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University of California
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Marion Cunningham
MARION CUNNINGHAM: AN ORAL HISTORY

Interviews conducted by
Suzanne Riess
in 2001-2002

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Interview 1: June 14, 2001

[Begin Tape 1A]

[Note: Cunningham had potato salad and sliced tomatoes for lunch. Small red, unpeeled, tossed warm with lemon and oil, and mayonnaise when cold. Asked, she says she doesn't have time to grow tomatoes. Riess had dried borbotoli beans, soaked, cooked with onion, jerk peppers, spicy, and warmed, with goat cheese on top.]

Riess: It's June 14th. I'm in Walnut Creek with Marion Cunningham. Marion, you're a Californian?

Cunningham: Born in Los Angeles, 1922. February 7, 1922.

Riess: Tell me about your family.

Cunningham: My mother was an immigrant. My grandmother, her mother, came from the area of Abruzzi in Italy, and brought four children with her. My grandfather, her husband, had died quite suddenly in his forties of a heart attack. He had been teaching agriculture at the university, over there, and died just suddenly. Her story was like so many: she had insurance money, and that was really it, and she brought her four children—two sons, two daughters— to this country, with the belief that the streets were paved with gold.

They were in New York, and she didn't have any abilities that made her hire-able, and so she ended up doing embroidery in a sweatshop. The four children went to Catholic schools. My mother had tuberculosis. She was always frail.

Riess: She was the youngest of them?

Cunningham: Yes, she was the youngest of them. So my grandmother thought California climate would be much better for my mother, and the two sons were learning to be tailors. They managed to get to California, get very decent jobs, saved money, and sent for the family, and that was how they landed in Los Angeles.

My father was Irish. He, too, was one of four. Never knew who his father was. He was kind of in the early throes of learning to be a plumber, and then he went into the First World War. The exact sequence of this, I'd have to pay attention to, but anyway, he developed a terrible disease called Raynaud's syndrome. He and my mother married--they were probably in their late twenties then--and very shortly after they were married, the symptoms began, and he ended up being badly disabled. He lost a leg above the knee and fingers and toes. Luckily, a Dr. Allen, who had come to the house and treated him, realized the plight they had financially, so he wrote papers saying that his illness was associated with the war, and that allowed him to have \$150 a month until the end of their lives.

- Riess: And they were in Los Angeles?
- Cunningham: Then in Los Angeles, and then moved to Glendale. It was a very small town then. That's where I went to school, in Glendale.
- Riess: What was your mother's family name?
- Cunningham: Spelta, S-p-e-l-t-a.
- Riess: That's the Italian?
- Cunningham: Yes.
- Riess: What do you remember of your grandmother's cooking?
- Cunningham: She was a very good cook. She loved to cook. When we lived in Glendale, she was in the kitchen all day. I mean, that was her home. She lived with us at that time because my father needed so much help, and my mother's strength--
[answers phone]
- [tape interruption]
- Riess: You were saying that your grandmother was living with you.
- Cunningham: Yes. She lived with us for a few years, and then she moved over to the other sister's home. But she was very instrumental in a lot of things in my very early days. I really loved her dearly. She was a perfect grandmother. I'm beginning to believe that all those grandmothers in the past were wonderful.
- Riess: Was she very Italian?
- Cunningham: Very Italian. Never learned to speak the English language. And the food was all very Italian.
- Riess: And she and your mother got along?
- Cunningham: Oh, all of the children adored her, the four, the two sons and two daughters. It would have been very hard not to love her. She was very, very patient. She was very gentle and extremely capable.
- Riess: Where is Abruzzi?
- Cunningham: It's sort of in the middle part of Italy, maybe slightly north. They're famous for chefs.
- Riess: Did you learn any Italian?

Cunningham: I spoke Italian and understood it, but finally my father--keep in mind he was bedridden for a long time, then he was in a wheelchair. He did get an artificial leg, and that helped, but he always used crutches and I can't blame him. My mother didn't, either. They understood. But having three people talking Italian in your house and not understanding a word of it made him feel very isolated, so I stopped talking and I don't know, all of that—whatever *that* was—has disappeared. I can't understand Italian today.

Riess: Was he very Irish?

Cunningham: Very Irish.

Riess: In what qualities?

Cunningham: Well, he had a very good sense of humor. What can I say about him? Temper. Got mad easily, was basically kind. Ultimately an alcoholic. He felt rather hopeless and I couldn't blame him, because really in a way he had lost a good part of his life when he had this illness. He was difficult in some ways, but they were very--I have to say I'm so grateful. They had wonderful values. They were very good to me. They were kind to me. Just that. That was it.

Riess: Were you an only child?

Cunningham: Yes.

Riess: Because they felt that as soon as his disease manifested itself--?

Cunningham: I don't know. In my era, at least, nothing like this was ever discussed.

Riess: Right. So what kind of an education did you have?

Cunningham: I had very little, deliberately. I just--what I always really liked to do was visit with people, and I didn't pay a bit of attention to teachers. I was a reader. I was that. My mother took me to the library all the time. Thank God I was a reader or I would have been totally illiterate. But she took me to the library constantly, and I read a lot. I loved reading, but I didn't like dissecting sentences in the English class. I don't know. I had no interest. I was more interested in who the people were that were in that class. I could have cared less. I had no interest in going to college at all, and even if I had--I could have done what a lot of my friends did and put themselves through. You know, get a job and do it. I didn't want to. I just didn't want to. I was very hyper. I think--my father used to say, "You have St. Vitus dance." I think I would have been on Ritalin if it were today, probably. But I don't like to sit very much, I don't feel comfortable. So I had a lot of different jobs, none of which was I interested in keeping.

Riess: Jobs during high school?

Cunningham: No, not during high school, but as soon as I got out of high school. I did work during Christmas vacations in a variety of things: selling something in a store, or I worked at Mortgage Guarantee. I worked for the Los Angeles Stock Exchange for a time. It actually was very good. I did learn a lot, but I didn't like any of the jobs.

Riess: Did you have a chance to travel at all with your family?

Cunningham: We didn't travel. We couldn't travel. His health was so poor, and my mother's was so poor. No, we didn't really travel at all. But, I tell you, it was a good life. I really would suggest that people get poor again and try to make a community and try to start interacting with their fellow man and start cooking and sitting down and sharing food. I think all those things--I think we've lost a lot. Innocently. I don't think there are any villains here; it's just the evolution of--the way things have developed technologically and in all those ways.

Riess: What was your parents' community, then? Similar sorts of people?

Cunningham: We lived in a neighborhood that was a real neighborhood. People were out every Monday morning, and it was just like it was a diagram for most during this era: washed on Monday, ironed on Tuesday, and sewed and cleaned on Wednesday. I can remember it very well. I remember standing outdoors with my grandmother, hanging up all the clothes, and my mother would come out. They talked about what they cooked. Neighborhoods were community. Neighborhoods were community. People would rally for the needs of the neighbors. It was a totally, dramatically different lifestyle.

Riess: Were they from somewhere else, like your parents?

Cunningham: No, I don't think so. There was a sprinkling of people who had come from other places, but basically the backbone were people who had been there, certainly in Glendale, in our area.

Riess: So was your mother very visit-y and social?

Cunningham: She liked people. She liked people. My father did, too. And the neighbors came to see him, and they would bring things, none of which he would eat because he didn't like food very well, except for beef and a couple of things. But nonetheless, there was a wonderful feeling of friends, if you were living there. That was the way it felt.

Riess: Now, with your reading and your imagination, were you eager to get out of there?

Cunningham: Out of home? Is that what you mean?

Riess: Yes.

- Cunningham: Well, I married at twenty-one the man I had known from kindergarten in Glendale. Robert Cunningham. By that time I was anxious to make a break. Yes I was, really, by the time I was out of high school, when I was eighteen.
- Riess: Is he still living?
- Cunningham: No, he isn't. He died in 1983.
- Riess: And what did he do?
- Cunningham: He, unlike myself, was a wonderful student. He loved American history. He had great aspirations of helping the world, and like many idealists, he became quite cynical after a certain amount of time. His uncle was a lawyer, and he worked for him, but he was in the Marine Corps, just like Tom Brokaw writes about, you know, "the [greatest] generation." Everybody was patriotic, and all the friends that we went to school with, all the men signed up and were in the service. They were that age.
- Riess: Did you marry before he went into the service?
- Cunningham: No, he was in the Marine Corps, and he was twenty-one. He was six months ahead of me. He was twenty-one, and I was twenty. And then I got a job that I loved, the first, and that was that all the men had gone off to war, and Union Oil--all the service stations needed women to keep running, and so I got a job at Union Oil in what they called an A station, meaning that it pumped more gas--except that it was rationed. In that era, everybody had four gallons per week. So I got that job, and then the man I worked for, Peverall, hurt his back. It was, as I say, what they called an A station, and it was at a very busy spot on Foothill Boulevard. So I ran that station for two years. Changed tires, cleaned spark plugs. I loved it. I really loved it. And I said to Robert, "You know, I'm going to save"--I was getting bonuses on things: oil and so forth. "I'm going to buy a service station, and that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to run it." He said, "I don't like to tell you this, but," he said, "no matter how many baths and showers you take, you smell like 40-weight oil." And he said, "You're not going to run a service station the rest of your life." So that was that.
- Riess: Is this generally known about you?
- Cunningham: I think so. Alice Waters--well, she knew him, you see. Actually, he was quite funny. A lot of people that I know today knew him when he was alive, and he was known to be humorous. He was very funny.
- Riess: When the war was over--did he have the full four years of the war?
- Cunningham: Yes. He had even longer. It took longer, and I can't remember what those reasons were, for him to be discharged. And then he went to law school and

became a lawyer. The last part of his service time as a Marine he was in Santa Ana, and we got a little, tiny just barely three-room house that we rented, and I stayed in Laguna Beach, and I earned money Simonizing cars, and it paid well. I would do it early in the morning, and then I would go to the beach. And I had a whole bunch of high school friends; all of our friends came and stayed. Some of them stayed and stayed. They brought sleeping bags. It was a different life.

