

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Liz and Luc Meyer
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
June 25, 2010

Smith: What were you doing before the Fords came into your lives? That's also part of the story of the creation and evolution of Vail, which is an interesting story in and of itself.

Luc Meyer: Well, in 1970 at Thanksgiving, we came and opened a restaurant called the Left Bank Restaurant, which became the favorite restaurant of President Ford. And that's how we started in Vail.

Smith: This is before he's president?

Luc Meyer: Yes.

Smith: He was Minority Leader and then vice president. So he was coming to your restaurant...

Luc Meyer: As Minority Leader, as vice president, and as president.

Liz Meyer: When he was a congressman, he would come to the restaurant because he lived in Vail right across the street at The Lodge and it was very convenient for him. I don't know how he heard about us. I didn't know who he was. I was running the dining room. I remember specifically one occasion - and it was probably the occasion when - oh my gosh, this man is in American government. He's quite important. And that was the first knowledge. He used to come with one or two of the children who were probably teenagers at that time, and that was before we remodeled the restaurant. And then things changed after that when we remodeled in 1978.

Smith: So now, they had a condo at The Lodge. Is that right? And what else was there in Vail at that point? It was much, much smaller than it is today.

Luc Meyer: Sure. Vail was basically Gore Creek Drive and Bridge Street, which went up to the gondola and Chair I.

- Smith: One lift?
- Luc Meyer: No, but that was the main lift. And the river was pretty much a border. Across from the river there was very little when we came. We came in 1970, so Vail was a fraction, of course there was no Lion's Head. There was very little in Vail. We lived in Sandstone 70, which was across the highway. The highway was already a highway at that time. But when you looked across, there was nothing.
- Smith: Was it harder to get to Vail then, as well?
- Luc Meyer: Well, yeah. Because you had to go over the Pass on US 6. You didn't have the highway. So it was only a two-lane road and that could be very tricky. In the summer it was alright, but in the winter with snow and the ice and trucks and everything, it was quite a dangerous road.
- Liz Meyer: See, between Denver and here, the highway started at East Vail, i.e I70, and ended at the Minturn exit. So it was only a small stretch, and it was probably four or five miles or something. And then you went over Vail Pass. We lived in a house right on U.S. 6, and I'll tell you, every time a truck came by I thought he was going to hit the house. And then all the way to Denver, it used to take us two and a half hours to Denver and three hours to the airport.
- Smith: I would think that one of the things that you would have to take into consideration is the possibility of forest fires. Has that ever been a problem?
- Luc Meyer: No, only recently with the pine beetle. The danger of forest fire now has only been a recent occurrence because of the pine beetle. Before this, our forest was green; plus, don't forget, when you are thirty years or thirty-five years old, you don't think of these things – you have your business, family, children, you have other priorities.
- Smith: I'm thinking of their condo at The Lodge. That must have been awfully small. If the whole family came out, for example, for Christmas, it must have been pretty congested.
- Luc Meyer: Well, I don't know. We never actually saw the condominium physically.

Smith: And is that building still there?

Luc Meyer: Oh, yeah.

Liz Meyer: Exactly the same as it was. I'm sure it's been remodeled by each owner.

Smith: Tell me, at your restaurant, what were his preferences? What did he like?

Luc Meyer: Liver and trout. In 1970, being a Frenchman and a chef, and coming to Vail, I was kind of an entrepreneur in many, many things as far as food is concerned. You have to realize, in 1970, in Colorado, you couldn't find anything fresh. People didn't know what a leek was. People didn't know what tarragon and chervil were fresh herbs in general. You couldn't find a fresh chicken. For me, having been trained in some of the finest restaurants in France, when I came here, I had to fight and finally get, these things for me. You had to have fresh fish, you have to start getting us access to fresh herbs to cook. There were a lot of things.

But we came here; we were immigrants – first generation – we were legal, by the way. And we came here; we knew very few people in Vail, but we just had a child. We were living before in the Virgin Islands, and we didn't want to stay there because of the future for our children's education and everything. We felt it was not what we wanted. We always loved the mountains because of our backgrounds. And we came to Vail, and it was the place where we wanted to be.

I had never any doubt that I would be successful. I had to start with little, we didn't have very much money, you know? As long as we are living in Vail, the kids – we had this vision that that's where we wanted to be. That's where we felt happy.

Smith: Did you feel you were in on the ground floor of something that would, over time, become much more than it was?

