

Name of Interviewee: Alejandro Llamas
 Date of Interview: March 8th, 2017
 Name of Interviewer: Steve Velasquez. Mireya Loza also present.
 Length of Interview: 72 minutes

Transcript audited by Velasquez on June 19, 2020. False starts and repetitive verbalizations ("um") have been removed for overall clarity.
 [Three audio files]

SV: Okay, so we're going to get started. Today is March 8th, 2017 my name is Steve Velasquez. I'm here with Mireya Loza and Alex Llamas in Napa, California to do the Mexican winemakers project. So, good afternoon.

AL: Good afternoon.

SV: So, for the record, can you please tell us your name.

AL: My name is Alejandro Castillo Llamas.

SV: Alex can you tell us when and where you were born?

AL: I was born on February 10th, 1980 in the Coachella Valley in the town of Indio, California.

SV: Indio, California. Nice and warm.

AL: Yes, certainly.

SV: So, Alex, can you tell us a little bit about your parents, what were their names and when and where they were born?

AL: So, my mother is Maria Lourdes Llamas Aceves. My father is Ricardo Castillo Solorio. [1:00] They're both from a small town, outside of Guadalajara. It's San Nicolas de Acuña and it is situated on the lake of Chapala, *el lago de Chapala*. It's a very gorgeous, picturesque valley, breath taking views, and it's almost difficult to see across the lake, as it is the largest lake in Mexico.

SV: And are you the only child?

AL: I am not. I am one of six. I have two sisters and the remaining are all boys.

SV: Oh, wow. Okay. So, can you tell us a little bit about you and your family's journey to California?

AL: Well, I think our journey starts a few generations back, but I would say that the most relevant would start with both my grandparents on my mother's side. Jesus Llamas and [2:00] Rosario Aceves. They too come from the small region of San Nicolas de Acuña. My mother was originally from a neighboring town, San Luis Soyatlan, very old school very disconnected to a lot of infrastructure. *laughs* I apologize

[Abrupt end of recorded material] [2:22]

[Abrupt beginning of recorded material] [0:00]

AL: Yes, something else is engrained in me through my family is cooking at home. My wife and I still do it religiously, six times a week. So it's something that we forget about sometimes burn the beans there, all the time. Essentially, you know, it was very rural part a part of Mexico, it still continues to be pretty rural. You know, my grandfather still picked up my grandmother on his mule on their wedding day. He compliments his greatest wedding gift being *cuatro brazadas de leña*, or four bushels of wood because that's what they would need to cook for the wedding and the fact that someone went into the hillside, harvested all this dead wood and brought it to his wedding was his most significant wedding gift. So it really, really tells you a lot about the time we're talking about. Obviously, my grandfather wanted the best for his family and ultimately he decided to pursue, [1:00] migration north, so he could find additional work, harvest some of those earnings, bring them back to Mexico, and invest them in his land and his cattle because originally he does come from a rancher background. Yes, so he started to immigrate north with his brother Felix Llamas, and we will be meeting with his wife Mama Ester. They were called *corridas* or runs. And it was essentially a way for an impoverished region to bring back financial means and build upon, you know, what little they had. Now, as his children got older, he started to bring them along with his *corridas* because more family members, more labor, more income, [2:00] more flourishing back in Mexico. So, my mother is the oldest, she started coming when she was sixteen, initially it was a summer trip in Delano picking table grapes. As the years progressed, all of her sibling started coming. She was ultimately married to my father. And that's really where my story begins, down in the Coachella Valley, where they were working on table grape varieties such as concord grapes and other varieties used for table consumption. As I mentioned, I was born in 1980. I did have a few complications. Initially, I was in an incubator, for about 3 months, but upon release from the hospital, I was immediately taken to Mexico. [3:00] And that really was the beginning of about 17 years of following an annual migratory pattern, for me personally. Where I would spend about 75% of my time in the US moving north from the Coachella Valley all the way up into Portland, Oregon. And then going all the way back down to San Nicolas de Acuña in the state of Jalisco, Mexico. This meant picking up and moving every few months. It impacted my schooling in cases where the vineyards, the field, the orchards were so far away from school that it didn't make sense for us to go school. My memories as a young child were

always of a strong family network. My grandfather being the patriarch. My grandmother being kind of this loving individual who will always ease everyone's hardships, [4:00] living in small reduced places, like trailers, living as a, as a close family unit, you know, when you got 15 people in a trailer with 2 bedrooms. The two married couples would take on the bedrooms, my grandfather and my parents. Everybody else was single, so we all got to sleep in the living rooms. So, I would literally lay next to my uncle Tito, my uncle Checo, my cousin, my brother Oscar, whoever it may have been. I think ultimately really really instilled in me the value and importance of being family oriented, of being part of a nuclear family. Going out and seeing the hardships of the family in the labor, really showed me the importance of work ethic. And although I didn't understand the importance of what they were doing the in the field, as an adult, [5:00] I would have this epiphany of why we were working so hard the vineyards, orchards and fields, ultimately to produce the highest quality possible, whether it be pears, it would be packed to go to market or now grapes that going into making our wines. So, it was a beautiful journey. It was a beautiful journey. I guess, for me, working out in the fields, one of the most clear and vivid memories is of Oregon, where we would harvest cherries. My eldest brother Oscar and I were known as *los barberos* or literally the barbers. And that was because cherries would be harvested by hand. To harvest a cherry tree, you would need at least a 21 foot aluminum ladder. My brother and I didn't have the muscle development to work with a 21 foot ladder, [6:00] so we would get strapped with a picking can and we were asked to pick anything within arm's reach, which is essentially the beard of the tree. And we were called *los barberos*. As rewards, we would a small stipend from each one of the family members that was part of our crew, but we were also allowed to pick up all the beer, soda cans that they would enjoy under the trees in the warm weather and in the state of Oregon, we would get a nickel per can, so you can imagine a day of picking cherries and then hanging out with the elders as they enjoy their refreshing beer or water or whatever may have been. And here is Oscar and myself fighting over cans. So, we both would want to hang out next to uncle Roberto, uncle Tito, who had the tendency to produce more cans than the rest of the clan. And that was always amazing, you know, [7:00] our parents held us to a high standard. My grandfather was very militant in his approach. And I guess at the moment in time, it's a burden. It's an inconvenience. It's why do I have to do this. But being able to reflect as an adult. I wouldn't have it any other way. I think that in today's world, we could use more young women and men to grow up in such a fashion so that they know what it takes. Not only to put food on the table, but what it takes to be part of a beautiful family.