Riess: Because you were in this great location.

Cunningham: Yeah, it was beautiful.

Riess: Early surfing days. Were you a surfer?

Cunningham: Yep, I was a body surfer, and they used to make their own--you couldn't buy a surfing board then. You'd have to make them. San Onofre, down from Laguna, is really the ideal place. That's where surfers--they still do head for San Onofre. But it was such an easy life. The country was beautiful down there. It really was.

Riess: Was Laguna artsy then?

Cunningham: Yes, it was, and partly because during the war there was no exporting or importing of ceramic things, so there were lots of little ceramic shops. In fact, I had worked in one of those, too. And they could sell anything they made because there was such a scarcity. It was a charming town. The Pacific Coast Highway has gotten to be like, oh, Mount Diablo here, it's so congested. But in those days it wasn't.

Riess: Did you go over to Mexico a lot?

Cunningham: I did. I love Mexico. I still go a lot. I went to Ensenada four times last year. I love Mexico. The families, you know, they haven't had success particularly, financially, so people stick together, and you see families, all ages, together, eating. I like that.

Riess: When you go, do you know people there?

Cunningham: Yes. Well, I don't know if you remember--I mean, where have you lived? Have you been a northern Californian for a long, long time?

Riess: Since 1958.

Cunningham: Well, do you remember "The Great Chefs of France" program? It was very, very successful, and it was probably, like, '69, '70, '72.

Riess: Yes.

Cunningham: It was started by Michael James and Billy Cross. They really did a smashing job. They imported the star chefs from France, brought them over here. They had a place in Napa. Originally it was kind of a lovely old yellow farmhouse, and that's where these classes would be held. People came from all over the country to take them. It was a brilliant idea to bring these chefs because it was very timely. I met them because I had by then met James Beard and was helping him, and he had known them. So anyway, I did a lot of work with them, with these programs, "The Great Chefs of France," and also, at the same time, I was doing a lot of work for James. But Michael James died of AIDS, and--that goes back maybe fifteen years ago, maybe longer. And so Billy, who has always traveled, knows a lot about Europe and he most particularly loves Mexico and knows all about Mexico, in every respect, and he makes--he's a great cook, and he does wonderful Mexican food. Anyway, he takes these little tours.

We have been very close friends for lots--well, back to when I first met them. So I can get together a little group of people, and we go down there. There's a wonderful, small hotel, Las Rosas, right in Ensenada, on the water. It's charming, it's very inviting. And so we stay there, and then he picks us up at the airport. He knows--they have an area that I had never seen prior to him introducing it to me: it's called Guadalupe Valley, and they make wines there. There are a lot of wineries, it rather reminds me of Napa way back. One winery in particular--Bob [Robert] and Margrit Mondavi had bought that cooking school from Michael and Billy and had them stay on and run it. And then after a time, they wanted to move on and do other things, so they did. But the Mondavis are very fond of Billy. They liked Michael, of course, too, but the three of us went down: Margrit and Bob and myself, and went to Ensenada. Guadalupe Valley is just a beautiful part of Mexico, so we went to all the wineries--and I've done it several times now that I've gone down. Bob Mondavi was very impressed with Comu, and I think some of the liquor stores here are carrying Comu now.

Riess: When you started going to Ensenada, were you looking for a different kind of Mexican food, or Mexican cuisine?

Cunningham: No, and it wasn't really only the food by any means. But Billy, because he has a good critical palate, has ferreted out some very good places to eat. Really, what we've all loved the best is Mexican street food: tortillas, tacos, all of that, and fish tacos. And he has certainly found wonderful places.

Riess: I wonder if the food movement that we have here has crossed the border.

Cunningham: I don't think it has, in all honesty. I don't think it has.

Riess: Diana Kennedy. How do you think she affected--?

Cunningham: Well, now, we're talking about the deeper part of Mexico. I don't know. I think that she has affected us in this country.

I tell you, Billy Cross would be someone that would be worth your talking to. He would know. He knows her very well, she talks to him a good deal, and he has spent time with her. I know her. We were years ago on a program, where we were together for about a week, and I'd known her. I'd seen her. I think she's having a very hard time now, trying to sell that house she built.

Riess: Is that in Morelia?

Cunningham: Yes, and I think it's a curious house. It's an odd house, and she's having a lot of trouble selling it, and she needs the money very badly. Billy is in touch with her. He would be able to tell you lots more than I can.

Riess: Some cuisines can be sort of tweaked and adapted, but probably Mexican food is still Mexican food.

Cunningham: I don't know whether it's that--we're talking about Tijuana, Ensenada and Baja on that side, and there's a lot of tourism. I don't know how much, but there is. It still, though, doesn't have that invaded feeling of tourism. But certainly the street food, that's what's selling all over the place. That's what the Mexicans buy. That's what *they're* eating. Whereas, I think, restaurants in a slightly higher scale are only drawing tourists. We don't go to there, but a lot of people do.

He would know the answers to that, I don't know. He really understands--he knows an amazing amount about Mexico. He knows the history going way back in time. He knows—he's very literate about this.

Riess: Laguna, this was postwar that you lived there?

Cunningham: Right.

Riess: And then where did you move next?

Cunningham: When Robert--I think he had already graduated, passed the bar. From school, we moved into Los Angeles and stayed in Beverly Glen Canyon. [Phone rings] We bought a very small house, you know? That's where we lived.

[tape interruption]

[End of Tape 1A]

[Begin Tape 1B]

- Riess: You were in Beverly Glen Canyon. You said you didn't work, but you socialized a lot.
- Cunningham: Socialized a lot. I cooked a lot. We had people come very often for dinner, or on weekends they'd come and have lunch and stay on. I remember those days as very pleasant. It was very, very pleasant. Again, having made friends over so many years, the same people were very threaded through our lives--when I think about it, I don't think anybody has time to do a lot of entertaining, but I don't know that. I'm wondering about today, how different that might all be.
- Riess: This is something you've been thinking about a lot lately?
- Cunningham: Yes, I have.
- Riess: Did something happen that this is suddenly your concern?
- Cunningham: Well, I belonged to--this is years ago--I joined a program that the American Institute of Wine and Food was doing called "Resetting the American Table." I should know the years, but I don't know-- it goes back a long time. And I worked on that program for six years. At that time I met many schoolteachers, public school teachers, who were very, very concerned about the feeding of young children. They were talking about lunches and the conditions of the homes, and their concerns were very real. Anyway, that started me on a track that I feel more strongly than ever about, which is that we really are isolating ourselves, and I don't think there are villains, it's not that bad, it's just the evolution of technology and lifestyle. Houses are empty in the daytime. A lot of houses are empty in the daytime. I mean, all of this happened step by step, in small ways to begin with.
- There was a woman--what was her name? Jane Jacobs. She wrote a book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, [1961] and it was about architecture. I think she worked in architecture. And her great concern was that they were doing buildings with blind fronts, that people were not looking at other people, people were being isolated, they were being cut off by the kind of architecture that they chose, and she predicted that this was a great loss. Step by step, over through all these years, you see more and more and more examples of our becoming, as individuals, isolated.
- As I say, I think it's perfectly innocent. We all adapt and keep moving with the population, but I think it's one of the saddest losses of all, the empty houses in the neighborhoods, that we don't interact with others. I mean, it takes time and an investment of time to be linked to your fellow man.
- Riess: If the houses are empty, that means the wives are working.
- Cunningham: Yes, they are. And in many instances, I suspect it's absolutely a necessity. But somehow the price is awfully high.

- Riess: When you socialized with your friends, what all were you talking about and what were the concerns in this generation?
- Cunningham: I don't remember--probably very small, incidental things, nothing particularly profound. Maybe among the men they were very interested in politics, and that was a topic of conversation.
- Riess: We were getting into the Korean War, actually.
- Cunningham: Yes.
- Riess: And the McCarthy era.
- Cunningham: That's right. But, you know, at that age everyone is dreaming of the future, dreaming of a better life—whatever that definition was—and the future. I don't remember any depressions or—I mean, I don't remember people worrying about things like that. Somehow when you're young there's sort of a freedom that you lose slowly over the years, a sense of freedom.
- Riess: You said that you didn't have your children until later.
- Cunningham: That's right, I was thirty-six.
- Riess: Did your friends have children?
- Cunningham: Some of them did. Some of them did.
- Riess: And did you see them change because of that, lose a sense of freedom?
- Cunningham: Not really. I can remember--many of them were late having their children, partly because of the war, I guess. But I also remember they'd bring them and put them to bed. I remember it wasn't a handicap or anything.
- Riess: Were you the best cook in your crowd?
- Cunningham: Probably. But I didn't think of it that way. Everybody cooked, and people didn't sit around analyzing food. [phone rings] You know, if you were hungry, you ate, and that was about the way it was.
- [tape interruption]
- Cunningham: That call was from the people that run *Taste* magazine--back in New York, where they produce it and work on it. They have wanted me to do this Thanksgiving dinner, the typical Thanksgiving dinner that I do every year. But it's a huge job. I just hate having these photographers come here and all.
- Riess: You mean you would do it here?