Luc Meyer: Oh yes. Well, of course. But we never realized how far we would go. When we started working in the first four years, we worked seven days a week. That's how hard it was just to survive. But we loved Vail, we loved the customers. In the early days there was another spirit in Vail. We met a lot

very famous people – one of them, of course, was President Ford. And it was different. Now, it's not the same. The valley has grown so much, you have Beaver Creek, you have “down valley.”

Smith: President Ford was a workaholic. He had an incredible work ethic and he also had great, great respect for self-made people. Having been through the Depression himself. I'm sure he loved your food, but I suspect he also admired your example as well. What you had created and the spirit that you brought with you to this place.

Liz Meyer: Well, I think at the beginning, suddenly this man, this congressman, became vice president. We were at a friend's house in Denver when that whole business happened, and I was saying, “Oh my gosh, this is one of our customers,” because I really didn't know him. Being an old-fashioned European, I called everybody by their title. I never called them by their first name until I was told to. And so, he was just this customer. And then he became vice president, and then suddenly he became president. Wow. That was a big thing in our lives. I think that was about 1975?

Smith: August of '74.

Liz Meyer: '74, okay. And then '76 I believe, he started the golf tournament.

Smith: In '76 the golf tournament.

Luc Meyer: In '75 he came as president in the summer to Vail.

Liz Meyer: That's right.

Luc Meyer: And then the first time he came to our restaurant as president, at that time Bob Barrett was his assistant.

Liz Meyer: His ADC.

Luc Meyer: ADC.

Smith: And a bit of a character.

Luc Meyer: That's right. I believe it was in July and I was in my kitchen preparing for the night. I was alone and it was about maybe one o'clock, the phone rang. On the

house phone this voice said, "I'm Bob Barrett, can you open up, we'd like to talk to you?" So I went in the front and opened and later Bob became a friend. He said, "Well, the President would like to have dinner tonight at your restaurant." So, "Oh, yes." I asked questions and everything, and then left. I called Liz and said, "Guess what? The President is coming tonight!" So it was very, very exciting, of course.

Liz Meyer: So I went into the garden and picked flowers. Our restaurant was very personal. I was there all the time in front and Luc was always there in the back, and he would come into the dining room. So I always had flowers on the table from the garden, not bought flowers. And also, I always placed him in the room, and this was with the guidance of the Secret Service of which we got to know Joel Glenn and Dale Wunderlich became personal friends as well. And they were in charge of things with him there. And so with their guidance, I put him on a certain table in a curtained part of the room which was often by the window because I'm not sure if they checked - if they had people outside across the stream looking there or what. He would have to walk all the way through the room, but they felt that a corner place would be better for him. Then, what I did, I put only customers I knew in the vicinity of his table.

Luc Meyer: Without telling them.

Liz Meyer: Oh, yeah.

Luc Meyer: Privacy was very important.

Liz Meyer: Because I felt they would be discrete, which, of course, they were.

Luc Meyer: It was our life, don't forget. We came as immigrants, I couldn't speak any English. In 1975, we were five years in business, we had two small children. At that time Vail was struggling. President Ford put Vail on the map, especially for the summer.

Smith: Because at that point, I assume, everyone thought of it exclusively as a winter resort.

Luc Meyer: That's right. The summers were very hard. We were working for very, very little. President Ford came in 1975 as president, and then in '76 there was the

golf tournament and all that exploded. The whole experience, not only because of financial said of the benefit from it, but just the whole exchange for me - as a person who came to this country, couldn't speak English, brought a wife with me, had two children who are Americans.

And now I'm an American myself because of President Ford, because when he needed to be re-elected he told me every vote would count. And I went to Pepi Gramshammer, who is a person you are probably going to meet, or you've met, and he said, "Everybody counts." And we ran and got our citizenships so we could vote. And yet the President didn't make it. So that was part of the history of our relationship with President Ford. And then you know, of course, he came with Kissinger.

A little funny story you might want to know: in 1970 we opened the restaurant; we were a young couple, we had a child, we had no money. I worked for somebody else, and we made good money. We had saved a little money, but we did not have credit cards. We came from the Virgin Islands. We didn't have credit cards, we didn't have a bank account. So we came here and when I wanted to open the Left Bank, of course, I went to the bank, to the credit card company to try to get the credit card. Who was I? I didn't have credit and they wouldn't allow me to take a credit card.

