If Derek Jeter called you up and said, ‘Let’s start a baseball team,’ you’d say yes to that.” Something along those lines.

So Danny and I got together. We talked a little bit. You know, we never discussed food or wine. I knew what he was capable of service-wise from going to Union Square Café. We talked about what we wanted from the industry, what we wanted from business, and how we want to run a business. So we got to a certain point, we decided to travel together. We figure if we could travel together, we could probably work together. So we took a trip to Italy. Great trip. Danny spent summers in Italy or France with his father’s travel business and so he knew a lot of people there, spoke the language, and so we had a great trip.

Came back. On the plane ride home, we sketched out the idea for Gramercy Tavern, talked about—
Q: Can you remember what those ideas were?

Colicchio: We talked about doing a restaurant that was about American food, but something that’s more polished. What American food was, we wanted to push it a little further. The idea of service being correct but not stuffy, a little more correct than it was at Union Square Café, a little more polish, but not stuffy.

Talked about a place. We talked about this idea of taverns, idea of a place where you come for respite where usually you find them, you know, on the road going from one town to the other, and this place where you actually stayed, and it was the only dining room. It was a place where also politics were discussed of the day, and things like that. So that was the sort of sense of community that we wanted in the restaurant and how that restaurant fit into the greater community of New York. We talked about a lot of stuff like that and talked about what we wanted to accomplish.

So it took about six months to find a location. I remember walking down the street. I was actually going to look at another space with a broker, and I remember walking past the space and the windows were boarded up. So you have four windows boarded up, graffiti all over the front of the building, and I look at it, and I always remember Aureole uptown and those big windows. Every night you’d look in there, it looked like a party was going on and you weren’t invited because you were outside. So the idea of these windows, there was something about it.

So we looked at the space, and the owner of the building, his office was upstairs on the third floor or something, and he only wanted to give us half the space. Danny was
like, “No, we need the whole thing.” We played hardball and talked him into it, got a great rent, and then went about building the restaurant.

Q: At that point you really knew the downsides of what it was like to own and run a restaurant. I mean you knew everything that would have been involved.

Colicchio: Well, I didn’t own the other one. I knew that restaurants fail, can fail.

Q: But you knew the perils.

Colicchio: Yes.

Q: So were you scared?

Colicchio: No.

Q: And why was that? Did you have to put up money?

Colicchio: I did. I don’t live life afraid. I just don’t. Robert Scott, who I mentioned earlier, when we closed Mondrian, I said, “Listen, I’ll do another restaurant together if you want to stay in the business.” He loved the restaurant business. He went to graduate school at Stanford and spent a lot of time in the Bay Area and really enjoyed food. So I
said, “Listen, I’ll talk to Danny Meyer and you should meet him and we’ll do something together.”

Now, what Bob did, Bob is not the kind of guy to just say, “Here’s money.” But what he did was really interesting. He guaranteed a loan. So he went to his bank, he guaranteed the loan, I had to sign for it, and I had to pay back that loan. So I invested money in Gramercy Tavern.

Q: Did it seem like a fortune? I don’t know whether you want to tell me, but—

Colicchio: No, it wasn’t a fortune. It was a good amount of money to pay back, I want to say $300,000, something like that.

Q: Oh, imaginable.

Colicchio: Yes. Well, back sixteen, seventeen years ago.

Q: Still.

Colicchio: Yes. So we were going to build the restaurant and design the restaurant. That was a great experience. Danny and I would go to antique shows, Connecticut and the [unclear] show in New York, and source stuff. We had these two guys who were helping us source antiques and artwork. It was a great process, and I think part of it was we kind of took our time with it.
We also had children at the same time. I think they were born almost a month apart. The great thing was I got to stay home for almost the first year and a half of my son’s life. My wife was working, or his mother was working, I should say. So that was neat. But building this thing and opening, it was a great experience. But then it wasn’t so great.

When we first opened that restaurant, it was okay, got two stars in *The New York Times*. I thought we deserved one, based on what I knew I was capable of doing at Mondrian. I looked at Mondrian versus what we were doing there. Different reviewers. Bryan Miller gave me three stars at Mondrian. Ruth Reichl gave us two, came back a year later and gave us three. When she gave us a three, we deserved it. It was night and day, the restaurant, partly because we were doing numbers, and I knew this restaurant was a lot bigger than Mondrian, so I kind of dumbed-down my food because I was afraid of the numbers that we were going to do.