SV: So you guys traveled via caravan, fifteen, twenty of you. When did your grandfather Jesus and his brother Felix start coming, was it in the 60s, 50s?

AL: It was sometime in between the late 50s or early 60s when they started coming up north. [8:00]

SV: Uh huh, ok.

AL: And the first roots that my grandfather put down were in the Coachella Valley. He and my father purchased a home, but it still in the family. My uncle Sergio owns the home now, but that's quickly become our home base. Nowadays, you know, you can drive to Mexico and you can be in Mexico in 48 hours, 38 hours, whatever might be, depending how fast you drive, but back then, it wasn't feasible to fly 20 people up north. You would lose all your earnings, so the way to go was driving back when gas was under a dollar a gallon and the highway infrastructure wasn't in place, used to be a four, four an half, five day trek depending on how far north you were. So, Coachella Valley became a great point for the family, not only because it offered the first [9:00] seasonality of work, but it was also the closest to our hometown in San Nicolas. From there, we'd work our way north in the Delano Fairfield California, which is right next door to the Napa Valley. We'd move north in Salem, Medford, Portland, Oregon and then on the way back south, we would stop in Corning California to harvest olives and then make the trek back into Mexico and spend a beautiful month and a half or two months. Again, when we got to Mexico, it wasn't really a vacation. My grandfather again had very high standards for the whole family. So, it continue to be waking up at five in the morning, going up to the *cerro*, getting the cows from the plot of land was known as *el quemado*, *el ojo de agua*, or had all these different names, and the cattle would be rotated contingent on the availability of feed or the level of water in the *presas* or reservoirs. And we'd take the cattle down to the lake, [10:00] lake Chapala, again they have access to water there. We bring them into their enclosures. We'd feed them. We would milk them. And then in the afternoon, we would separate them from the calves and then take the cattle all the way to the top. As a six, seven, eight year old, this made a tremendous impact on me. It gave me a lot of empowerment to know that I was alone hiking three to four miles into this untamed nature, and commanding 40 to 60 cattle that were, you know, 20 times, 40 times my weight. And every once in a while you get that stray what wanted to do its own thing, famous *vaquillas*. And I remember, you know, coming to tears as I was, you know, pushing myself through thicket, through needles, the famous wisache [??] plants, and I knew that if I came down that hill [11:00] minus one animal, it would be worse than going through the entirety of the wisache [??] and the entire region because my grandfather, again, was very militant in his approach. And, you know, you also wanted to please him, and you knew how hard he worked to acquire what he had, and he wanted me to meet him halfway, so yeah. A lot of great memories of when I was young. A lot of stories that I'm sure will pop up as you can kind of probe into my mind here a little bit.

SV: Yeah, yeah. So, so you went back to Mexico for a couple months in the winter time? Or in the...?

AL: Correct. Typically, in the winter time. Typically we'd leave around November. And then we would make our way back some time in February or March.

SV: And when you were in Mexico. Did you go to school? Or did you have any schooling in Mexico?

AL: I did attend school, the primary and elementary level in Mexico. [12:00] It was a great experience. My parents were always pushing for an education. As a matter of fact, the whole family unit was because they knew at the end of the day. The real reason why they were working so hard was to give everybody an opportunity that they themselves didn't have. So, the sacrifice of leaving everything you know, your family, your friendships, your home, was ultimately for next an upcoming generation which being first generation, being the eldest of the entire family really fall on my brother Oscar and myself.

SV: And how old is Oscar...?

AL: Oscar is three years my senior, so 40 in July this year. I'm 37 myself.

SV: Just out of curiosity, is Oscar in this area too? Or did he...?

AL: So, Oscar is still here in the Napa Valley. He too work in wine making. He is, you know, one would call in the wine industry a cellar rat. [13:00] Essentially, he makes wine but the wine maker directs him as to what to do. He's a chef, just not the executive chef per se. he's currently in Mexico, but he is a free spirit. He spends a lot of time in Mexico. He still averages three months to four months a year. And he has a tendency to come into the Napa Valley as harvest is beginning. He works the entirety of the harvest inside the cellar, takes his little lump sum of money, and then retreats to a private beach in Maruata, Michoacan. Yeah, so he's really got it figured out. He's single, you know. Being the eldest in the family. He did serve our military here in the US. He was stationed in Kasavau (??) Germany, Charlotte, North Carolina, and he really seems to have found his own unique philosophy on life. I really admire him. He's an extremely [14:00] talented artist, but he has difficulty conforming to society standards, and I think a lot of us sense that but we find ourselves conforming to society standards. So it's really nice to have...something that I look up to, you know, I respect his views, you know, I admire his views. I feel that I do everything that I can to follow in his footsteps, but you know, I've got something going that I'm really passionate about. And you know, it's a slippery slope there, you really want to walk that tight road, and honor both elements.

SV: And then, trying to find that like with your grandfather and your brother and see how, you know.

AL: Correct because they are on the opposite ends of the spectrum.

SV: Let's shift gears a little bit, move forward in time. [15:00] How did your family end up in Napa then?