So in 1975, when President Ford came, I was on national TV and all this, suddenly American Express, MasterCard, Visa came, and said, well, you should take credit cards. And I said, "Well, for the five years I survived without you. Now I will never take credit cards." And in the thirty-six years we have been in business, we've never took credit cards because of that.

Smith: That's a great story.

Luc Meyer: And President Ford, he had a charge account at the left Bank. We always felt, again, because of values coming from Europe, you know, we always felt the most elegant way to come to a restaurant is to be able to sit down and bring your guests, and never see a bill on your table. You don't have to pull out the credit card or cash or check – nothing.

Smith: That brings to mind - when the World Forums were here. And this kind of motley group of people. Politically you wouldn't think of them as being kindred spirits. Jim Callaghan, who was a kind of an old line Socialist, and Helmut Schmidt who was certainly to the left of Ford, but then of course, Giscard, who for all his many fine qualities, is not exactly a hail fellow, well met. He's rather a lofty figure. And yet they clearly all hit it off. And I'm wondering – did he ever bring Giscard to your restaurant?

Liz Meyer: Yes.

Luc Meyer: Of course. We had all these people.

Liz Meyer: We have a wonderful guestbook, which we started. Gerald Ford was one of the early ones. That's about the time when we started it. He brought Jackie Gleason and Bob Hope and those people, because of the Ford Tournament. And I remember Jackie Gleason didn't even turn a page of the book, he just opened the cover and just signed it right on the inside cover.

Smith: He was the Great One.

Liz Meyer: It's amazing, his signature. But then he brought the World Forum leaders into the restaurant and I have a page in our guest book with Callaghan and Giscard and Pierre Trudeau, and Schmidt. Who else was there? But I have their signatures. Of, yes, Frazier, he was there. And I remember, because I was raised in Zimbabwe, and Mr. Callaghan was joking with me saying, "Hello, Miss Zimbabwe." I don't know how he found out.

Smith: Did they surprise you at all – any of them? Their personalities or temperaments?

Luc Meyer: I, as a Frenchman, with other French people in the valley organized a party for Giscard d'Estaing. So I provided the food and it was at Fitzhugh Scott's house, who was an old time Vailite. The house was right on Mill Creek Circle, next to the house where President Ford used to stay when he was President. And the interesting story about Giscard d'Estaing is this: I was born in 1942 in the town of Clermont Ferrand. Below us lived a family which was Giscard's parents. Now he must have been about fifteen years older than me, I

would guess. My older brother, just by coincidence, was here that summer when we had this party. I told my brother Christian, who was here with his wife and children that they had to come. So he came, and we, as a family, came to Giscard and introduced ourselves and said, "Do you remember the Alsatian family (because we were refugees) who lived above you in Clermont Ferrand?" He said, "Sure." We said, "That was us." The funny story is that Giscard d'Estaing has a bald head, he has no hair. Well, when I was a tiny little boy, in the summer, because we lived there until 1945, my mother would put me on the balcony – there was a tiny little balcony. And one day I was doing what was natural for a little boy to do, but Giscard was walking under the balcony. And my mother, of course, was terribly apologetic. But this story stayed in the family. So we reminded him of that and he was wonderful.

Smith: Was he?

Luc Meyer: Yeah, he had a good day. His wife is not that approachable. He has a sense of humor and he's open.

Smith: By all accounts, he really enjoyed himself here.

Luc Meyer: Yes, he loved it.

Liz Meyer: And Callaghan, he was very, very relaxed with me, I suppose both being English.

Luc Meyer: So Giscard used to come after, and used to come privately to the Left Bank, because when the Ford Forum moved here, then it got diluted. Well, less people from the community were asked to host one night this, so we need to do catering. But then they had the night off and I remember Giscard used to come to the Left Bank.

Smith: And you obviously got to know Mrs. Ford.

Luc Meyer: Oh, of course.

Liz Meyer: Oh, yes.

Smith: Tell us about her.

Liz Meyer: Well, you know, she started the Betty Ford Alpine Gardens with Helen Fritch. And I don't know if you are interviewing them as well, they own the Sitzmark Lodge, in which the restaurant is located. And they are still there. Helen was an avid gardener, and I would go to her for advice all the time. I don't know how the two of them met, but Betty Ford and Helen were the founders of this garden. And I've always believed in it because it is such a unique thing at this altitude. And of course, it's taken a long time to take flight. But what Betty has done also, in her own little way for the community here is tremendous. And she is so loved, and she's not a walkover, I mean, I knew where my place was, but in a gentle way, as far as running the restaurant. He was a little more relaxed, I think, and I think that's normal because of his position in life. And she's the wife and she always has to sort of be in the background.