Q: Dumbed-down in what respect?

Colicchio: I just made it simpler and made it easier to produce, maybe start cooking a little more in advance and things like that. I remember at one point going to Danny, and he brought in a general manager and a partner, I remember going to them and saying, “You know what? We’ve got to make some changes here.”

They said, “What do you have in mind?”

I said, “Well, we’re doing about 240 covers a night. I don’t want to do that anymore. I want to do about 180.”
They looked at me like, “Are you crazy? You know how much money we’re going to lose?”

I said, “Guys, trust me on this one. I want to do a tasting menu. In fact, I want to do two tasting menus. I want to do better food. The waiters will have more time at the table. And I guarantee you if we drop those covers, check average will go up and we’ll make more money.”

And they said, “Fine.”

Q: That’s a big vote of confidence.

Colicchio: Well, I was the managing partner of the restaurant too. [laughs] So I was kind of like, “Guys, this is what I need to do. This isn’t working. It’s only going to get worse from here.”

Q: And were you cooking at all?

Colicchio: Oh, yes, I was in the kitchen. Yes, I was there all the time. Well, I say cooking. Chefs don’t typically cook; cooks cook. But I was in the kitchen night and day. In fact, I would do the stay at the end of service, twelve o’clock at night. We had a private dining room about the size of this room here, and that’s where the waiters would check out at the end of the night and do all their paperwork and stuff. I would sit in there with them. Back then you could smoke cigars in a restaurant, so I’d sit there and smoke a cigar sometimes and drink whatever I would drink at the end of the night. And we would
have meetings, but very informal. They didn’t realize it was a meeting. They’d start talking about the night. I’d listen to them rant and rave about whatever, and I’d come in the following morning and go, “Oh, I think we should do this, this and this. And this happened.”

And everybody, “Where you getting all this stuff from?”

I’m like, “Well, we have meetings at one o’clock in the morning. I’m not sure you guys are, but that’s how we’re running this thing.” So anyway, we cut back.

I remember it was also right around the time of the [James] Beard Awards. I knew a lot of people were going to come in town because we’re the new restaurant, and I wanted this thing to just change, and it did. We also had everything right. Claudia Fleming was just coming into her own in pastry. Paul Greico, who now has Hearth, and Tara Weinbar was running service and wine. Nick Mautone was our general manager. Things just really started gelling and came together.

But it was work. You know, this was every single day just pushing and pushing and pushing. So getting that third star by Ruth was just great. It really just kind of pushed that restaurant into a different place than where it started, because when we started that restaurant, the week before we opened, there was a cover of New York Magazine that said, “Is this the next four-star restaurant?”

Q: Oh, my. Terrifying.

Colicchio: I mean, the stakes were so high. It was really tough. And, you know, it wasn’t close. Ruth came back a year later, it was close. In fact, in her review she said,
“This restaurant is just a touch away from your four-star restaurant,” which we never wanted it to be, but it was good. It was very, very good. So, happy doing that.

Q: The idea in the front of no reservations, was that common at that point in the city?

Colicchio: No.

Q: That seemed like a great idea.

Colicchio: A couple things about the front of that restaurant. The reason why the front dining room was different was because there would have been way too many seats for me to handle doing the food that I wanted to do, so we decided to separate it and do a smaller restaurant in back and in front. The reason we didn’t take reservations in the front, we thought it would be too confusing. People would call for a reservation, we’d say, “Front or the back?”

And they, “Well, what do you mean by that?”

So we just kept the front for walk-ins. So it was just by necessity; it wasn’t by design at all.

Q: But it was a really good idea.

Colicchio: Yes.
Q: Is that the way this is going—

Colicchio: We take reservations up front. Since then, we figured out a way to do it. People know it’s different. The reason being here, also, is we’re so far west, people aren’t going to venture here if they don’t have a reservation. There’s not enough neighborhood people to fill the seats right now, so we have to take reservations up front.

Q: We’ll get to it, but what made you build here?

Colicchio: Yes, we’ll get there.

Q: Okay. All right.