AL: So, it must've been, mid 80s, '87, '89, somewhere in that time frame. We were doing a harvest next door in Fairfield. The pear is also harvested similar to grape in the sense that you have to assess sugars and development of the grape and its ripening. And that's really going to dictate when it's going to be harvested, and whether is going to make it into the market for table consumption or if it will ultimately be canned. We were told by the contractor, specifically my grandfather was told by the contractor, that the fruit wasn't ready for harvest, and that it would be about a week's time before we could get there and work. My grandfather being such a hard-working man had issues with us [16:00] kicking dirt for a week or so. So, he decided he would drive around, and try to find work to fill the void for the week. Well, sure enough he found here in the Napa Valley, working for yet another foreman on a harvest, so the whole family unit comes to the Napa Valley, goes out and harvest first thing in the morning. And by the end of the day, the family's work ethic, speed and technique were so impressive to this individual that he decided to hire a lot of my uncles, my father included for full time work here in the Napa valley. And that was really the first time that my parents, my uncles, grandfather started to establish roots. I would say that prior to then, [17:00] we already had an influence in the valley because of my grandfather's brother, Felix Llamas, who was helping set up and run the migrant camps in Rutherford, California, along with Mama Ester.

SV: And this was before?

AL: Before. This was before. This is just more my immediate family.

SV: So you're uncle Felix was running, so he'd been in Napa valley since the 70s, 60s.

AL: Prior than that. They started immigrating in, you know, I think that just like any other family unit, you know, some people find work here. Some people find work elsewhere. And although you're still always part of the family, you continue to pursue the avenues that kind of yield the most. So, uncle Felix was a little bit more prominent in the valley earlier than his brother.

SV: So, he had already established himself here, his [18:00] family was here? And so, did your uncle get your grandfather and father the job or...

AL: No, just again, the work ethic. It stood out. *Resaltaba la manera en las que trabajaban*. So, the contractor, I'm sure, you know, I think historically the Napa valley has always has seen a labor shortage, but the work was mostly vineyards back in the day when there was a lot of plum, and walnut, and different kinds or orchards. So, it's an issue that continues to exist here in the Napa Valley. So, because it's such a quality driven industry versus a yield driven industry, knowledge. Knowledge is paramount. In any time, you see someone come in and work quickly, efficiently, and with technique and knowledge, [19:00] you want to retain them. And I think that was really the case with the Llamas family.

SV: Wow. So, a couple questions. Did your family had they done Napa valley grapes before?

AL: So, they had in passing. I think my family's history in the valley predates the 80s. Predates that one pivotal moment where they got full time positions. They were certainly present seasonally. And it really, again, was contingent on climatic patterns, what was ripening first. Hey, where in this general area. The pears are ready to harvest, we're going to go there. The grapes are ready to harvest, we're going to go there. I think in this particular occasion, however, was really that pivotal moment when was like: "Listen, we don't have to move anymore. These people are willing to retain our services year round."

SV: Yeah, so who were those people? Was a winery? [20:00] Was it a contractor?

AL: Probably an independent contractor. A lot of the work they were initially doing was in that fashion, but that then gave them exposure working at different vineyards, at different wineries, and they slowly started cementing themselves throughout the Napa valley at actual estates, and starting taking on full time position that way. As a matter of fact, I know that family was working all the way up in Alexander Valley and the Sonoma side as well, early on back in the 60s and 70s as well.

SV: So, they started in the late 80s, 90s planting roots here in Napa. What kinds of jobs were they doing? How did they end up, did they specialize in anything, like budders or cellar rats, or how did that go...? [21:00]

AL: The bulk of the family first started out in the vineyards, you know, just *trabajo del campo*. I think there's always been this, this undeniable bond between the United States and Mexico. You know, in Mexico you have a population that is well versed in agriculture in general as most of Mexico still relies heavily on independent farming of corn, for bean, squash, tomato, onion, so on and so forth. So, my grandfather is a rancher, was already well versed on the importance in seasonality of harvesting things like corn and beans, not only so that we could have *masa* for the *tortillas* and feed his family, but also that he could take the byproduct of the corn, mill it and that would then become a staple of the feed that would go to his livestock. A very cyclical and holistic approach to farming, but when you have this spread throughout the country of Mexico, [22:00] and all of the sudden you have a labor shortage in the United States in agriculture, it's a seamless transition. It really is. And although you don't have to be a viticulturist to farm corn or tomato, understanding the physiological markers of plants in general, really expedites or accelerates the understanding of what it takes to be a world class viticulturist.

SV: Yeah, that expertise is hardly ever acknowledged.

AL: I would agree. It's a...you know, I think infuriating is a strong word, but it's certainly upsetting and a couple of other things to see a 21 year-old graduate from UC Davis, out in the vineyard, next to my father, and as a tour comes through, [23:00] they address that

young man as the viticulturist and my father as the vineyard worker. And it doesn't make sense that someone who's been working a particular vineyard side for 15, 18 years to not be considered a viticulturist to in many ways be surpassed by a young man who's really been in that vineyard for 8 months, ever since graduating his program. And you still see a lot of that today.

SV: Yeah, yeah. So, that's part of the thing that we're trying to do. It's trying to spotlight on the workers and their knowledge and what work they do and how they do it. So, you're at this age, at this point, you're about what 10, 12, 15?

AL: Yeah, so, you know, I think I've been coming in and out since really I was 1, 2, 3 years of age. [24:00] It wasn't annual but I think that by the time that I was 9 years of age, it was definitely coming to Napa pretty much every year and the ultimately full time.

SV: So, so late 80s, this labor, you, you and yourself, you and your brother were still going back and forth between Napa and Mexico.

AL: Yes, we attended about fifteen different elementary schools growing up. Here in the Napa valley alone, I attended Carneros, Alta Heights, MacFerson, Vichi, Red Wood Middle School, and then ultimately Vintage High School.

SV: Seven.

AL: Just in the Napa valley alone. Now, one of them is a middle school, Red Wood Middle School, and then obviously high school. I didn't move around that time because I was already living in town full time. But [25:00] it is pretty interesting, you know, I have guest of people that come into town. We'll go out, every time to see a lot of people say hello to a lot people. People say: "Oh my God. You must seem some really nice guy. You must be the mayor of Napa." That can be further from the truth. I try to be nice a guy, but the reality is a lot of these people I know because I probably went to school with them at one point in time, where most people that go to elementary school, they go to the one elementary. I went to so many different elementaries because you go to school contingent on where you're living, and every time we came to the Napa valley, we were renting a different apartment, you know, in a different part of town. And that's why I went to so many elementary schools in the Napa valley.