Smith: Interesting observation.

Liz Meyer: Yeah, but I felt she was – I have a lot of respect for her.

Luc Meyer: You see, don't forget: we knew her when she had her problem with drinking.

Liz Meyer: About food: Luc mentioned about the liver and the trout – he [Ford] loved desserts, as well.

Smith: He did have a sweet tooth.

Liz Meyer: He had a sweet tooth – most definitely. And being from Michigan, and we being foreigners here, we are learning as we go along about American stuff. And then we learned that the blueberries come from Michigan. So Luc would get blueberries and he would make a blueberry tart for him. He would make this torte tart for him that day and present it to him at the table and Luc would serve it up. And we did some other desserts.

Luc used to bicycle to work in the summer, and he was bicycling and he was thinking – he thinks so much about food, he thinks about food and wine just about all the time. And he's thinking there must be a dessert I can do. I love to eat sour cream. He just eats it by the spoonful. So he figured out a recipe, which is unique. Most chefs, they never invent anything. They get an idea from someone and they change it around. In this case – I give him credit for

really inventing something. He made this ice cream with sour cream and cream and lemon zest. And then he decided that with the lemon zest it was very nice, it wasn't sweet, but it wasn't sour, but then to put a sauce. So he did a raspberry sauce, a fresh raspberry sauce on top. Then we couldn't get a name for it. We had to call it something. The Left Bank Special didn't make it. So President Ford came to dinner and Mrs. Ford was not there because I think it was Susan who was having her first baby. No, the first child was from one of the sons – I think it was Sara. And the second child was Tyne.

Smith: That's right.

Liz Meyer: So, Mrs. Ford was away, and we presented him with this ice cream and we said, "Mr. President, we have a new creation of Luc's, we'd love you to try it. You're the first to try this ice cream. But we don't have a name for it. We thought of maybe Red and White Mountain." And he said, "You know, Betty's not here because Susan has just had her baby, Tyne." He said, "You know, I have two granddaughters – Sarah and Tyne." And I said, "That's it. We're going to call the ice cream Sarah Tyne ice cream." And, until this day, people come to the restaurant and ask – Jean Michel, our chef who has now taken over the restaurant since we sold it to him has to make Sarah Tyne ice cream.

Smith: That's a wonderful story.

Liz Meyer: And it's a wonderful ice cream.

Luc Meyer: Going back to Mrs. Ford, I would really like to say this: we have known that she had a problem with alcohol. And at that time, of course, she would drink. But she would hardly eat. It was a little frustrating for me. I was always trying to find out what she liked to present her. And she would have literally one bite, and not eat the rest. And I was always feeling, oh maybe I didn't do it right, maybe she didn't enjoy it. And it was nothing to do with it.

Smith: Is that a function of the drinking, that it dulls the appetite?

Luc Meyer: Well, not only dulls it, you don't have any appetite. I remember one day she wanted sole – she thought she would eat sole. So I ordered some fresh sole

and I made the fillet – she liked it with the cream sauce, with the grapes and everything. Again, she ate just one. And then we saw the evolution of her going off and then her coming back, because, you know, President Ford did come every year for his birthday, which was the 14th of July, that I remember because it's Bastille Day in France. Until the year before he died, he was still in the restaurant, coming on the 14th of July. And many years we were invited to his party, but running a restaurant, sometimes we couldn't go there. But anyway, we saw the evolution and then later on, when Mrs. Ford got over her problem, she became a regular eater again. She would eat normally, and it was wonderful because President Ford enjoyed his cocktail, and his wine with dinner. But after this he quit drinking just to support Mrs. Ford. I as a wine lover I think this is a tremendous achievement, to have this kind of discipline to stop something you like to do.

Smith: And I imagine they probably were a good influence on other people's lives. Clearly, she had an enormous impact.

Liz Meyer: Oh, yes, because she has the Betty Ford Center in California. I mean, it is tremendous what that place is doing for people. It's like the garden, which is a happy thing, it's a whole different thing.

Luc Meyer: You should see the garden.

Smith: We saw it yesterday.

Luc Meyer: Oh you did?

Smith: Yeah, it's beautiful, and larger than I had pictured it. And of course, the proximity to the Amphitheater, which is very impressive.