Cunningham: I would have it, and then I would put it out on the table, and then we would have people, probably Chuck Williams among them, who does come here for Thanksgiving every year. We would have everybody seated around here. I told this young woman in the beginning, I said, "You know, it's just chaos in this house. Why can't we do this in a studio?" And that had been arranged. And she said now they don't want to do it in a studio, they want to have it feel like a real home. Well, I'll call her tomorrow.

I don't want to do it. I just know what that's like. They want the table with the turkey on it. They want the desserts. I told her--I said, "I've done this in the past, a lot, and I love to cook and I love to work, but under the circumstances of photographs and all the rest of it"--and I don't want them to tamper with the food and make it look phony. I hate that! Anyway, I thought it was all set, and now they want to come here, so I'll have to figure out how I'm going to think about this. Anyway, she's very nice. She's just trying to do her duty, you know.

Riess: But it's never going to end, this flocking to your door. It's only going to get worse.

Cunningham: Yeah, it's only going to get worse. That's true. You know, you get into the field, so you can hardly slam the door now. [Speaks to herself as she writes herself a note about the phone call.] "Call Victoria re: dinner." I'll know what that is.

Riess: Did you cook from cookbooks back in the Beverly Glen Canyon days?

Cunningham: I didn't originally. But I got so I loved to read cookbooks, and I would go to the library--I didn't buy them, I would go to the library, and I would take out books, and I would try recipes out of them. I liked doing that a lot. And James Beard was my favorite. He was my favorite cookbook writer. But I did start using cookbooks. But partly having watched my grandmother--I'll tell you, that's a wonderful way to learn to cook. I mean, I knew some very basic things about how you cooked pork. It wasn't that we had a big variety. The stores were very small in that era. In fact, they were a relief! Now when you go into these megastores! The choices then, it was limited. And the way it was kind of played out was there was a long period of time when people cooked a roast or a chicken, roasted a chicken on Sunday, and then you had leftovers. Everybody was sort of doing the same thing, relaying leftovers. And I don't remember people being--it isn't true of all of them--being fussy. People weren't fussy about food. They weren't. It was easier to satisfy people.

Riess: What about the influence of food magazines, like *Family Circle*?

Cunningham: I don't remember *Family Circle* in that era. I don't. I think it came later.

Riess: *Sunset*. Did you get ideas from *Sunset*?

- Cunningham: That came later, too. I think *Sunset*--I'm guessing, but I don't think I'm too far off--is about fifty years old. Maybe it's older. I know Jerry di Vecchio. She just left, but she had been there forty-two years. In fact, I just went to her goodbye party down there. Well, that certainly is a magazine that has had influence. But I didn't see it, no. I didn't see it.
- Riess: Did you subscribe to any magazines?
- Cunningham: It was a long time before I did, because they seemed expensive. I like going to the library, and you could always see them there and look at them.
- Riess: A lot of newspapers had a Wednesday food section.
- Cunningham: Well, my memory is Jane Benet up here at the *Chronicle*.
- Riess: But not the *L.A. Times*.
- Cunningham: I don't know when I first began to look at that, you know. I can't remember.
- Riess: You can see that I am trying to construct this past in which you gradually come to focus on food.
- Cunningham: Well, you see, I was fifty when I met James, so the first half of my life was different. There was that rash of cooking classes. You remember there was a period when cooking classes started to spring up? And really what those classes were about was cooking to entertain. It wasn't about bare-bones home cooking. That had no--see, home cooks are very déclassé. Cooking in the Martha Stewart entertaining way--that's a different story.
- So people such as myself are--you know, we're just kind of the bare bones of the basic needs of everyone. But it doesn't have any frills, it doesn't have anything that captivates people. It's always been regarded--people, I can remember some situation would come up and I'd have to be somewhere, and they would want you to put on chef's clothes. You know, chefs were important! Home cooks were not. It wasn't out of any malice. It was just people like my grandmother probably didn't want their children locked up in a kitchen. I think the whole evolution of the thing was that home cooking was very déclassé. That's just the way it was, and it's just the way it is.
- Riess: And as people got more money, they got more appliances, and appliances were going to take you out of the kitchen.
- Cunningham: Yes, like the microwave, where you could have one dish and you could carry it to the table.
- Riess: When you moved up to the Bay Area, when your husband had the job with Crosby Heafey Roach & May, how did you decide where you wanted to live?

- Cunningham: Well, we rented a house in Lafayette when we first came. And then, because Robert was entitled to the government's--there was a down payment, you could buy a house. We bought a house over on Del Hombre, which is up by the BART station, between Walnut Creek and Pleasant Hill. It's up on the north part of Main Street.
- Riess: The firm was in the city, wasn't it?
- Cunningham: No, it's in Oakland. They have had offices in New York and all over, but Ed[win A.] Heafey has--he has been, I think, remarkable. He deliberately set up his practice in Oakland because he feels that Oakland should lose its sort of bad image, and he has worked very hard at trying to help the city of Oakland get beyond that. So his main offices in the beginning were there for that reason, and he's poured a lot of energy and time into trying to upgrade Oakland so people feel safe and are willing to go there and shop and all the rest of it. But he has had offices in San [Francisco], all over the place, and he's been very, very successful. He deserves to be. He's a very good lawyer.
- Riess: And did he recruit your husband?
- Cunningham: Yes, he had heard about him and he wanted him to come. They got along very well, and that was a very good thing for Robert. The whole thing was a good move.
- Riess: For you, too?
- Cunningham: Yes, I liked it. I mean, I was happy to come here. I missed southern California in slight ways, but this is home, and I love living out here, so I'm lucky there.
- Riess: It was when you came up here that you decided you wanted to have children?
- Cunningham: Yes, it was after we got moved up here. We have the two. That was kind of it.
- Riess: Did you stick close to the house then?
- Cunningham: I did. I did.
- Riess: What were the first connections you made with people when you moved up here?
- Cunningham: Oh, I went to something. What was it? The school system in Lafayette. We had rented a house in Lafayette, and we were there. And the school system had had their funding cut back, and they were trying to fill in with people who would step forth and do different classes, such as art classes and, oh, literature classes, where you didn't need credentials necessarily.

In order to meet some people, I was interested in that, and I went to some meetings. I always liked to draw. I used to draw all the time. So I taught classes there to the youngsters in elementary school, and there I met these friends who were doing the same thing. Lawton Shurtleff, who has been a wonderful old friend, and a whole bunch of people. We are still friends today, you see, and we're talking fifty years ago. It's a long time.

Riess: It was awfully rural out here, wasn't it?

Cunningham: Yes, it was. It was properly named at that time. Walnut trees were all over the place. And then we had the terrible blight, and we lost them. And people were building, and that grew ever more rapid, where tracks were set up and everything. But it was beautiful then. There were these creeks that were running all throughout Walnut Creek. No, it was really pretty country. I'm lucky. I have, I think, kind of the last of the last houses out here.

Riess: This is the edge of the state park?

Cunningham: Yes, there's one house that you don't see right away. It's way back, next door to me on that side. And then the gate to the park is right there. So you see, my chances are very good that nothing will destroy the view of the mountains.

Riess: When did you build this house?

Cunningham: We built this house--gee, I think we built it about forty-one, forty-two years ago. We had horses, quarter horses at that time, and the children had a pony. We really lived an outdoor life, and we knew that that's the way we were going to live, and that's why deliberately--these floor tiles are split pavers, they're not a full brick. They have been fired at a higher temperature than a brick so that they can be cleaned. If you have regular brick--brick absorbs, and you can't get it out, it's too porous. And we have, under the floor, radiant heat. The house is not large. It's 1,500 square feet, and that isn't large. But you can see the reason [moves away from microphone] it's in the shape it's in is we love the view of the mountain, and so [opens door to an adjacent living room].

Riess: [joins Ms. Cunningham] Oh, it's a wonderful room, yes.

Cunningham: The damn dog. You see, I'm fighting with him about this chair. I would give him back, but he's lovable, and I feel he's been to other homes and they've given him up, and I just can't do it. But he's driving me crazy.

Riess: [returns to microphone] Well, you have to think this time next year he'll be an old dog.

Cunningham: [laughs]

Riess: You hope.