SV: Yeah, yeah. Wow. That's got to be hard to sort of process.

AL: It presents its challenges. I would say the most cruel people on earth are children. I did experience a lot of racism growing up. Being young, moving to a new place, [26:00] really forces you to make friends quickly, otherwise you're the pariah. And although it presented its challenges. I think that ultimately it really had helped morph of my personality where I have a tendency to be able to get along with virtually anyone because

that's how I grew up. That's what I needed to be like, to be accepted everywhere I went and even then, I wasn't, so you always want to strive that. You know, assimilating the culture, losing any accent if I had one. And even though I was born in the States, Spanish was my first language. The first words I ever read *el hombre de la estrella*. And that was from one of the small little cowboys books that my uncle Tito used to carry in a safe way bag. He must've had, you know, 40 of these little things in here. But being in such rural areas, there was never really access to TVs, and it was either the radio or you carried [27:00] around your little *vaquero* books and that's what you would read for entertainment.

SV: Do you still have those...?

AL: You know, I'm sure we can conjure up a few, but they would probably be in Mexico or in my Uncle Roberto would have access to them. My uncle Roberto still lives in the Coachella valley.

SV: Just out of curiosity.

AL: I'll tell you what. If I do find some, I'll make sure to mail them over to you.

SV: So, let's, you have discussed how your parents got to where they are now, and so, I'm thinking I want you to talk a little bit about that before we get into how you got into the wine business. So, can you explain a little bit how your parents got to where they are now. That story.

AL: Sure. Can we take a...

SV: Take a break.

AL: Yeah. And...[27:57]

[End of recorded material]

[Beginning of recorded material] [0:00]

SV: Okay. So we're back. So we were going to talk a little bit about how your parents got to where they are now. So, let's start...where does your mother... your mother is a highly successful skilled viticulturist. And where does she work? And how did she get to where she is...?

AL: So my mother is currently a viticulturist technician at Atlas Vineyard Management, here in the Napa valley. She does oversee quite a bit, that particular farming company has vineyards under their management as far north as Mendocino County. She started, again, working in the vineyards, fields, orchards, in terms of the wine industry, there was kind of this defining moment where she got an opportunity to work at Robert Mondavi

seasonally, back in 1990. [1:00] In 1991, she was offered a full time position. And after a few years, she had an opportunity to really highlight her know-how after being pressed for, you know, what is the difference between this vineyard block and this one? What kind of vineyard disease do you see here? What kind of water stress do you think you're seeing here, and out of all the women that were questioned, my mother stood out to the vineyard management. She was then introduced to viticulturist for Robert Mondavi, and he immediately saw her gift, her knowledge, and brought her under his wing. She ended up having a 13 years career with Robert Mondavi. But when this particular viticulturist [2:00] left Robert Mondavi to be the viticulturist for Pine Ridge, he brought my mother along. After a shorts stand at Pine Ridge, he, the viticulturist, decided to start his own farming company, Pacific Growers and yet again, brought my mother along with him. He ultimately was able to buy out some holders in the Pacific Growers, and started his own company, Atlas Vineyard Management. And through the entirety of all those transitions, my mother has been his lead or go to viticulturist, so she has really helped that company flourish by passing on her knowledge and her expertise to new viticulturist trainees or to other senior viticulturist managers on that particular team. And I think she has done such an amazing job [3:00] with that company that they started a wine brand called *Añito*, which means the acknowledgement of knowledge, and started bottling a wine that bears her image. On the other side, I have my father, who again through finding full time work with Atlas Peak winery. There came a point where that full time work became seasonal again. And being a mason back in Mexico, he started doing some mason work for Atlas Vineyards, and not to be confused with Atlas Vineyard Management. This Atlas Peak winery. Well, he doing an extremely good job for them. They were very happy. He was making, I believe 20 dollars an hour. And they were using a lot of his services. He knew the whole time that with, you know [4:00] with at the time was four children going at 5, and then ultimately 6. He needed full time work. And he needed that to be insured. So, he was able to use his abilities as a mason, and leveraged a full time position with a lower pay per hour, but with full benefits, and with, you know, with the guarantee that he would be a full time employee. Now, he was not the only family member to work at Atlas Peak winery. His brother in law, Jesus Llamas, worked there, which is my mother's brother, their first cousin Martin Llamas, my other uncle, their first cousin as well, Esteban Llamas. I think the payroll, every other name really read Llamas. And that's how that all came together. Now, that particular property was a lease between the owners of Atlas Peak winery [5:00] and the Antinori family of Italy, a very iconic and historic family in Italy. When the lease was up for that land, Antinori took the entirety of the property, bought out the partners and started Antica winery up there. During that same time frame, my father was asked to yet some more rock work, it's what we call it. And this particular job was for a new gentleman in town up in Soda Canyon Road, Jan Krupp. Now, while my father was working up there building this rock wall, he asked my uncle Esteban Llamas, if he would help him mixing cement, so that they could build this rock wall for

this individual, Jan Krupp, Dr. Jan Krupp. [6:00] Well, after a few weeks, Jan had planned this beautiful tweak of Malbec a while back, and if I'm not mistaken it was Malbec. And he'd ask if, you know, if either of them were interested in farming for him, for helping him up with his project. My father wanted continuity, wanted full time, wanted benefits. He had this large family. So, he was actually reluctant to accept. He decided that we would do it part time. I would go out and help him, clear weeds, in any way I could before I went to school. My uncle Esteban on the other hand, being a little bit more adventurous, having a little more gusto, really saw an opportunity, seized it, and was able to work hand in hand with Jan Krupp in the development [7:00] of what is known as Stagecoach Vineyards. It is one of the iconic vineyards in the Napa valley, despite the fact that it is new. It's one of the second largest plantings in the valley. And it encompasses approximately 700 plus acres, and most of that is planted to grapes. Growing up, I had an opportunity to help develop that vineyard, and some of those vineyards sites, where moving rocks, and brush, digging holes for plantings, an array of different things that I did there as a youngster, anywhere for 15 to 17 years of age. When Antonori, decided to take over the Atlas Peak property because the lease was up they pretty much let go everyone within that company. By then, I had personally already finalized high school, decided that I wanted to go and travel the world. [8:00] And had work towards bringing in money, gaining some income outside of these little projects and vineyards. Right off high school. I started working in restaurants, bussing tables, first at Musterd's Grill. Then at the restaurant at Domain Chandon. It was hard work. It was intense, but it really really paid well.