Luc Meyer: We're going tonight, for Yo Yo Ma

Smith: Oh wonderful. He was a classmate of mine at Harvard. Class of 1975.

Liz Meyer: I just read that yesterday.

Luc Meyer: Yeah, you told me. You said he went to Harvard.

Smith: Yeah, same year. We just had our 35th reunion.

Luc Meyer: You talk about the Fords. We have so many wonderful souvenirs, because first he came with a lot of very important people to the restaurant. He created an energy in this town. When he came people would line up. And we were very discrete. We never were the kind of restaurateur who wanted to have their picture taken. All the pictures we had, he had them taken of us.

And then when he came at Christmas, of course, it was a gathering of old friends and we would do a lot of the catering. So at the Kindel's house at Christmas, we would do his Christmas party. So here I had a restaurant – you can believe how busy we are – 24th of December. And here a house in Vail I would say ten minutes away, there would be his dinner party. Well, I had to cook the goose for Christmas. Because I would do a traditional French Christmas dinner with the goose and the chestnuts, and all this. And I will have to go (because we will have two seatings) in between the seatings at The Left Bank and take the goose and everything to the house. Then the Secret Service were there saying, “Hey, where you going?” I would say, “Don't wait – the goose is getting cold.” And I remember once this guy blocking the steps going up to the back door to this kitchen, and I handed him a goose and I said, “Here, do something.” And the guy grabbed the goose and said, “Wait a moment” and I said “Don't worry about it.” So it wasn't Washington – Vail is Vail.

Smith: Now, had they built the house?

Luc Meyer: Oh no.

Liz Meyer: They were in Dick Bass's house on Mill Creek Circle. And the reason that the Secret Service chose that house – there was only one way in and one way out. It was a circle.

Luc Meyer: Where we did the Christmas party was not at that house. That was at Ted Kindel's house at the time. So anyway, I would go in the kitchen. I had my staff already there. I had the goose and I would put it on a nice silver tray and prepare it. Then I would open the door and I would come and present it to Mr. President and Mrs. Ford. Go back in the kitchen and start slicing. And in the meantime, (because I'm a working chef, I'm not a celebrity chef) in the

restaurant dining room, while losing the chef at the second seating, she (Liz) had to go and say to the people, “Excuse me, can there be a little delay in your food, Luc had to deliver the goose to the President.” And everybody was just so happy.

Smith: My sense was that they were very visible in this community and very hands on in their involvement.

Luc Meyer: Of course, they would do the lights at Christmas. They would do so many things, you know? They would be involved in so many charity events, the golfing.

Smith: I have to ask you, because we know he was a real fiscal conservative. And there is something of a debate over what kind of tipper he was.

Liz Meyer: I think he was nothing extraordinary that I would say, “Oh what a cheap president we have.” No, not at all.

Luc Meyer: He was twenty percent, but he was not a big spender. He loved liver. Well, liver was not an expensive item on the menu. Or trout.

Liz Meyer: He didn’t have expensive wines or anything like that. He was very fair on that.

Smith: I wonder, as he got older, whether the diet changed at all I had just a couple of occasions to eat with him, and there was a lot of fish – the kinds of healthy things that you would associate with an older person.

Liz Meyer: He had a sweet tooth. Let me add a little story. Well, the President of the United States comes to my restaurant; I’m not going to buy him a drink, right? I mean, we have a little more class than this. You cannot buy him something – if I presented him a new dessert, I could make it complimentary. But, one thing I did was, years ago before he became president, my mother used to make the most wonderful jam in the summer. Now, when you are in Europe, in France, and in the summer when it is the season of the blueberry, we would go collect this fruit in the wild and Mother would make jam. Well, when my mother got too old to make jam, one day she sent me a beautiful copper pot in

which she made jam. So here I got this copper pot and I said, “Well, that’s my memory of my youth, making jam. So I’m going to make jam.”

Now, Colorado is famous for apricots this week, in two weeks from now, it’s going to start peaches. These are the two fruits that Colorado is very famous for. So what I did was to start making apricot and peach jam with the local fruit that I bought from the local market and from local people. Well, when President Ford came, what I would do is take a little pack and put two little jars of my jam as a little present. That’s personal to give, something that I made that I sent to him. Well, first time I did, the next time he came for dinner he said, “Hum, may I have these wonderful jams of yours.” So I gave him one and of course, it became a custom.