- Cunningham: That's what I hope. Oh, it just is exhausting.
- Riess: This room is a total surprise. And another time I'd like to talk about how you designed this house to work for cooking.
- Cunningham: People come in this house--it's odd that more than one person would say it--people come in, and they look around, and they say, "Where's your lab?" They think I've got a kitchen that--but, you know, that's very adequate. It suits me 100 percent, because everything is next to everything else, and you're not running around.
- Riess: Forty-one years ago when you designed this, were you thinking of doing some demonstrations?
- Cunningham: No, I wasn't. Not when I started. It was later that there was this rash of teaching people to cook. And then I tried to get some classes together. It was just because I had people that were interested in cooking. I was interested in meeting people who liked to cook so we could talk about cooking. That was the whole point.
- I remember making an ad for that class. I was charging \$6 a class, and I had copied 200 of these flyers, and I went around and left them in different stores. People were very nice about letting me put them there. And I never got one call. And then I decided to do an ad.
- Riess: When do you think that was?
- Cunningham: That was probably in about 1975. Then I went down to put an ad in the then just beginning *Contra Costa Times* newspaper. They had a little lean-to. That was all they had then, and I went down with this little ad I wrote. The young woman who was there at the counter--I said I wanted an ad, and I wanted to teach classes, and she said, "Well, if I interview you, I can do a lot more for you, and then it will be noticeable," she said. "An ad is very small, and you have some competition." Her name was Maggie Crum, and she did the interview and wrote it up, and it was in the paper, and I got nine students from it. We remained friends all these years. About two months ago she died. Anyway, it was really wonderful. I said to her, "I think, in all honesty, you're the one who gave me a start. It wouldn't have occurred to me to try to find anybody to write anything." So that was really good.
- Riess: But you already had a reputation, didn't you?
- Cunningham: Not really. Honestly not. Because we only had--we had two cooking schools here in Walnut Creek. People weren't coming together on this story of cooking yet, in a big way. We had one woman who was doing French cooking, one of the two. And again, it was in the category of the Martha-Stewart style of cooking. It was all about entertaining, impressing people, doing complicated

things. But my goal was simply to have other people interested in the same subject I was interested in to interact with, and that worked very well, it really did. In fact, there's a man in Orinda, Jack Schneider. I haven't talked to Jack Schneider for twenty years, I bet. He called me a couple of weeks ago, and he said, "I was just thinking"--he's now eighty-I think-something, and he said, "I was just thinking about what wonderful times we all had in the cooking classes you had." He was in Orinda, and he got a little cookware store, and there wasn't anything really like that here, and so everybody went to his store.

Anyway, he said, "I wanted to thank you." He said, "You told me I should give some classes." And he said, "Do you remember the brandy snaps that we used to make?" And I said, "You know, I'd forgotten those." Totally. And so this morning he called me, and he said, "I'm mailing the recipes to you." And he said, "You can try them again, and I can make them in a minute if you get stuck." Wasn't that nice?

Riess: Yes. So you were saying that the way you got connected with people was teaching art in the school.

Cunningham: That's right. And at that time we met a group of friends, the Scotts, the Shurtleffs, and a couple of other couples, who ultimately moved away. But we've remained friends--I talk to both the Scotts and the Shurtleffs, and we still get together after all these years. So it was a wonderful way to meet other people. It worked out right.

Riess: For you was one of the attractions of the Bay Area all the theater and art and so on?

Cunningham: Well, in those days we used to go to the theater a lot. We went to a lot of the ballets that they had. They had wonderful people: Margot Fonteyn and just on and on. And we did go to the theater a lot. They did a lot of old classics, which were really wonderful.

Riess: Did you eat out much, now that you were coming up in the world?

Cunningham: No, not really. We weren't used to eating out. I never--I may have eaten in a restaurant once all through school. I had no clue what it was like to go to a restaurant.

Riess: You mean all your growing-up years.

Cunningham: Well, you see, my father was crippled, my mother wasn't strong. We couldn't go places. He couldn't drive. And we did have a Ford that the government gave us. She learned to drive, but she was high-strung, and she felt unsure of herself, so we didn't go anywhere. I mean, that wasn't a bad thing. I don't think we ever went to a restaurant.

Riess: When you were living in Glendale was there food to be had from farmers' fields or anything like that?

Cunningham: No, not really. It was more civilized than that. Most of the land--there were tracts of homes. La Crescenta, where we ultimately moved, was more rural, but people weren't producing food.

Riess: And there weren't produce stands?

Cunningham: Not really. I know in San Bernardino Valley they used to have--you could buy fruits and berries that were in season. But it wasn't anything that was all that available. And La Crescenta was very small. You knew it all very quickly.

Riess: That was still when you were in your high school years?

Cunningham: Yes, it was.

Riess: Did you go shopping with your mother? Was food shopping considered a fun activity?

Cunningham: Well, the stores were very small. I mean, it wasn't as though you went in and browsed around, because you saw everything practically at a glance, so you went in and came out. My grandmother--when we were in Glendale, I remember she loved Kress's, the dime store, and I did too. I remember that.

[End Tape 1B]

[Begin Tape 2A]

Riess: That fine grandmother of yours, did she make her own pasta?

Cunningham: Oh, yes, she made her own pasta. She was a very good cook. She really was a very good cook. She used to make these stuffed artichokes which were quite wonderful. I loved her food. There wasn't a big, vast difference between everything—it wasn't like we had endless recipes—but everything she cooked tasted good.

Riess: Did you incorporate some of that Italian cooking into your cooking?

Cunningham: Well, some, but Robert never liked food. His family didn't like food. Isn't that an irony? Never did. He used to say to me, "The only thing really I want on my plate is money." He didn't like salads, he didn't like--but I had known him from kindergarten. I just took it for granted. I didn't care that he didn't want to eat. I mean, it was up to him.

When the children came I did try to make very well-rounded meals, and I liked doing it. So it really gave me more of an opportunity to cook. And then

when I had company, I could cook. He didn't care what I cooked, he just wouldn't eat anything.

Riess: And you've said that everyone smoke and drank?

Cunningham: Yes.

Riess: Was it wine?

Cunningham: It was wine because we didn't in the beginning have very much money.

Riess: Wine was cheap.

Cunningham: Wine was cheap. People used to say to me, "What kind of wine do you like?" My answer was, "The one that has the highest alcohol content. I don't care about the taste of wine." See, I was an alcoholic. And I knew it. I knew I was. There's a vast difference between drinking to be sociable or just because you enjoy it, the way the bulk of the population drink. That wasn't why I drank. I drank because it made me feel better, and I did have a lot of agoraphobia and things like that, demons chasing me.

Riess: When was this?

Cunningham: The agoraphobia?

Riess: Yes.

Cunningham: When I was about eight years old, seven years old--I still have the diary--my grandmother was living with us. I couldn't go to sleep until sometimes two o'clock in the morning, and really couldn't--these anxieties, these terrible anxieties. I was probably eight or nine. The phobias developed more and more over the years. Fear of--I hated to drive over the bridge. Just a terrible agoraphobia. If you've never had it, it's very hard to describe it, but it was really wretched, and it limited a lot of things for me for a long time.

Riess: Did your parents know you had this problem?

Cunningham: They did. They did. Oh, yeah. They knew that I couldn't go to sleep, that I was fearful. I went to the library, and I looked for books on insomnia. There wasn't much, but I found one, and this was amazing. I found one, and I read it, and I realized when I read it that nobody ever died of it. People didn't die from a lack of sleep. And after that, I was over the insomnia. I still had phobias and fears, but the sleep problem was gone.

What really helped me to make the best progress on this agoraphobia was when *Life* magazine was large, way back, there was a story--it was a cover story--about a man who lived in Sausalito. I've got this story somewhere. He

lived in Sausalito, and he wrote of his fears, this agoraphobia, where he couldn't drive over the bridge. The feeling is that against your desire, you will park the car on the side and get out and jump over the bridge. It doesn't make any sense. It sounds crazy. But that is the way you feel. You feel out of control, that you have no control of yourself, and you'll do things that are crazy, things that are going to be embarrassing. You never do, but you feel you will.

This man wrote a story that was a cover story, and he said in the story that he finally had become so stricken with these demons that he said he made up his mind he was going to kill himself, and he thought, "Well, I know if I drive my car over the Richmond Bridge, I'll park it on the side, jump out, and go over the edge." So one night he got in the car and he started over the bridge, and he said he started to throw up. He said, "I threw up and threw up all the way over, but I didn't do that." He said, "I got over there. So then I drove back." He said, "I drove back and forth, back and forth," and he said, "until the gasoline was so low." And he said, "Finally I was just wiped out, and there wasn't a service station. I couldn't keep it up, so--I'd done it many times, and I went to bed." He said, "It was the beginning of my recovery. I can drive anywhere." And he met up with a psychiatrist down at Stanford, and the psychiatrist had been treating people with all kinds of personal problems that had nothing to do with agoraphobia, and he got tired of it because he didn't see much progress. This is the psychiatrist. So he read that story, and the two of them joined up together, and they started an organization called TERAD, Territorial--I have to remember what that is. I still have some of that material. Territorial Apprehension Center, something like that. And I had a friend--that was Bobbie Shurtleff--and we drove down, and I had an opportunity to talk to them. I began to see that the problem was you can't think your way out of it, you have to act your way out of it. The very things that you think you can't do, you must do, and you must do what he had done, this man in Sausalito, repetitively until all of these demons have disappeared.

When I met James Beard, I had never flown. I mean, we didn't have the money anyway, we didn't talk about flying and going places, we went to the beaches. And so that [having to fly to do my work with James Beard] was really when I started to recover. What I ultimately learned—which was really fascinating—after I had my daughter, my second child, I began to lose weight rapidly and my hands shook. It was finally discovered that I was hyperthyroid, and I had a goiter. I went to see a man at Alta Bates Hospital, who was doing a thesis on this subject of thyroid goiter, and he had really made an in-depth study of a lot of people. And so he asked me all these questions, and he said, "As well as I can track this, you started having the thyroid trouble when you were nine years old." And he said, "Because of the basal cell test," which isn't accurate--my test had always come back high, but it wasn't quite high enough to treat me. He said, "They weren't able to discover that this is your problem and probably has been. It's been a contributing factor to this agoraphobia."

And I will say he treated me with—what is it—Isotope, and I took this dose of Isotope, and then I would say maybe within six weeks, two months, I felt normal. I used to think to myself, "Why would I know what normal was? Why do I think I'm normal?" I don't remember feeling normal.