SV: This was in high school?

AL: This was right out of high school. So, I graduated in 1998, so somewhere like 2000, 1999. I'll never forget that I really felt that going to Europe required an immense amount of money. And it really does, but I felt like I needed more. I need more money. So, I'll never forget, there was a gentleman there, Juanito, who said: "Well hey, you should come and work with me at the French Laundry." and I said: "Dude I don't want to work at a laundromat, you [9:00] know. Does it even pay that well?" He's like: "No, it is a restaurant." So, I decided that hey, anything to go to Europe. So, I decided to go and ask for a job at the French Laundry. And this is kind of the beginning of this, of this defining part of my life that ultimately led me to be in wine. But I'll never forget, he said: "Wear black pants. Wear white shirt. Go in and just ask for an application." You know, what's the worst that can happen. So, I show up this building, that looks just like a house. And I'm like: "Where am I going?" I decided that it would be best if I came in through the back, so I wouldn't disrupt the businesses ongoing. And proceeded to go around the bend of the home, or what I thought was a home. I opened the door. And I was greeted four young gentleman, all in white suits, with the white chef's cap. And I kind of stood [10:00] there, and looked at them, and they all kind of stood there and looked at me for a

second. Then, they all looked down and continue to do what it was that they were doing, whether it was chopping carrots or onions, or whatever it was. I really didn't know what it was going on. So, because no one really said anything to me, I took it as like: "Hey, come on in." So, I come on in. I take a right. And then before you know it, I'm in this white pristine glowing kitchen with a team of individuals that seem to be extremely focused of what they're doing. It's very quiet, except the clinking of the occasional pan, or the sizzling of the foie gras and I really don't make eye contact with anyone. I proceed to walk through the entirety of the kitchen and hook a left into a hallway. The whole time I'm doing this, I do see this towering figure, and out of the corner of my eye, I can't say that I see him looking at me, but I sense him [11:00] following my every move. Yet, he does not say a word to me. I take a left, I start to walk through this hallway, which on the left hand side is full of gorgeous glassware, so a lot of stems, and before I know, beautiful young lady approaches me and says, almost a little angry: "Excuse me. Can I help you?" and I look at her and I say: "Yeah, I'm here to get a job." And you can tell that her annoyance kind of turn into this comical response: like "What?" and I said: "Yeah, I'm here to get a job." And she says: "You can't be here." And I said: "Why not?" and she says: "Well, you know, because we're in the middle of service." And I said: "Well, my friend Juan. He says he works here. He said I should come in. And ask for a job." So, the gal [12:00] says: "Okay, well. Let me go get you an application." I said: "Sure." Well, she goes to get me an application. I proceed to walk to the end of the hallway, and before you know it, I find myself in a dining room, and I see a lot of servers in nice suits, a lot of finely dressed individuals at tables that are pretty small and intimate, four guests, two guests, kind of lightly lit, nice aromatics. But, overall pretty calm and soothing. Before I know, I have a hand on my shoulder. I get yanked back in the hallway, and she says: "You can't be here." And I say: "Why not?" And she says: "Because we're in the middle of service and you're not wearing service attire." So I looked at her and said: "Well, can I borrow some?" and she says: "What?" and I said: "Yeah, can I borrow some so that I can then observe the dining room?" [13:00] she kind of chuckles. She's a little bit in disbelieve, but she says: "Okay. I'm going to go get you a vest and a tie." So I stand there. She disappears, comes right back. She has a vest, which she puts on. And then she hands me a tie. I'd never tied a tie around my neck. I'd never seen anyone in family do so. And I was kind of taking aback. So, I had to ask this young lady to please help me putting on a tie, which she did. She also kind of ushered me into dining room, put me in front of a pillar, and asked that I do not move. I can only observe, which was find with me. So, I proceeded to just sit there and observe and kind of see this ballet like fluidity in the dining room, and again, the nice intimate setting. Well, it's a not long before I hear a stern voice behind me saying: "Hot food. Pick it up." [14:00] So, I can't help myself, I look around the corner and there seems to be, you know, three young individuals in their vest with their ties, looking a little confused. So, I proceed to walk back down the hallway towards this towering figure and then I decide that he's the boss, and he needs