And then one day he came, and I don’t know why, I was joking and I said, “Mr. President, I will make you all the jam, but you will have to bring back the jars because I recycle them.” And do you know that from that day, every time he would come for dinner, Secret Service would bring me the empty jar of jam. And the 14th of July when I did not have time to see him I would make a box of jam and I would drive it all the way from here to Beaver Creek, and stop by, “For the President.” So I would provide him with his jam for the rest of his life, so I’m very proud of that.

Liz Meyer: I have another little story about him, too. We met a man, who is a book publisher, and he used to publish cookbooks – *Dining Out in Los Angeles*, *Dining Out...*, and he was doing a cookbook for a chef in Aspen and this was in about ’79-’80, somewhere around then – the late ‘70s. So Elliott came here and he told us about these things, and he said, “I think you should write a cookbook.” And Luc was saying, “I don’t know – my English is so bad I can’t do anything like that.” He said, “No, I can’t possibly do something like that.”

Luc Meyer: My reaction was more that so many cookbooks were being published. He said, “You have the most important person in this world in your restaurant who comes on a regular basis. What about if President Ford would write a foreword to your cookbook?” And I looked at him and I said, “What a presumption to think that I can ask the President of the United States to write a foreword!” He said, “Have you thought about it? Look, it would cost you

just a stamp.” So he came that night for dinner and he said, “Just think about what a stamp would cost you, just write a letter.” So, I wrote a letter and less than a month later I had the foreword of my cookbook, but I hadn’t written the cookbook. So here I had the foreword and had to write the book. So I called this Elliott guy who is the publisher and I said, “I have a foreword.” He said, “I will help you.” Because he has special people who can help. So we went through the process in the off season, writing recipes and everything. That was the worst time we had together because it...

Liz Meyer: Our marriage was very fragile.

Luc Meyer: It was so hard because I can cook, I can make you a hollandaise in five minutes, but to put it down on paper and in the right order and in ounces – when I’m used to grams and everything.

Liz Meyer: Then we had to think of a title. And so with the collaboration of this man, Elliott, he said you get so many famous people in this restaurant – and we had showed him that time our guestbook – he said, “Let’s call it the *Left Bank Celebrity Cookbook*.” And so we took a page of a celebrity...

Luc Meyer: Like President Ford.

Liz Meyer: Like Ford.

Luc Meyer: And what I served him – so it was a cookbook of recipes, but all with menus. So we would make a menu for every celebrity who came. But there was always a story of what happened when this celebrity came, when Robert Redford came, what happened with him, President Ford or Bob Hope.

Liz Meyer: Andy Warhol.

Luc Meyer: Andy Warhol.

Liz Meyer: That was first published in ’82. We had three printings. Then, the second one, we added another chapter. And, you see, a chapter consisted of a menu. So it might be six courses or something, just to make it a little different. Instead of doing a cookbook where you have all appetizers here and all fish here – so it was all jumbled up and you could find everything. And then he did a

Christmas in Vail, for the Christmas that he did for President Ford at the private house where he was staying.

Luc Meyer: And the profit of this book we gave to the Betty Ford Alpine Garden.

Smith: That's wonderful.

Luc Meyer: It was so wonderful to do it. It was not for the purpose of making money. It was more something for me a challenge, of course, publishing a book. And it was just something new, something exciting. In the old time we did so much, without us thinking of the bottom line, you know. That was the wonderful spirit of cooking, of wanting to grow, my herbs in my back garden so I could bring zucchini flowers, all the chive flowers and fresh chives and this kind of thing. Every morning you would see me on my bike – with my taragon and chives and some basil and thyme and everything in my basket that I just picked from the garden to cook. Because I'm an artist. Cooking is my life, I've been cooking for fifty years.

When President Ford died, we went to Rancho Mirage. We were invited to his private wake. We knew a lot of people from Vail, so we went there with a lot of different people. But when we got the invitation to go to the official funeral in Washington, I said, "What do I belong with these thousands of people who have come from around the country, the world. What have we done? Yes, he's been a customer. He has never eaten for free in my restaurant because that's one thing that President Ford would have never accepted." He had his free jam, he never had a free meal in my restaurant.

Smith: What was the reaction in Vail, generally when he passed away?