Colicchio: So after six, seven, eight years, whatever it was, I remember walking with Danny over to look at a space that he was looking at for Michael Amato to do an Indian restaurant, and it was on the north side of Madison Square Park. I remember walking over there and looking at the space and just saying, “Dan, this is a tough space.” I remember walking back and pointing to where Eleven Madison and Tabla is now and saying, “This would make a pretty interesting restaurant.”

He said, “Well, it’s available.”

I was like, “Well, let’s take a look at it.” So we looked at it and decided to go ahead, and Danny made a deal with the owners of the building, MetLife.
I was involved to a certain point with Eleven Madison and Tabla and decided that I didn’t want to be part of the group. The ownership was different. The ownership of Union Square was different than the ownership of Gramercy, and Gramercy was going to be different than the ownership of the other restaurants, and I just didn’t want to be part of it.

During this time, right after that, probably because I wanted autonomy to do my own thing still, I mean, Gramercy was my own thing. I did it with Danny. That was great, but I wanted my autonomy to do something different where I didn’t have someone sort of telling me when I can and when I can’t do something, or trying to tell me. So I opted out of the group.

It was a year or so later when I was approached by a guy on the coop board of the building where Craft is now, and he wanted to know about garbage and pest control and things like that, and I asked him why. He said, “Well, we have this building on the corner and we are negotiating for a restaurant tenant, and I just want to talk to you about this stuff.” So I asked if I could see the space. He said, “Well, we’re in lease negotiation so we’re going to sign a lease.” Okay.

Couple months go by. I walk by the building, nothing’s happening. I call the guy back and said, “What’s going on?”

He said, “Well, it fell through. Let’s talk.” So we start negotiating, got it up and created a deal, and that’s how Craft started.

Q: And your idea for Craft at that point was?
Colicchio: Well, the idea was that I was doing my food at Gramercy Tavern, and I knew didn’t want to do an ethnic restaurant or something like that. I had to do something different. I couldn’t do the same. My plan was always to stay at Gramercy; it wasn’t to leave. In fact, I had a deal to buy Danny out, and at the last second just said, “This is what I want.”

I thought about where I thought the food world was going. Everybody was talking about simplicity and there was a lot of talk about ingredients and product. So I thought, okay, if you really want to highlight great ingredients, let’s just highlight the great ingredients. What is wrong with serving a bowlful of peas? That’s it. A little butter, that’s it. What’s wrong with serving a plate of morels when they’re first in season, or a plate of wraps or asparagus? And why do you got to mix things? So partly because I didn’t want to do what I was doing at Gramercy, I didn’t want to just do different dishes, so I was like, “Hmm. This could work out nicely.”

Now, also, right around this time was the James Beard Awards, and I remember we used to have this little sort of private party after the awards and I would invite some chefs back to my restaurant right after the awards, and then we’d go to parties after that. I remember this group of, like, twenty of us coming back to the restaurant, and I called John Schaefer, who was the chef of cuisine at Gramercy at this point. I said, “I want some baby lamb. Just put some thyme, olive oil on platters on the table. I want a bowl full of morels. I know we have some asparagus just came in. That, and that’s what I want. Don’t mix together. I want it on platters.”

I remember sitting down and it start happening and it was great. People were passing food around. And it was like, “Wow. This is different.” I always remember
that. I said, you know, this is, I think, something missing from a lot of New Yorkers’
lives, the idea of passing food around, because we’re not eating at home, we’re eating out
too much, and if you’re already home, it’s takeout. So this can work out nicely.

So that’s how Craft came about. The name came about because to me this was
about the craft of cooking, not so much the artistry of cooking. It was about just really
focusing on those individual ingredients and saying you can take a piece of fish, roast it,
some herbs, olive oil, put it on a plate and leave it alone. That’s it. And that’s what we
did.

Q: Was that difficult to sell?

Colicchio: To sell to—

Q: Diners.

Colicchio: Not as hard as I thought it was going to be. What was difficult was the first
menu was a little complicated because there was sauces and there was condiments, and I
got rid of that within the first week. Funny thing was, everybody had a very difficult
time when it first opened up ordering, trying to figure it out. Some people didn’t; some
people did. But we opened up the exact same restaurant, pretty much the same
restaurant, only we called it Craftsteak in Las Vegas, and no one had a problem figuring
it out. So it’s just how you kind of package it. A lot of people thought—and I think the
press actually misrepresented it as well—that you were going to order these ingredients,
these disparate ingredients, you were going to order them and then we were going to plate them together on a plate. And it’s kind of like, “How do I know this goes with that?” It’s like, “No, that’s not going to happen.” And I would always say it grows together, it goes together, so seasonal food always has an affinity for each other.