these eight plates to go somewhere. So, I pick up two plates, I look at the three other staffers, and I say: “Do you know where this food is going?” and one of the individuals says: “I do. We’re going to the private dining room.” Which I didn’t where that meant, but I said: “You lead. I’ll follow. And can someone describe the food.” At this point in time, I had already found out that we’re in a fine dining scenario, and the little bit of knowledge that I picked up at the restaurant Domain Chandon give me a few pointers, like drop the food off of your left, clear with your right. So, [15:00] I knew some of the fundamentals. Well, we start to proceed down to the dining room. There’s a small narrow stairway, we start go up to the second floor, and right beside the stairway, is the young woman, pouring wine out of a decanter. And as I’m going up the stairs, following these three other staffers, I see her look up, notice it’s me and see her jaw drop almost to the floor. We going into the second floor. We take an immediate left, and there before us is a table of eight. We proceed to arrange ourselves in between diners and then drop the food. By this point in time, this young lady is already at the doorway, there’s nothing she can do, but watch the entirety of the staff deliver the food and the calmly walk down the stairs and into the hallway. And the whole time she is eagle eye on me and she’s following me. And she says: [16:00] “You can start tomorrow.” And that is how I landed a job at the French Laundry. And of course the towering figure was Thomas Keller and the young lady his fiance Laura Cunningham. Working at this fine dining establishment I was exposed to amazing food, amazing wine, and really got to see the landscape that is gastronomy, enology with guys like Paul Roberts Master sommelier, he’d won the Crew Cup, with future master sommelier Cerlo Losero with this environment, culture, food and wine. I had this moment where I realized: “wow, the ingredient is the paramount factor here. Now, I know why we’ve been getting up at 4 or 5 in the morning. Now, I know why it’s been so detail oriented.” And all of the sudden, everything that I kind of heard as a child, I started to appreciate and fall in love with. [17:00] You know, seeing Paul Roberts open a bottle of wine, that little pop, it was almost like all of the jokes, all of the stories, all of the hardships that my family, that others felt, was escaping that bottle, in that one little pop. And I was like: “I want to do this.” And I loved how to cook, or I knew how to cook and loved cooking because of my grandmother and mother, but I saw that more as a feminine job. And didn’t realized at the time that, you know, a lot chefs are mostly male or there is a high percentage of male chefs. So, I decided like: “Oh, I wanted do wine. I want to do wine.” After, you know, a year and a half, or two years, I was asked to be part of the team that opened a sister property in New York City, Per Se. And again, just most exposure to more people in the world that are not only fascinated but passionate and in love with food and wine. [18:00] And getting to see the gratification, the look in the costumers face when they have a specific dish, or when they had a wine, or even better yet, when Andre Mac or Paul Roberts, or one these great sommeliers was able to elevate that experience by pairing a wine with the food. And I told myself: “I want to be a wine maker. I want to make wine.” And I left Per Se in late 2004, early 2005, somewhere in

that transition, and came back to the Napa Valley, set on starting my own, my own wine brand. One of the cool memories I have from Per Se, is a young lady, a co-worker, was able to write a book called *Reservations Not Included*, and it touched based on the opening of Per Se, on the world's great restaurants, a three star Michelin restaurant, just like the counterpart in Napa, [19:00] the French Laundry. And, it kind of some of the things that go on behind the scenes, and at the end of the book, which if I'm not mistaken was New York's, New York Times best seller, and you know, Oprah book club, and whatnot. She thanks the entire staff, the entire opening staff of Per Se, and it was a huge honor to have my name or to still have my name as one of the names that make up this thank you, or this acknowledgement in that particular book. So, that was always really cool. I got back into Napa. I started working for Miner Family Vineyards in Oakville. A friend of mine, Jaime Orozco, got me involved in that project. And I think that, you know, it was a series of events that ultimately led me to where I am today, but, you know, I have to acknowledge that [20:00] spending time at French Laundry, Per Se, under the guidance of Thomas Keller, and Laura Cunningham, and all these people who really show you what passion is and finesse and integrity. You know, that was really a defining point for me and I thank them for it, very fortunate. So, around 2008, comes the...I'm going to backtrack a little bit, comes the moment in time where Antinori took over the Atlas Peak property. Clearly, a lot of people were not, were not happy with that. I did people a lot of people out. So, the vineyard manager at the time, Antonio Hernandez, was speaking with my father. My father already knew that I was extremely interested in wine, wine making, and he said: "Hey Ricardo, isn't your son interested doing a little project with wine?" and my father says [21:00]: "Yes. Why you ask?" he says: "Well, you know these..." Not very good language. "well, you know these guys, you know, just putting us out on the street like nothing after so many years of dedication here. Tony hadn't been there that long. My father already in his year 19th, 20th year with the company. Says: "Why don't you have him come up? And we're going to give him anything he wants up here. We'll give me like a ton, ton and a half of fruit, or whatever he wants to take. He can do a little wine project." Well, that, at that moment in time, I was living with a young man, Morgan McCrum, who was the enologist at Turnbull Cellars with Peter Heitz. And Morgan had gotten into wine because his degree was, was kind of like, I want to say chemical engineering, somewhere along those lines. And he had moral issues with the pharmaceutical industry, and decided to use his chemistry background to go into wine. [22:00] And that's how he landed the job as a technician, as an enologist. So, I tell Morgan: "Hey Morgan, do you think that we can make some wine? My dad that I could go up and cherry pick anything I want." So he goes, and he asks Peter Heitz: "Hey, you know, I have access to some fruit with my roommate, can we make some wine." So, Peter Heitz says: "Look, if you guys show up first thing in the morning, and you sanitize all of the equipment, I'll let you process some fruit. I'll let you guys make some wine here. So I said: "Let's do this. I mean, it's now or never." So, I went up to Stagecoach,