Luc Meyer: Well, you know, President Ford was so close to all of us. He had done so much, but in a fatherly way, that for us, missing him, not seeing him, not seeing Mrs. Ford, and remembering all that he did for us – now our generation remembers this. A lot of the younger people you see today in Vail don't realize what President Ford has done for us. It was all about his position as president. That's why I think he liked Vail so much, because he mixed with people like us. We never talked politics. We never asked for any favors from President Ford.

Smith: And I'm told one of the things that they both really enjoyed about this place was that basically, people would leave them alone. People did not bother them for autographs and pictures – you know, the whole celebrity thing.

Luc Meyer: That's right. Not at all.

Liz Meyer: Well, you know, he would have to walk through the restaurant, and this was even after he was no longer the president. And I would see them get up with a pen and so on, and I'd say, "Excuse me, do you want President Ford's signature? I will get it for you." And so when he walked by in the restaurant – of course, everybody clapped.

Luc Meyer: You have to see like Christmas, now. You figure out our restaurant – a hundred people seated, it's full. And suddenly you are eating there and we wouldn't tell anybody – now, people knew that President Ford was in town, of course. But suddenly you look and you see the President of the United States walking in. He would come in, people would stop eating. And he would go, and very graciously say hello because he knew so many people, you know. And then he would sit down and have his dinner. But it was so elegant.

Today I open the *New York Times* and I saw President Obama having a hamburger with the president of Russia. I think this is wonderful. This could not happen in Russia. See what I mean? So that was the spirit that President Ford just loved.

Smith: Did you ever see them with the grandchildren?

Luc Meyer: Oh, yeah. At his birthday.

Liz Meyer: At his house. But you know, when they would come here, I think it was much more of a private time. I think Sheika is the only one that's really that close. I mean, she was just out in California for Betty's birthday and so on. I've never called her Betty. I've always called her Mrs. Ford. And just getting back to the reaction of when he died. For me, personally, it was an emptiness in the future. There was a sort of void. Even though he was in California and he didn't come here quite so much in the last year maybe, we always think about him, because Vail is what it is because of him. And I think if he saw Vail

now, with those big buildings back there which you have not seen, he would probably be a little sad. Because when he started off in the Lodge at Vail, which is still the same. But, I mean, all these other places that have changed.

Luc Meyer: Main Street is still the same.

Smith: But you mean some of these over the top mansions that are a little bit garish?

Liz Meyer: Yes. It's sort of changing the...

Luc Meyer: It was a very comfortable relationship because I don't think that many of the people in Vail wanted to really be involved or asking for special favors. And I think that is what the wonderful thing was.

Smith: Did you see his sense of humor?

Liz Meyer: He was always very gentle, warm.

Smith: Upbeat?

Liz Meyer: I couldn't joke with him; but on the other hand, it's not my position to joke with the president.

Smith: Understood.

Liz Meyer: Yes, he would laugh – like with the Sarah-Tyne, naming the Sarah-Tyne ice cream. Now, that tickled him. He thought, wow, that's a great idea.

Luc Meyer: And after we had to serve it and I had to make it for the grandchildren.

Talking about the grandchildren once he called me and he said, "You know the grandchildren are coming, I would love you to make some ice cream for them." I make a bucket of ice cream, the Sarah-Tyne. We were invited to the White House. We never saw him when he was in there because they were busy, but we were invited to _____ with Bob Barrett to the White House. He was a very thoughtful man.

I'll give you an example. I remember this dinner for Christmas. Of course there was a person taking pictures there. And President Ford would always, when I gave him jam, write me a little note, by hand, never typed, and sign it. And I have so many of these notes that I keep and I cherish. And Liz says,

“Do we have to keep all these notes?” And I say, “Of course, everyone is important to me.” It was incredible, the President of the United States has the time to say thank you for two little jars of jam. You know this, a lot of people, you do a lot more and you never get a thank you. But anyway, we didn’t do it for the thank you, we did it because we appreciated it. And that was where President Ford was so special. And we did this dinner and they took pictures. And then after President Ford asked us for the name of each of our waiters because he had a picture taken with them, and he sent us a picture to give to each waiter that he had personally signed. And I thought that was so thoughtful. We are doing our job, but that was President Ford – the detail. And I think, unfortunately, that that’s why he wasn’t re-elected president – he was too much of a human being, and not enough, maybe, politician. For us, we never got involved in politics.

Smith: That’s probably one reason he enjoyed it because he could switch off, and just be himself.