But after a while, people got used to it. I think also it got very complicated when the waiters would try to explain it. So finally I remember listening to some waiter explain it and this glazed-over look that these customers had on. I was like, “Stop explaining it. Just put the menu down. If they have questions, they’ll ask. If not, then tell them.” But we were doing something right. Bill Grimes, three stars. So this is my third restaurant, third different reviewer, third three-star review. We hit a home run.

Q: I wasn’t living here, but I came up as often as I could, and I remember going there and thinking the people that I knew who went there, the women were very nervous because the women were used to presenting a sort of full plate at home. The guys, it was perfectly normal. It was like they could order a steakhouse menu, and so it was no problem. I just found it interesting.

Colicchio: This is why men won’t ask for directions and women need directions. [laughter] But the funny thing was, I, like a lot of other Italian American chefs from my generation, we all stayed away from Italian food. Alfred Portale, Tom Valenti all kind of stayed away from Italian food because we were trained in French food and it was a fancier food, whatever. At a certain point, I looked at what we were doing at Craft and said, “This is Italian.” This is Italian the way you eat in Italy, not what’s known as Italian
restaurants here. It was funny, because Sergio Macchione’s wife came in for her birthday about two or three weeks after we opened up and she pulled me aside, she goes, “This is the best Italian restaurant in the city.”

I looked at her and said, “Don’t tell people that.” [laughter] I wish I had told people that it was Italian, although I don’t know if people would recognize that it’s Italian.

Q: No.

Colicchio: Never. But it’s such in the spirit of Italian eating, where one thing and that’s it.

Q: That’s why Italian food is so good. I mean real Italian food.

Colicchio: Yes. But I thought if I called it Italian food, no one would get it. I think if I tried try to explain it in the spirit of the simplicity, then people would have been confused.

We just had our tenth anniversary at Craft, and I brought back some chef notables, cooks and chefs who worked in the kitchen. So it was Marco Canora, who was the first chef in the restaurant; Jonathan Benno, who was a cook there; David Chang, who started answering phones at Craft and then we [unclear]…him down in the kitchen; Akhtar Nawab; Karen Demasco; and then the three chefs who are currently in my restaurants in New York, James Tracey, Damon Wise, and Lauren Hirschberg.
Q: Let me ask you two things. I realize that the time is an issue here.

Colicchio: I got to get to a seder tonight. That’s all.

Q: [laughs] Oh, I see.

Colicchio: Well, actually, I’ve got to go home and get the kids packed up into the car so my wife [Lori Silverbush] can go to Brooklyn, and I’m going to take a cab later on and meet here there.

Q: Do you do two seders?

Colicchio: Yes.

Q: Oh, my.

Colicchio: Because her parents are divorced.

Q: At what point did you write *Think Like a Chef*?

Colicchio: *Think Like a Chef*, god, that was—
Q: Because it was published in 2000.

Colicchio: I was still at Gramercy. And interesting, I didn’t want to write *The Gramercy Tavern Cookbook* because I didn’t think we were old enough to do that yet. *Think Like a Chef* came about because I’d been asked to do cookbooks. I kept saying, “No, I don’t want to do a cookbook,” because I didn’t want to just have a bunch of recipes and say, “Here’s the recipes.” I wanted to try to teach someone something different or something at least the way I was comfortable cooking food. So it was an interesting process writing that book because I kind of started out in a very different direction. There was a different writer who was a waiter at the restaurant, who was a very, very smart guy, and I was sure he turned in some great papers at school but he wasn’t a writer.

Q: It’s a fantastic book.

Colicchio: Well, we did everything at home, and my wife’s a writer and she would kind of listen to what we were doing with one ear. She’s a screenwriter, so she understands story. So once the manuscript was turned in, she read it and goes, “There’s no way we’re turning this in.” And within two weeks she wrote the book, just completely rewrote it.