kind of drive around, I apologize, I went to Atlas Peak Winery, kind of drove around. And found this one particular row, and I said: "Dad, you know, what's the deal with this row It's just doesn't even fit us. Not even in block." Well, he's like: "There is a farming area that we actually have San Geovese on either side. And that one road is actually Cabernet Sauvignon. And I said: "Look at it. It's on a perfect slope. It looks beautiful." [23:00] I don't really think I had the... I didn't have the knowledge I have now in terms of what that means on a viticultural front, but it just looked right. And I said: "That's what I want." So, my father, Morgan and myself drive up to the vineyard, at 5 in the morning, with my dad's little S10 pickup. We've got quarter-ton T-bin in the back of the truck that was loaned to us by Peter. And we get to the site, so dark, we have to turn on the high beams and drive the little truck down in between the rows, and we proceed to start harvesting. So, we're going. We're picking fruit. And I can see my dad, you know, just going like super crazy on it. And I'm like: "Hey, dad, you know what? There's only one row. Let's do this right. Let's not try to get any leaves or anything." I already kind of understood the core concept of quality and just trying to get the perfect fruit into the bin. So, he's a little reluctant. You know, he's hardworking. He wants to do things fast, but we kind [24:00] of come to a compromise. And I'm kind of going around and any cluster that I don't think it's perfect, I start throwing out. And then my father starts going around me and picking up the fruit that I was throwing out. It causes a good fifteen-minute dispute as to why I was throwing it out and why he wanted to keep it. But ultimately, he said: "Well, you know, it's your wine. You do whatever you want." So, we go ahead, we pick this whole block, and we're able to fill this T bin and by that time, the sun is coming up, the rest of the workforce is there. And dad feels we can get a little bit more fruit on this thing, so he says we got a little bit of syrah over there, and some petit verdot. Let's just fill this thing up with a couple of bins of that. So, we go. We pick a couple more bins. We get this thing right. And we go down to the valley floor, where Turnbull Cellars is. I'll never forget, the first thing that Peter Heitz said: "Where did you get this?" [25:00] and I said: "oh from my father over at Atlas Peak." And he says: "This is amazing quality. You can just see it in the fruit." So, that immediately was just immense motivation. So, Morgan and I get ozone water, and we start sanitizing the water press, the conveyer, the de-stemmer, tanks, everything we're going to need. And we proceed to process I think it was somewhere in the 700, 80, 900 pounds, 800 pound range of fruit. We get through, we get it in fermentation. We're so excited about this amazing project. And if I'm not mistaken, they did another three hundred tons right behind us. So, you know, it was, it was, the piece of scene in the big picture. But, we take the fruit, we going into t bins, and basically, Peter you know, took us under his wing, taught us about pumps overs, punch down extractions for this particular wine making process. [26:00] We were just doing punch downs, and you know, just the importance of finalics [??], finesse. And really kind of opened my eyes to the fact that wine making is very much like cooking. It's very forgiving in many ways and allows to take very different avenues. Whereas brewing

beer, it's very much like baking, if you're off by a gram here or there on your recipes or on your timing, you've ruined it. So, being a very creative individual, loving to cook, loving aromatics, textures, I said: "Oh my God. I can do this." You know, you can take a steak and you can broil it, you can grill it, you can make tartar with it, you can sous-vide, you can steam it, I mean, there's so many ways. With wine is never different, there's so many approaches you can have to different grapes. And he really opened my eyes. I think for Morgan as well. Well, we made the wine. We aged it. [27:00] Everything was donated. We were able to take the wine, put it in a bottle. And I'll never forget. I went to a BBQ at my uncle Oscar's house. And my uncle Oscar is my mother's youngest brother. And I was so excited to share this wine. So, I pull the wine at the BBQ I uncorked it and poured a lot of people a glass because I clearly wanted to show off. And uncle Oscar says: "Wow, where did you get this?" It didn't have a label, didn't have anything. And I said: "Well, I kind of made it." And he's in disbelief. He's like: "No, seriously. Where did you get this?" And I said: "No, seriously. Me and Morgan, we made this wine. And we're very happy. And we're very proud of it." And he said: "Wow. Why aren't we making our own wine? Everybody in the family worked out in the vineyards. We're accountable for getting this amazing grapes into the winery. Why aren't we doing this?" and I said: "Because we can't afford to buy these grapes. These grapes are extremely expensive. Then, you got to know wine making. [28:00] You know, fees for costum crush, and then bottle and cork and this and that." By this time, my uncle had already established himself as a successful business owner in the Napa Valley, owner of Valley Auto Body. He's owned that for 23, 24 years now. And he basically said if I put out the capital to start this project, will you partner with me and you think we can make this work. I wasn't going to pass that up. And that's really how the beginning of Llamas Family Wines started. It was, it was really cool. I think that initial wine, which we ended up calling Surco was another one of the catalyst for Llamas Family Wine, and it also, it's a beautiful name. it's always stuck with me, and I always planned to make an ultra-premium wine that I will call Surco. Trademark the name and all the good stuff. But it came to be because Morgan [29:00] and I, we wanted to name this wine, this project we made, and a lot of names came up. We were thinking about Mother's Milk because obviously the grapes come from the soil. We thought about calling it The Darkest Hour because we were picking, you know, at five am, they say that the darkest is right before the light. And because it was that single road, I told Morgan: "Hey Morgan, what do you think if we call it Surco?" He says: "What's that mean?" And *surco* means row, like a single row. And it really, really caught his attention. He really liked it. And he said: "Listen, just spell it with two r to honor my Italian heritage and Surrco it is." And 'wala', that's how we did our first wine. And the first wine, you know, was part of Surrco, 2008, Cabernet Sauvignon.

SV: Wow. So is Morgan still part of the team?

AL: No, so Morgan is not part of the team. Morgan actually does not live far [30:00] from me now. He since married a beautiful Italian young lady in Italy. Has a pair of twins. And he's found a lot of success. Also, in wine, he's still overseeing lab assessment, like, you know, essentially a lab technician for Hall, Kathryn Hall, and Hall family, stayed up in St. Helena, where you see that big beautiful bronze bunny.

SV: Yes, so just back up real quick. So between 2005 and 2008, you're with the Miner (??) family, right?

AL: So, I was in minor for one year, Miner for one year. And then, I want to say approximately from 2006 to 2008 or so. I was working for my uncle Oscar at Valley Auto Body. So, [31:00] I learned a lot there. One of my trucks outside, I painted myself, and learned how to do body work and learned how to do that. After that, I started to working for Luna Vineyards. I was with Luna Vineyards approximately until 2001 or so. And then, my last job, my last full time job outside of Llamas Family Wines was with Jarvis Family Vineyards. And I worked there for approximately 6 years.

SV: Ok, alright. So, again going back to experience, knowledge, starting at the bottom, work your way through the jobs. Is that what you did?