Riess: So it just neutralized all the phobias?

Cunningham: Yes, it did. It really, really did.

Riess: Well, that's all so interesting. Did your friends know about this?

Cunningham: Well, they knew I had these fears because I wouldn't go some places, you know? Yes, they did. They knew that. But they didn't know what it was.

Riess: But your description of yourself as content with the library, and content with being at home and content with the small community--now when you look back at that, do you think of it as contentment or just that that was the only place that was tolerable?

Cunningham: It was the only place, really, that was tolerable. But after I got the thyroid treated, then I began to do more. I was very interested in the Great Books series--it came out of Chicago. I don't know if you ever heard of it. But Acalanes High School advertised it, and I was interested in that, and so for five years I went to that. The man who was our leader became a close friend. He died very recently. Anyway, I see a lot of his wife. But *that* I really loved--I really loved that Great Books thing. The discussions engaged everyone. I mean, you don't have to talk, but they encouraged it. I thought it was well worth the investment of time.

Riess: So this was a major change, getting past the phobias.

Cunningham: Yes, it was. It was. Absolutely.

Riess: And say again when?

Cunningham: I think after this thing really flared up, my metabolism, after I had Catherine. And let's see, she's forty-five now. So, in '56. It was after that that this whole thing went haywire, really. I was losing weight very fast, and my hands shook. It was terrible. So that was when the symptoms became so evident I could be treated.

Riess: For thirty-plus years you had been trying to figure out what the phobias were about.

Cunningham: That's true. That's really true. I had read a lot of material about it.

Riess: Have you ever been in therapy?

- Cunningham: No. The only time I've seen a therapist has been in the last year. I guess it's about the last year. Only because my son had suffered from a lot of, again, addictions: drug addiction. And it's been very helpful because I don't think that my instincts--I mean, I needed some guidance from somebody you could respect on how to act with him. And so that's the only time I've seen a therapist, and she's very down to earth, very level-headed.
- Riess: I'm really feeling very intrusive, but you've brought up some things, like you said, "That's how I knew I was an alcoholic."
- Cunningham: Yes, right.
- Riess: Is that something that you then dealt with?
- Cunningham: Oh, yes, happily. I was blessed. I decided--you know, people didn't think I was an alcoholic, all these friends I'm telling you about that we got together with all the time. I never felt down. I didn't pass out. I didn't do any of that. But I knew I was dependent. I was drinking from a totally different point of view, a desire other than any of the rest of them. They just liked it because it made sociability easier, more fun or something. That wasn't why I drank. I drank because it made me feel better, in a very unhealthy kind of way.
- Luckily--I mean, it was just really fortunate, I knew I'd end up just like my father. I feel so sorry about him, what a disappointed life he had. That was really terrible. So I was lucky. And really, in a perverse way, it's because I could see when he had DTs [delirium tremors], that it was a nightmare. I knew I had to quit, I just knew I had to quit. And I knew a lot about AA [Alcoholics Anonymous], so I just followed their [guidelines]--I didn't go to AA meetings because the children were young and they needed me at home. But that did it, that worked. It's a great concept.
- Riess: Well, that's a great achievement.
- Cunningham: Well, it just came from somewhere. It did, you know? I don't know. Anyway, thank goodness, yes.
- Riess: But that part of the whole food scene--you've not been drinking since then?
- Cunningham: No, I haven't.
- Riess: The pressure that you must be under sometimes. I guess your friends must know.
- Cunningham: About my drinking thing?
- Riess: Yes.

Cunningham: Well, I just come out and say it. I don't care. I don't care. I don't like to have my father thought of as an alcoholic. I don't feel good about that. I don't. I don't like that. Because it became so clumsy. You're in a restaurant, they're saying, "What kind of wine do you want?" "No, thank you." "Well, maybe you'd like to try a Chardonnay?" "I'm an alcoholic, so I can't drink." And it's so much better. It's more fair to them. They're not trying to please you, and on and on. And I don't care, you know? It's a big help for everybody.

[tape interruption]

Riess: You said when you were working with James Beard you had to fly places. How did you meet him? But I don't want to leap into that if there's a whole decade before that.

Cunningham: Well, the only thing regarding food during that time, the 1960s, was that there were classes, cooking classes, that were being given all over the place, and I did take a lot of those classes. Actually, I think I took them all. I tried all these different classes that they had.

Riess: Who taught the classes?

Cunningham: Well, Lonnie Kuhn. Everybody went to Lonnie Kuhn's class.

Riess: And these were classes for housewives?

Cunningham: Again, there was a lot of the entertaining emphasis. It wasn't just down-home cooking per se, it was really about how to fix a nice dinner for company.

Riess: Why did *you* go?

Cunningham: I went because cooking is cooking. You always learn something. And because I was curious, that's really why. You know, you learn a lot. Joyce Goldstein was giving cooking classes, Lonnie Kuhn, Josephine Araldo, Jack Lirio. There were just a rash of classes, all over the place. The first one was--what was her name--Mary [Risley]--she was out in the Presidio, and she was a very good cook. I've got some of the materials.

Riess: Were some of the teachers connected with restaurants?

Cunningham: No, they weren't.

Riess: Well, Joyce Goldstein?

Cunningham: Well, Joyce ultimately, but she wasn't in a restaurant until well after her classes. She gave the cooking classes prior to opening the restaurant.

Riess: What about Lonnie Kuhn?

- Cunningham: Lonnie was never affiliated with a restaurant. She just loved giving classes in cooking. And Jack Lirio. He had a cooking school in the south part of San Francisco.
- Riess: And Josephine Araldo?
- Cunningham: She was from France. She was really quite wonderful. She had terrific classes. We all loved the classes. She was very endearing. She had a very kind of generous--most people in food are generous, and she was not an exception. She had worked with some fine chefs in France, so she knew a lot of complicated dishes, but she also stuck to French home cooking, and she was very thrifty, as the French are given to being. Unfortunately--what is that woman's name? Judy?
- Riess: Ets-Hokin?
- Cunningham: Yes. She did the meanest thing when she started her first place on--wait a minute, what is the name of that street where they have all the shops? Union Street. She had a shop out there, and what she did was she turned in all the people that were cooking at home and having classes, and they all lost their opportunity to do it. And I'll tell you, there was an up-in-arms that you could not believe about this.
- Riess: Oh, what sort of health inspector issues were involved in these home classes?
- Cunningham: People didn't look in on them.
- Riess: Did you start seeing some of the same people at these classes?
- Cunningham: Oh, yes. There was a whole cluster of us, yes. And then those newsletters started. You know, Jack Shelton. He started the first restaurant letter. And Bob [Robert] Finnegan, who is still here in the city. He bought that letter from Jack Shelton.
- Riess: When you think of the people who were in those classes, did they go into the business?
- Cunningham: Oh, yes. I think Mary Risley was taking classes, and look at Tante Marie. And Pam Wischamper--she's made a career of working with food people. She's down in San Diego now.
- Riess: Did you feel like this was a movement and a thing?
- Cunningham: No, I never thought in those terms particularly. I didn't know where it was going to go. But all across the country I began--when was that--I remember taking classes in Chicago. I took tons of classes. They all helped, you see. A variety of techniques, a whole lot of them. And then the cooking school on

Fremont Street, [which] is the CIA now. Remember? That was really for chefs. In a way, the classes brought people together who came to know each other because we all did the same thing, moved around.

Riess: Were the classes creating an educated palate so that the restaurants gained?

Cunningham: I don't think so. I think the only thing--no, I wasn't aware of that. But I'm so convinced that having a critical palate is everything, and most people don't have one. That's really the problem. And they learn by rote, they don't learn by critically tasting. Again, we're on a subject that is so--is the word "ephemeral"--I mean, there's no defense for taste. There's no defense for taste. Somebody can be as right as I'm right, or you're right, or anybody. They might love the worst combination of something that I would avoid, and I'm not right. You follow me. There's no defense. The only thing that you can learn is numbers.

The restaurants that pack people in--Craig Stoll over at Delfina--the numbers tell you that somehow he has a common appeal. But as far as taste goes, you either have to have that gift of knowing when it's good and what it needs when it isn't. And it's just not common. It's like anything, it's a talent. Very few--you know, that's the way it is.

Riess: I thought you were saying that's it's not absolute anyway.

Cunningham: Well, no, I just say that there are variables. But you know, when you're standing next to somebody and they put a spoon into a pot and taste it and can say, "This is lacking salt," "This needs more tarragon"--if they can do that kind of analysis, and then when you taste it, it appeals to more people in the room, it's a gift. Everybody can get into this whole thing of cooking. But a lot of it is what I consider to be really very inferior food--I would say 65 percent of all the restaurants produce very questionable food. But, you know, I don't know that people are going to agree, except that we do know by numbers, like Zuni Cafe. We know by the numbers of people that are packed in there. Whatever she's doing, she's appealing to more people than most.

Hi, there. This is Low Life.

Riess: A beautiful cat.

Cunningham: He's the most perfect cat. I've always had a lot of cats, but this one is the best ever. He's very easy going, only this dog has nearly driven him crazy.

Riess: I remember tasting a really green and peppery olive oil--I didn't know it was good until I was told it was good, and then as soon as I was told it was good, that became the standard for me. A lot of eating experiences must go like that.