Q: She reorganized it into the—

Colicchio: No, I did that. The components?
Q: Why don’t you explain that.

Colicchio: Well, for me, again, I was trying to figure out ways to teach people about food, and so obviously if you’re going to talk about techniques, you start with techniques. But I wanted to boil it down to make it really simple and something that you could understand: roasting, braising, sautéing, poaching, how to cook green vegetables, how to do certain things. So this was the building blocks. Then from there, I wanted to give the reader a jumping-off point to create their own food, do their own thing. The idea of going to a market, having the ability to walk into a Greenmarket or whatever and just buy stuff, and knowing that when you come home you’ll figure a way to make it all work, versus the recipe in hand and, “Oh, god, they don’t have this. What do I do?”

So I stumbled upon this idea of trilogies, where we take three ingredients and work them together in very different ways to teach people how to create. Then we look at a dish that you’re doing, lamb, fennel, eggplant, tomato, whatever. You know it’s all going to go together. It’s all seasonal. It all kind of makes sense. It sounds right. But the question is, how do you get that stuff in there? The lamb, is it braised? Is it roasted? Well, that all depends on the cut. The fennel, do you want to roast it? Do you want to sauté it? Do you want it braised? Do you want it cool like a salad? Do you want to actually make it all together and make a big ragu? How do you want to do the eggplant?

So the question is how, not so much what, and that’s something that the trilogies teach, because you take these ingredients and you manipulate them in different ways to come up with different dishes. So three chapters of that.
This is something I used to talk to Barry Wine about, and he was talking about, which was component cooking, because that’s all you do is move components around the board to create the dishes. But also this idea of ingredients. What is an ingredient? You make a roasted tomato. So now there’s a recipe to do that, but now that’s the ingredient in a dish. And that was actually something I’d written for Food & Wine magazine. I did this tomato piece for them a couple years before that and talked about just the roasted tomato, not as an ingredient. But now when I made it into this book, that became an ingredient, and then from there, so, okay, now you have the ingredient. What do you do with it? How do you create dishes starting with the ingredient outward?

So these themes, as I thought about what I was doing, they presented themselves. Then once you hit on the tomato theme, it’s like, what other theme can you use? Oh, it’s the mushroom theme. Then what else? So the trilogies, it was throw three ingredients together and let’s see how we can push them and pull them. So the duck and root vegetable, apple became one. The ranch asparagus morel, I think, became another.

Q: I reread it recently, obviously, and I was really impressed with the clarity of the explanation of the techniques. That alone would have been enormously helpful to people, I think.

Colicchio: My favorite cookbooks are Elizabeth David’s.

Q: With no instructions.
Colicchio: Exactly. And why? The assumption was if you’re buying a cookbook, you knew had to cook. [laughs] So you can say, “Take a shoulder of lamb, bone it out removing all the fat, tie it up,” and show you how to tie it, “and then you brown it off and you take your carrot, your celery, onion, leek, cut into quarter-inch pieces, brown them off, put it together, add stock, braise the lamb shoulder.” That’s all that’s said is, “Braise the lamb shoulder,” so the assumption was you knew how to braise a lamb shoulder.

So for me it was like let’s break this down and make it as simple as possible and get rid of all the fluff. I’d have these problems when I worked with an editor in a magazine and I’d give a recipe and say, “No, you’ve got to be much more detailed than this.” Why? It just clouds it up. Just keep it really clear and to the point, I think it’s easier.

Q: Because readers panic.

Colicchio: Yes. You know, it’s funny. I tie flies. Just before I came over here, I was reading this magazine that I got. I don’t need to read—tie flying for me is like recipes. I don’t read the recipe. I look at a picture and go, “Okay, I know how to do it.” I know the technique, so I know how to apply materials to the hook and I know whether it’s fresh water or salt water because it’s all technique. You learn how to put wings on if you’re tying trout flies. There’s various flies and you learn how to tie them. These are the basics. Then from there, you make your own patterns and your own thing. Same thing with cooking.
But I’m looking at this recipe for this fly and it is so complicated. It is just crazy complicated to what he’s trying, and the fly’s a fairly simple fly. But to make it where the particular string or feathers don’t get wrapped around the hook, which is a problem, you have to create this base underneath it. It would have been the easiest thing to give us three photos, and yet it was ten paragraphs of nonsense. I was reading this, going, “This is so much easier.”