AL: Sure. So, I really felt like, you know, I've always had some time, some type of growth, you know, although my time at [32:00] the body shop may not have been growth in the wine industry, it was still growth nonetheless. For the most part, all the winery positions I held were in hospitality, being an educator, wine educator, wine, wine making the processes involved in that. But, at the same time, always having access to friends, family members, cousins, uncles that worked in production, so I did have opportunities to work in production on smaller projects that weren't necessarily affiliated with actual larger well-known brand names. You know, the amazing insight that I've gotten from my uncle Arturo Llamas, who has been the cellar master at Araujo since its inception. Now, Araujo estate sold, I want to 2 years ago, here in the Napa Valley and it is considered to be one the most famous and iconic vineyards in this [33:00] country. The Eisele vineyards has this ability really to express itself, express its terroir, and terroir is essential this element of weather, soil; I personally think people because you can have this beautiful expressive vineyard site, and if you have stewards to the land, they can really help showcase the pedigree of that site versus someone who doesn't care. It might still express itself but not in its entirety or in this specific purity. So, having access to people like my uncle Arturo, and then him introducing me to Francois Pichon who's this mazing female winemaker, one of my personal favorites in the valley. Striking up a relationship with Matt Taylor who was the viticulturist and winemaker there for five years. [34:00] And it's someone who I work with to this day on Llamas Family Wines. He is essentially, I want to say is more than a consultant because he is such a friend and he's amazing. He's amazing. He's made wine at Dujac. He's made wine at Araujo. He makes wines for Reuling, his own

labor Taylor Cellars. Now, his new project Komorebi and being highlighted as, you know, one the winemakers to watch in the past by Wine Enthusiast, named 40 under 40, 30 under 30, I apologize. But, I've really been blessed with a lot of these connections. You know, my uncle Esteban Llamas is at Stagecoach getting opportunity to better understand viticulture. My mother, who've I spoken about, my father. You know, I've got my cousin Trino, who's at Spottswode. My great friend, James Revie, [35:00] also is a winemaker at Spottswode. Aron Grosskauf, also at Spottswode. You know, having family members working at all these places. You know, I've got family that Continuum at Cain and for those that don't know wine that well. I'm always talking about car manufactures. I have family that works at Ferrari, Rolls Royce, Bugatti, so on and so forth.

SV: Global, out in the world.

AL: Yeah, so it's an honor and I'm really happy to talk about this and to really inform people about, of what us Mexican-Americans have done in this country, in this part of the world that was, you know, at one point in time, you know, Mexico. At one point in time, it was something other than that. It was, you know, just land, you know, where people could transcend [36:00] if you could get to it, you know. There were literally no borders, no nationalities. It was just raw land. You know, it's kind of our little grain in history in a much larger picture but it's really cool, and I take a lot of pride in that. But I also want to acknowledge the fact that there's a lot of parallel stories to mine. And although they might not be their verbatim, they still have that same cord, you know, coming from one place and migrating to another to flourish, you know. It's actually in our DNA. It's in our history. It's why the human race is where it is.

SV: Well, before we end, I wanted to ask you about the branding iron and the logo and what does this mean for you? This is branding iron with... how would you describe it? [37:00]

AL: So yeah. It's a band new iron. It is, you can think of it as minimalistic logo of a scorpion. This is something that was handed down to my grandfather, by his father. I was able to talk to my grandfather in ask how many generations back it goes. He said he didn't know how many generations back it goes. It is something, you know, like all the cattle brand is used. To identify the proprietors of the cattle, in case your cattle get out in the road or someone steals them, or something of that nature. You know, I always took a lot of pride in being Mexican-American, in my family's history and being cattle ranchers and, you know, it's inexplicable to me,. Or for me to kind of convey the emotion that I get just seating here looking at this. [38:00] But, I think understatement are pride, joy, history, love, yeah, it's something amazing. It's transcended. It belongs to the entire family. And it's really, you know, it's really something that I associate directly with my grandfather specifically, Jesus Llamas. You know, my grandfather is currently bed ridden. He's had a wonderful, wonderful life. He's lived a full life, but he had the stages where he has

Alzheimer's, and his mind has been fragile and I'll never forget, two years ago, I was talking to grandpa, and he kind of comes and he kind of goes. And he was having one of those moments where, you know, he didn't know who I was, where we were. He was kind [39:00] of like in and out. And I had an idea. I said: "I'm going to go and grab his cattle brand and bring it to him and see what he says." And I'll never forget that as soon as he say the cattle brand. I said: "Grandpa, do you know what this is?" And he like woke up. And the fact that he came to with this also speaks volumes to the importance in the historical significance of this, to him and to the Llamas family. So, every single Llamas Family Wines bottle does bear the scorpion logo on the label. And that is kind of this subliminal message that I want honor where I come from, so that I can better understand where I'm going.

SV: Right Wow. I know we're running out of time. But I'd like to pass it over to Mireya because I think she has a couple of follow up questions and then we'll end up there. [40:00]

ML: I just have two small little questions. One, were your siblings all born in the US or were they born sort of in between like going back and forth?

AL: So, all of my siblings were born in the US. The three youngest, Daniel, Jonny and Lupita were all born after our *corridas* were over, so they didn't get a chance to fully experience the migratory pattern that we went through. My brother and I certainly had the bulk of that experience. And my sister Daisy got a little touch of that, but it was mostly my brother Oscar and I. And yes, we were all born here in the States.

ML: And you guys, when the family crossed the border back and forth, how easy was that?

AL: Well, every time we crossed, or every time I personally crossed, [41:00] it was legitimately, so it wasn't very difficult in the sense that we were crossing deserts or doing anything of that nature. But, you know, I do hear stories from my father, from other family members that saw much more adversity getting into this country.

ML: Well, thank you.

SV: Well thank you very much. This has been, it's wonderful.

AL: It is been my pleasure and an honor to give a little tiny sliver of insight into the Llamas family.

SV: Well, you know, the contributions to this part of the country by Mexican-Americans is, you know, beyond words. So, we thank you for helping us document what's been going on here.

AL: Again, a real honor, thank you.

SV: Thank you.

[END OF AUDIO]