Cunningham: I don't know when you kind of develop--"confidence" isn't exactly the word, but you rely totally on your own taste to make something good. All I'm saying is, it doesn't really matter because people--it doesn't matter, there's something for everyone. Although I think when you begin to analyze these restaurateurs, almost everyone will agree, that in spite of the fanciness, that Thomas Keller is a wonderful cook. Chef. "Chef" is the proper word.

Interview 2: June 21, 2001

[Begin Tape 3A]

Riess: It seems to me that you've set your life up so it's already nearly impossible. [Referring to Cunningham's new and undisciplined dog, and the phone calls that have already begun to come since Riess walked in the door].

Cunningham: That's right. That's exactly what it is, running and gasping.

[Shows Riess the April 2001 issue of *Saveur* magazine] Here is this article about Judith Jones [cookbook editor]. I have known her for thirty years, and really she is absolutely the best. [Talks about recent dealings with publishing houses getting out editions of her cookbooks.] I was talking with her. She's heard it before, it wasn't the first time.

I said, "I have no respect for these publishing houses. They could care less about the author." Over the years--there have been thirty of them that I've worked steadily with her, and by chance, sometime, a year back maybe, I got a fax sheet that was never intended to be sent to me from Random House. (And it is primarily due to these revisions of the *Fannie Farmer Cookbook* that over the years, up to 1998, I sold two and a half million books for these people.) I said to Judith, "What is it, that an author who has been devoted to sticking with this whole thing--?" "And, you know, it's because of you." (She makes me look a lot better than I am.) "And they don't tell me when they've stopped printing a book?" And, you know, the rights return to me. But they don't notify me. And unless I hear enough people say, "I can't find that book," I would never track it. I don't think about it.

Riess: What about the role of the agent?

Cunningham: I've had two different agents--literary agents can be just as bad as anything. There are very, very few that are on top of things and really follow through and on and on. So I said to Judith--I said, "Honestly, I would find another—or self-publish or something. I am so angry at all of this stuff they put out." This [looking at Bantam edition of the *Fannie Farmer Cookbook* that Riess has brought] is like a value book. It's absolutely the worst. A woman came here yesterday, Gay Golden, with twenty of them that I autographed for her. I said, "How do you hold it open to read a recipe?" It's horrible. And they also redid the *Breakfast Book* and the *Supper Book* in one issue and left out the entire index from the *Supper Book*! So nobody can find a recipe. There's no index. I could go on for hours telling you the outrage, and the cheap paper they use, the whole thing. It's embarrassing. I think this is where a good literary agent can act. They might not be able to stop this in the beginning, but they can do something. I have a friend who has Jane Dystel, and that woman can control a lot. But I don't. So—

- Riess: I suppose all of that has to be in the contract up front. But still somebody has to be reading the contract each time.
- Cunningham: They're not. Trust me. The stories--the authors, some of the best--Debbie [Deborah] Madison. We've been friends for years. You've no idea. We're not living in an era where courtesy and consideration seem to be very abundant. Or thoughtfulness, or whatever. It seems to me the ethical thing is to notify the author when they don't print any more, and all of those accompanying things. When they change it to bring down the prices, one should be allowed to look at it and okay it. But that's the way that is.
- Riess: I hope we will talk more about the book business. Now I'd like to start on my little chronology, which goes back over some of what we talked about last time.
- Cunningham: Tell me, before we begin, what in the world it is that I can possibly give you, doing this. What are you after by way of this interview?
- Riess: [Explains the purpose of the oral history to be Cunningham's life, formative years, observations of changes over those years, cooking school classes and later work with James Beard, writing, contacts with and observations of the restaurant and food writing business, people she knows, food gossip.]
- Cunningham: How long do you think this is going to take? Because, you know, I've got a book waiting, I've got a lot of things. So my feeling is to see what the basic tenets are that you're after. That's the thing. Time is a consideration, from my point of view. You know what I'm saying.
- Riess: I do.
- Cunningham: I realized I hadn't given you a chance, even, to talk about what specifically you really wanted.
- Riess: Well, let's say you wanted to write an autobiography.
- Cunningham: Chuck has done this. I have his book [oral history with Chuck Williams], but I have not read it because I have not been here enough to read it. I want to give it back to you pronto, and I will try--so at least I'll scan it and get the picture of what Chuck did.
- Riess: Well, Chuck Williams had the whole store and catalog business to talk about, and he talked at great length, for instance, about something like the Cuisinart, or butcher block tables.

[tape interruption, immediately followed by phone interruption]

- Cunningham: It is terrible, but if I don't answer these calls I'm going to get them all again and again.
- Riess: That call was a perfect example. You get a call from someone who's calling you because you know everybody.
- Cunningham: You have no idea. You really do not have any idea. I'll tell you the way I feel about it. I hate sounding sort of saccharine and stupid, but--NO! That's a bad dog--[Time out to chastise the dog, Calvin, who is rooting in a flower bed visible from the kitchen table. The phone rings again, and Riess fields the call.]
- These young people that want to get into the business of food--I have one young woman right now. She has some ideas. I no longer--they want to come and visit. They want to sit down and talk. I don't do that anymore. I talk to them on the phone. I've explained that it's a full-time job if I do that.
- Riess: They come to you for advice?
- Cunningham: Yes, for advice about some idea they have, what do I think about it. The Bakers Dozen that I told you about that I started--it's just a wonderful bunch, with 424 people, and that is--I get lots of--I just received some chocolate from [one of them], saying, "Do you think this will sell to the market that's out there?"
- It isn't out of being nice. Number one, all my life I have always loved to visit with people. That's the way I am. Love it. Always loved to visit people. Always. It makes me forget myself, and that's a very healthy thing, a very healthy thing. I've never found a great cure for anxiety and fears except distraction, and it's very distracting.
- Riess: As well as that, you're called the Mother Confessor to Alice Waters and others.
- Cunningham: Really, the truth is I'm in the wrong category. [To Calvin] Here. I want you to stop it! I should have just had a little office where people could give me five dollars and come and talk for fifteen minutes, a half hour. [Laughs] That's what I should have done. I've always thought that.
- Riess: Now, do you give them advice, or do you just listen?
- Cunningham: Well, I don't feel that I have an enormous amount of wisdom. It's easier for me to think of the right path for somebody else. In fact--[starts to tell a story and then decides she doesn't want it taped]. Anyhow, that's the truth of it. So you're stuck with somebody that's in the wrong business for what they do. But I do love cooking.

- Riess: Okay, I am warned. My program today is that I want you to describe the kitchen you grew up with, with your grandmother and your mother. Appliances, that sort of thing. The table. What was it like?
- Cunningham: The house I lived in, that I can remember, when I was probably two years, three years old--the kitchen in my memory looked large. We had inexpensive pots and pans and very few things. My grandmother was the one who cooked. The one thing that we had was a big boiling pot. And I remember we had a double boiler. You saw double boilers everywhere in that era, and it's a shame we don't see them now because they really do serve a very good purpose. It's not always easy to get something else to work as a double boiler, steaming.
- Anyhow, we had a double boiler. I remember that. We had two frying pans, and that's what we called them, not skillets. And we had a little saucepan. We don't need everything that we've got now. It was an era that, due to the crash of '29 and all of those kinds of things, people, certainly in our area, just had a very minimally stocked kitchen. And we did put up tomato sauces and things like that.
- Riess: And jams.
- Cunningham: We didn't do a lot of jam. You see, Italians aren't eating a lot of sweet things. They don't. Sweet things come for special days. No, actually, it's very simple fare, the truth is.
- Riess: There was no baking equipment, cake pans, muffins, cookies.
- Cunningham: I think my mother--I do have her cookbook. It's a baking book. As I told you, my grandmother largely did everything in the kitchen, but that baking book--yes, she would make sometimes the desserts, cakes and cupcakes and things like that. But the kitchen to me--the lifestyle, if you want to call it that, that we lived, was one of very minimal money. And everybody cooked. The difference today is kitchens are silent, largely, and unoccupied. In my era, they were bustling. And relatives lived with people. It had a far greater communal feeling.
- Riess: Did you eat in your kitchen?
- Cunningham: We had a little alcove that we called a dining room, but we ate in the kitchen.
- Riess: Did you say grace?
- Cunningham: No, because my father was agnostic. There was difficulty about it. I think I told you my grandmother went to Mass every morning, and I was raised a Catholic.
- Riess: Okay. Did your mother pack your lunch for school?

- Cunningham: No. In the house I'm describing, which is the one that I remember in my earliest years--they deliberately chose a house across the street from an elementary school because my mother was very fearful about my safety, and I came home for lunch every day, so I didn't eat at school. Here again, money was scarce. Pennies meant something.
- Riess: Given what you said about some of the phobias last week, was school difficult for you? Were you eager to get home at lunchtime?
- Cunningham: I always liked to be around people. I liked it. No, I liked school. I just didn't like to pay attention to people, or I didn't pay good attention. It wasn't that I didn't like to. No, I liked intermingling with others.
- Riess: Why was your mother fearful?
- Cunningham: I don't really know why. I couldn't tell you why, except she was fearful when—oh, there was the Hauptman case, the Lindbergh case [Lindbergh baby kidnapped in 1932, and in 1936 Hauptman was convicted of the kidnapping and killing], where the child was kidnapped. And my mother--I stayed home from school until they captured the culprit. I was very fearful.
- Riess: I would think so. I've read about Jurgenson's grocery in Los Angeles. Would you have shopped at Jurgenson's?
- Cunningham: No, not ever, no. No, there was a Ralph's in Glendale, where we lived, and I think I told you we had an old Essex, and my mother was not a very good driver, but we drove to Ralph's and bought our food there. That's my recollection as to where we shopped.
- Riess: Did you live at home until you got married?
- Cunningham: Yes. But, we moved from that house on Acacia Street in Glendale--I remember it was 1206 Acacia--we moved from that house to an apartment. I can't really remember why we moved, but as I told you, my mother's health was very frail, and we moved to the apartment. And then from there--because my mother's health was so shaky, all these lung problems, we took the money from the house, I guess, that we had on Acacia and bought a lot in La Crescenta, which would be along those foothills. And then we had a very small house built. My father, for someone--it was amazing. He did the whole design of the house. It was very small, but it was rather charming. We moved there when I was about ten or eleven, and that's where I lived until I married and left home.
- Riess: People lived in that part of Los Angeles because of the health benefits, didn't they? Because it was somewhat elevated.