Luc Meyer: Well, you have to realize when you come as an immigrant your priorities are your family, your children, running a business, making some money to pay for the education of your children. And politics, Republicans or Democrats, were nothing. I didn’t even know what President Ford was, kind of until later on. And now, of course, having lived in America for so long it’s a little different.

Smith: He did come up here that last summer before he passed away. There were lots of folks who were almost begging him not to for reasons of health. But they were determined. He was stubborn, And they loved this place. Did you see them at all during that time?

Luc Meyer: He came for the 14th of July.

Smith: He did? On his last birthday?

Luc Meyer: Next to last.

Smith: Which would be 2005.

Luc Meyer: Right.

Liz Meyer: We got out of the restaurant 2006.

Luc Meyer: He didn't come anymore.

Smith: And frankly, by that point, he might not have been able to come down here.

Luc Meyer: Yes.

Smith: And he was enjoying himself?

Liz Meyer: It will be in my diary. I write a diary every day and it will be in there. He didn't come for his 90th – it was his 92nd. And he died?

Smith: He was 93.

Luc Meyer: And he came for his 92nd birthday.

Liz Meyer: His 92nd was his last one.

Smith: And he had the trout?

Luc Meyer: And he had the trout. Well, plus the liver – I always get it fresh, so it's not an item we keep that long – we don't have it all the time. If I know the President is coming, I would order it. If he did not have the liver, then he would have the trout. By the time you get to his age, you don't eat big meals anymore.

Liz Meyer: I remember his 60th birthday specifically on the 14th of July. They had a surprise birthday party for him at the golf course because he was playing golf. And so they arranged for the guests – did you go? (asking me) I went because it was during the day and we were at the golf course and there was a wall and everybody had to hide behind the wall. And when he came to the eighteenth hole, we all leapt up and shouted "Happy Birthday!" to him and he was like a little boy. It was so wonderful – the surprise of the whole thing, and, of course, he knew everybody. And of course we felt so honored to be invited to that. That must have been in the late '70s?

Smith: That would be '73. He was born in 1913, so his 60th birthday would be 1973. Maybe 65?

Liz Meyer: It must have been a little later.

- Smith: Let me ask you because we're about out of tape. How do you think, from your own experiences, how do you think he should be remembered?
- Luc Meyer: As a politician or as a man?
- Smith: Both.
- Luc Meyer: Well, as a politician, I would say he was a very, very decent man. When you see today, politics - let me say this as an immigrant - I sometimes feel I am more American than the Americans, because we love this country a different way. Because we weren't born here, but we are Americans by choice - you are an American by birth. You didn't have this choice. So I take this very seriously - I wanted to become an American. I wanted my wife to become American, and I'm glad that my children are Americans. So that's one thing - as an immigrant, it was very important. He was a man of great decency. Today, when you see politicians - let's not go into that.
- Smith: I know what you mean.
- Luc Meyer: As a man, as far as a man, he was a family man, he was just a wonderful, warm individual who never abused his power or his stature. He always tried to bring people up. He gave you this wonderful, wonderful feeling. We have met a lot of very important people, but you know, President Ford is certainly up there with one of the most...and I don't think it's because of the camera. This is very personal, we are sincere people. We have nothing to gain. Do you have something to add?
- Liz Meyer: He was always so kind to us when he used to come into the restaurant. He seemed to have such a warmth about him. He really enjoyed it.
- Smith: He had a good life. And Vail was a large part of that. Growing up in the Depression in Michigan, he could never have imagined the life that he would lead. Not just the offices that he held, but the opportunities and the friends that were made.
- Liz Meyer: And I think that when he probably thought back on his life, that he was adopted, that he came from the most humble of beginnings, and where he got, he still kept that humbleness about him which was so wonderful. Because I

couldn't imagine meeting ever meeting any of the other presidents if we would have had the same repartee. I doubt it.

Smith: Well put.

Luc Meyer: And as I said, at the time we met him we were humble people trying to make a living, bring up a family in a wonderful place called Vail. And thanks to him.

Smith: Perfect.

INDEX

D

d'Estaing, Giscard, 8–9

F

Ford, Betty

addictions, 11–12

Ford, Gerald R.

first acquaintance with, 1

funeral, reactions to, 17

personal stories about, 12–14, 20

remembrance, 22–23

Vail/Beaver Creek, Colorado, 1–23

L

Left Bank Restaurant, 1–23

S

Sara Tyne ice cream, 10–11

V

Vail/Beaver Creek, Colorado, 1–2

W

World Forum, 7–9