So for me, I think cooking, basic cooking, not some of the stuff that’s going on today, which is much more complicated, it is easy and it should be easy. It doesn’t need to be overly complicated. I mean, look at a recipe for making a consommé, how complicated it seems. When you actually do it, it’s like, “Oh, this is it?” Take some egg whites and some mirepoix and whip it up and put it in stock and just stir it until it comes to the top and let it simmer. That’s it? Really? But yet you read that recipe.

Q: It’s scary.

Colicchio: Oh, god. You never want to do it.

Q: You mentioned writing for magazines. Had you done enough of that before you did Think Like a Chef so that you felt that you could write a book?

Colicchio: I’d written a few articles. My wife and I did an article on bay scallops for Saveur. We did the article together on tomatoes.
Q: Were editors calling and asking?

Colicchio: Yes, a few would call and say, “Think about doing a book.”

Q: No, I meant actually for the articles first.

Colicchio: Oh, no. We would pitch them. Yes, we would pitch them. It’s a pretty easy thing to actually do, I guess. I wish my wife would do more of it. She doesn’t want to. In fact, she used to have arguments, “I don’t want to be known as known as a food writer. I’m a screenwriter. I’m a director. I’m a film director.” I was like, “Use a different name then.”

Q: She’s right.

Colicchio: Yes. She won’t even pitch now. I said, “Well, fine. We’ll just use a fictitious name and it’ll be fine.” No. Won’t do that.

So, yes, that book, when it came out, it won a Beard Award, which was pretty exciting. But for me was when I started getting calls from people in cooking schools saying, “We’re trying to use this as a text,” as a teaching book. That’s pretty cool.

Q: That’s thrilling.
Colicchio: Yes, it really was. And I think the second book, *The Craft of Cooking*, we didn’t put as much effort into the book. I think it shows. It’s a good book, but it’s not *Think Like a Chef*. I don’t want to say I mailed it in, but we were just trying to capture a moment in time in the restaurant, and so the recipes were very different. It was a very different book. It wasn’t meant to be a sequel to *Think Like a Chef*. It was really meant to just sort of capture this moment of a restaurant without it being this big over-produced restaurant cookbook.

Q: When did you have time to do these things?

Colicchio: You find time. You make time. For me it’s about having a good team around me sort of forcing me, “Okay, Tom, this is what you have to do today. You’ve got to get this thing done.” I’ve owed a new book to my editors for a year now and I haven’t started yet. But I finally know what I’m doing. [laughs] It took a while.

Q: So you had to figure out what you wanted to say?

Colicchio: Yes. I thought I was going to do a book based on the Tuesday Dinners, like a big coffee table, over-the-top photo kind of book. I started looking at those recipes and they were impossible. I don’t use recipes. I’d look at a particular dish that I was putting together and just go, “This is way too complicated.”

Then I was thinking of doing a butchering book. Got very complicated. Then I hit on something that I think is going to be actually pretty neat. My son’s turning
eighteen and he loves food, has no idea how to cook. He’s my son. He should. His friends all assume he knows how to cook, and I think he actually plays up like he knows how, but he really doesn’t. So I’m going to teach him.

Q: It must be pretty intimidating.

Colicchio: No, I don’t think so.

Q: Really?

Colicchio: No, because I cook at home and it’s very simple stuff. So this summer I’m going to teach him how to cook, and we’re writing a book together. He’s writing it too.

Q: Oh, what a great idea.

Colicchio: It’s going to be stuff I cook at home without it being “Chef cooks at home,” which we need another “Chef cooks at home” book. He’s eighteen in two days, three days, twenty-first. Two days. And our relationship has changed. He’s a young adult now and he’s not a kid anymore. He’s away at boarding school, so I don’t see him as much. With these two babies at home, it’s like we need to reconnect, and so we’re going to reconnect over food. For me teaching him, it’s more about a life skill. I doubt he’ll ever work professionally in a kitchen. So I think this is more life skill, more sort of a way he can cook for himself, for his friends, family later on in life when he has his own
family, and just kind of understand food a little better. So it should be fun. But I’m
making him write the book too. He’s got to do a little work here.

Q: I think we should stop now.

[End of interview]