- Cunningham: Yes, it was. It was at the foot of this range of mountains. In fact, in Tujunga, which was adjacent to La Crescenta, that's where they had one of the largest tuberculosis sanitariums. She ultimately had tuberculosis again, so she went there. And oh, I didn't remember this. We were in Runnymede, which, again, is near Tujunga, all of that. They rented a little house, and we had some chickens, I think, then. That was before this final, La Crescenta house.
- Riess: Did that house have some of the country feeling of this house you are in now?
- Cunningham: Yes, it did, because there were chickens. You heard them crow in the morning, at dawn, and I hear that every morning here. Yes. And La Crescenta had a lot of that. We had rabbits and chickens. So it is very familiar.
- Riess: When you married, then, what did you think was essential to have in *your* kitchen?
- Cunningham: I never thought like that. I don't think like that. I'm impatient with this thing about all of this stuff that supposedly you need. I really am. It wasn't part of my time. I mean, I think you can cook a very good meal with very simple pieces of equipment. To me, the irony of it all is that so many people don't know how to cook, and so many people are not cooking at home. This is the big mission I'm on, the loss of the communal table. That is what I care about. That's what I'm really working on.
- Riess: So all the young couples who buy a complete set of All-Clad, it's more decorating their kitchen.
- Cunningham: Yes. I think it is. I think right now I could give away half of what I've got in this little tiny kitchen, and it wouldn't change very much. Most of the things you can make--I will say that a mixer is a help, or even just one of those electric beaters would help, because sometimes mixing does get to be hard for some of us.
- Riess: The Cuisinart didn't change your life?
- Cunningham: Not at all, not at all. It enabled me to do--well, there's a very good recipe called Strawberry Blizzard, where you take strawberries and you run them through the Cuisinart. You first freeze them, and then you run them through the Cuisinart. It really is a wonderful dessert, and it's great because a lot of people don't want any fat in their food. But I can live without that recipe. I couldn't do it with what I've got, but there's so little of that. You can really make almost everything that you need, with very little.
- Riess: So what *did* you have in your kitchen? When you got married, did you have a list of things that you wanted?

Cunningham: No, I didn't want a wedding. I wasn't interested in that. We were married--my mother and my husband's mother, Cecilia, and my best friend, Loraine {?} Crawford came to this little--we stood up in a Baptist thing {?}. It was just absolutely simple. It was nothing. I look at today--I mean, everyone has a right to take the path they want. This woman that works for me, has been coming ten years now, every Tuesday, and she's wonderful, but her daughter was just married, she's struggling with a husband who's an invalid, and that wedding cost \$20,000. And that was the low end of things. A wedding at twenty thousand. It was so hard. Watching her, I felt sorry for her.

And then the irony of all of this is, if you read the numbers, the marriages don't last that long, a great number of them. It just seems like a colossal thing that--. But, on the other hand, if that has value to them, who's to say?

Riess: When you got married, what did you do for pots and pans?

Cunningham: I think we just bought them. At that time--we're talking back to 1942--you could go to Kress's and buy what you needed. That is such a whole misconception, it really is, to me, that there's anything called necessity about so much of what people buy. I don't begrudge them anything if, you know, if it gives them pleasure, I'm not censuring what they may get out of it. I'm just saying it's totally unnecessary. If you really intend to cook, you can get by with a very few things.

Riess: Is this an attitude that you've come to lately?

Cunningham: No.

Riess: Or do you think that was always where you stood on all this?

Cunningham: I remember people would say, "I don't have a good cutting board" or, "I don't have this or that." And I remember saying, "Have you ever thought about the pioneers?" I think I mentioned that before. It's so classic. They were feeding tons of people.

You know, I'm going to get that stick away from him [Calvin]. He threw up part of a stick last night. He swallowed a piece of it. It was a branch. It obviously got stuck. I'm not going to let him do that.

[tape interruption]

Cunningham: Think of the covered wagons. They were feeding fifty people with one pot! We've gotten carried away with--we're confused about what the necessities are. The irony is most of those things aren't used, because fewer and fewer people are cooking.

- Riess: Well, something like the madeleine pans. That was certainly a big thing to have. And if you have madeleines in a cookbook, then you're part of the system, for sure.
- Cunningham: Yes. You can't devise a little madeleine pan yourself. But the kind of food that I write about, I don't really need anything very fancy. And now that Flo Braker, bless her heart, is writing for the *Chronicle* about baking, she can do the madeleines.
- Riess: So you cooked simply when you were first married, and you remember that very fondly as a great time.
- Cunningham: Oh, I thought it was wonderful. I thought it was a wonderful time. It was wonderful having a whole bunch of people to cook for.
- Riess: Were you dealing with rationing? Do you remember?
- Cunningham: For a time there was rationing.
- Riess: Did you do any kind of a victory garden?
- Cunningham: No, I didn't do that. But I knew people that did. Often they would give me a few tomatoes or some corn, things like that.
- Riess: In Chuck's book he talks about food nostalgia. He definitely has a place in his fond memory for Franco-American spaghetti. I wondered if you have a bunch of things like that you think could never be bettered.
- Cunningham: I remember liking Campbell's tomato soup, and I remember thinking, "If I had to, this would make a good sauce, if I used it like that." I can remember that. Actually, making fresh food was very much cheaper than buying canned food. My grandmother made noodles all the time. That was cheaper than buying it ready-made. Anything you could make was usually cheaper than what you could buy.
- Riess: She rolled out noodles on a big table?
- Cunningham: Yes, she would do noodles. And she had a couple of holiday--there was a kind of deep-fried cookie, I can't remember the name of it, that she made at Christmas time. It was very good.
- Riess: Did you carry on making the Italian tomato sauces and putting them up when you were married?
- Cunningham: I didn't do a lot of that.

[End Tape 3A]

[Begin Tape 3B]

Cunningham: Last year my daughter and I put up some, and we need to do it again.

Riess: The idea is pervasive, in the history of cooking over the decades, that a woman's life was pure drudgery in the forties.

Cunningham: That's the pity of it. That's the tragedy of society. The fact is, to my mind, that today is a total nightmare for many women, trying to keep a family together, trying to manage, go to work, be all things to all people in this kind of way. I think it's quite untrue--I think it's absolutely untrue. With the best of intentions, these women's lib groups--they believe it. I have my beliefs. They are very opposed to that kind of an attitude.

This is the irony, believing that if women could take an equal place in the work world outside of home, they would begin to glean the equality they never had with men. It hasn't worked that way at all. Hasn't worked that way at all. A few exceptions, where totally brilliant women can get somewhere. To my knowledge, it wasn't the way it was. I think a man with some sensitivity and conscience would not make that line of division between his being superior to a woman that was doing housework. This all happened normally. There were no villains. It was because the immigrants that came, such as my grandmother, thought the streets were paved with gold, thought opportunities were going to be plentiful for everyone, daughters and sons, and they felt that housework and staying behind doors and working for other people as housework people was holding them back. It's a very reasonable concept. I mean, I can see why it would appear that way. When it's put to the test, look at what we've got. It hasn't worked right.

Riess: Yes, we have a bunch of frazzled women.

Cunningham: They feel guilty because they can't do all the necessary things. It's terrible. It's terrible.

Riess: What about education?

Cunningham: I'll tell you, education and wisdom are different things. Education is being packed with facts and tools that can serve you for earning money. But nobody teaches anybody wisdom. Wisdom is something else that probably has greater worth than anything else we could have.

Riess: Chuck Williams says, "It was a very restricted life. Some of them managed it very well and made a good life out of it, if they had sufficient interest in other things connected with it and found themselves with enough friends who were in the same category of interest in cooking and taking care of the house."

Cunningham: You know, he comes from a different point of view. I respect him greatly because--you know, it's what we're all entitled to. We all have how we see it. Chuck has always felt more comfortable. Number one, he has a very artistic eye, a very good eye. Things that are beautiful appeal to him. He has a great sensibility about it. We have different values. I have a different value system than he does. When I go down to Ensenada and Tijuana and see the Mexicans sitting at the table together and everything, I envy them. I think "Why can't *we* be like that? Why can't *we* be together?" I mean, Williams-Sonoma is really designed for the upper-middle class. Always has been, always will be. There's nothing wrong with that, except it isn't my standard. We wouldn't be friends if we didn't share some things the same. It's a different lifestyle. That's what it is. Like all the cooking classes--I'm probably repeating from last time--but all the cooking classes are not teaching how to cook in an ABC way, it's about entertaining, it's about doing fancy foods, food that'll look spiffy, that make people think that you're something. That's what it's about.

Riess: Okay, back to the chronology. *Gourmet* magazine, I was surprised to read, was started in January 1941.

Cunningham: Yes. The woman--I know her, I'm trying to think what her name is. She's very smart. As a matter of fact, she's still alive. She's in New York, living there. Her niece lived out here. She knew exactly who her audience was, exactly. What is her name? [Pearl Metzeltin, according to September 2001 issue of *Gourmet*.] Anyhow, the people who lived comfortably, meaning upper-middle-class people--that's who the magazine was designed to sell to. For instance, Caroline Bates, who did the reviews--I remember, because I used to have lunch with her when I went to New York--she would say, "I don't want anything negative about food in the reviews of the restaurants that Caroline Bates writes about. I don't want these people in the Midwest sitting there, reading about bad food. I want them to sit there wishing they had that plate in front of them." She thought about everything. But that magazine is a Williams-Sonoma magazine. It's up there. And *Taste*--I told you they have been calling me. They're going to do a Thanksgiving dinner here. I told them that I had a kitchen that is seven feet wide and eleven feet long. And they want to come with these photographers! I've done this before, so I know. They want the whole picture. And it kind of makes me laugh because in a way I'm sort of untrue to myself. The first thing I said to them was, "What are you going to pay me to do it?" They're probably going to give me--I'm going to push them as best I can, although I'm not too good at this--they're going to give me probably about \$1,800 for the recipes I'm providing, and there are a lot of them. I mean, I'm doing exactly what I do at Thanksgiving--and Chuck Williams comes here for Thanksgiving, we've done that for a time. And then they probably will pay me maybe \$1,000 to use the house. Now, it doesn't sound like a lot, but I think I better do it. I could use the money.

Riess: You could ask for more, because it's a *tremendous* disruption.

- Cunningham: I told her that. I said, "Why don't you have the food prepared? You've got the recipes. Have it made. Let's have the table set and have the people--the food can all be shown." Anyway, they're coming tomorrow to take photographs. I think they don't think it's true. I think they think, "How can she have a little tiny kitchen and do cookbooks?"
- Riess: And to photograph it for their fall issue, I suppose.
- Cunningham: That's right. We have to do it in the next month.
- Riess: So you have to do a turkey in July.
- Cunningham: I said, "You're going to have to have somebody come and do it. I am not going to prepare all this food. I won't." I have all I can do with that dog! Life is funny, isn't it?
- Riess: You mentioned that because you were thinking about the audience for *Taste and Gourmet*.
- Cunningham: She's one of my best friends, Ruth Reichl, who is the editor-in-chief. When she was restaurant critic of the *L.A. Times*, we went to Paris for three years running, right after Christmas, to see what all the starred restaurants were doing. I traveled with her a lot. I talk to her. I talked to her husband yesterday. We've been very great friends for a lot of years. She's terrific.
- Riess: Were you, after the war, becoming aware of French cooking?
- Cunningham: Not really. When I became aware of it was when we were married, and we made this move up here. We didn't know anyone, and there were cooking classes being given in the city, and I did have this agoraphobia, but I managed to get kind of beyond it, and I did attend--most of the cooking classes that were held in San Francisco, I went to for a time. But, as I say, the classes, with the exception of one or two, were pretty much designed for entertaining.
- Riess: You listed those classes last time, and we didn't go into anything, really, about them. I guess the first one you mentioned was--
- Cunningham: Was Mary [Risley]. She was the first person that was teaching classes that I knew of, and I think many people first knew of. I've got the recipes, and I've got the binder that we had, so I can give you that. And that was about fancy food.
- Riess: Were those classes what you would call serious, or were they ways for women to get together?

- Cunningham: Well, they were serious in the sense that we saw the food carefully demonstrated, and then we had the opportunity to taste it and see how we felt about it. No, the classes were very legitimate in their ABCs.
- Riess: And then did you take notes or were you just given a handout?
- Cunningham: We were always given recipes, and then you made notes on the recipes, as it went on. I can get her folder out. Do you want it?
- Riess: I would like to see it. Some of the others, you said, were Lonnie Kuhn--did they each have a different cuisine they were working with?
- Cunningham: Well, everybody has their own little kind of what they like. There are certain dishes that everybody is making during a certain period of time. There's a kind of "in" style.
- Riess: Beef Wellington.
- Cunningham: Yes, Beef Wellington was one of them.
- Riess: How about Jack Lirio? Was he different because he was a guy?
- Cunningham: No, I think he did--here again, I've got all his stuff. I admire him. He was in San Diego. He's moved, and somebody just told me where he was--I can't remember. But he tried many different kinds of food. He was adventurous. He was self-taught. He hadn't attended any cooking classes. He had just kind of learned it the hard way, and he loved to do it, and that was the thing. And he needed to earn money. So that's what got him going. People liked going there. It was pleasant, and he was nice.
- Riess: Do you remember how you heard about the classes?
- Cunningham: I'm sure it was reading in the paper who was teaching classes. And then some of the people I knew out here wanted to take classes. They were interested in learning about making new dishes. But it was primarily--we did all learn something, there was no question about that, but it was more recreational.
- Riess: Did it make you yearn to know more things about basic techniques, or did you really have that under your belt already?
- Cunningham: No, I wouldn't say--well, you could find out all of those things by reading. Everything was in a book. They didn't know anything that you couldn't find in a book, so that wasn't the motive at all. Again, it was back to the thing of intermingling with other people. That's primarily what it was.
- Riess: I was amused to run across a reference to the Duncan Hines "Seal of Approval." I remember that. But maybe it had more impact on the East Coast.

- Cunningham: Duncan Hines I'm very familiar with, meaning the cakes and the cake mixes, but that doesn't ring a bell with me.
- Riess: I thought you might have something to say about this notion of the seal of approval.
- Cunningham: Well, it's like a restaurant criticism. We're depending on one palate to tell us that that's the best of all, and there's no defense for taste. If you know that, the best thing to do is try to see what this cake is about and make one and decide whether that really is that good. That's the only way.
- Riess: Other things that happened in the fifties--well, Reynolds Wrap came out in 1947.
- Cunningham: That was a big help.
- Riess: Saran Wrap, 1952.
- Cunningham: They help. They certainly help. Having a refrigerator was a help. That was probably the biggest best thing that happened, was to have a refrigerator.
- Riess: Did you have an icebox or a refrigerator?
- Cunningham: I had an icebox during the Second World War, when I was living in Laguna Beach. Because so many people were coming and eating all the time, and I was doing all this cooking, I ordered a refrigerator, which was unheard of. Nobody in our little area in South Laguna had--they didn't have that at all.
- Riess: You were having ice delivered?
- Cunningham: Ice delivered, yes. It's true. That's what we were doing. And the day that they were to deliver the refrigerator--I will never forget this--all my neighbors came and sat and waited to see the refrigerator. It was really kind of wonderful. Everybody was excited. We went and got some ice cream and put it in there. I remember very well, it was a big moment. Everyone wished they had one. In the little house that we rented, it was so--you have no idea how tiny it was. But where the icebox sat, they had drilled--whoever "they" were--had drilled a hole so all the ice water melted and went out the floor, which always troubled me. I thought all this wetness under this place--that isn't good.
- Riess: So the ice box was moved out, and the refrigerator went into the same spot?
- Cunningham: Yes. It was a small refrigerator. Who cared? And it helped a lot, because I was using seafood. That was cheap. You could buy shrimp for nothing in Laguna Beach then, and it enabled me to keep them fresher. It was a great help. It was exciting.

- Riess: In 1955 James Beard started his cooking school. I don't know where the first one was.
- Cunningham: Fifty-five. Yes, that's probably right.
- Riess: And Chuck Williams went to Paris in 1952 and saw all of this--.
- Cunningham: All the cookware.
- Riess: Yes. And *The West Coast Cookbook*, by Helen Evans Brown, was published.
- Cunningham: I knew her very well.
- Riess: When did you get to know her?
- Cunningham: I knew her because James Beard had known her husband. They were a wonderful couple, really a wonderful couple. James always visited them. I drove him there when he went to Los Angeles and they lived over in Pasadena. I remember being there many, many times. And that book is wonderful, really, that Helen Evans Brown. In fact, she went on a cruise with James, and I remember she was working on that book then. I have it. I turn to it. I think it's a first-rate book.
- Riess: Why do you think it's wonderful?
- Cunningham: Because it's a compilation, unusual compilation. Have you looked at it?
- Riess: I did.
- Cunningham: She has a wonderful, unusual, unique--here's a paper napkin for you.
- Riess: [Samples something] It's sticky. Delicious.
- Cunningham: You can always be sure it's sweet. A lot of the [*West Coast Cookbook*] recipes are unique, and you would have a hard time finding them anywhere. I go to that book--I don't do it often, but I've used it over the years. I think James cooked a lot out of it.
- Riess: How was she different from other cookbook authors?
- Cunningham: She zeroed in exactly in the way Californians, primarily southern Californians, really--it was kind of that broad expanse of all kinds of food, that it was sort of a catch-all. And many of those recipes are very unusual, that you're not going to be apt to find in other places. I'd have to go back and look to use a specific example. She was a food writer, but she was also--she loved to cook. And Phillip [Brown] loved to cook. Phillip used to come--they came to classes James taught up in Oregon.

- Riess: When you say the recipes are unusual, are they the ones that she's collected or ones that she's devised?
- Cunningham: I don't think she devised them. She's collected them from places, yes. Very few of us are inventing foods, dishes. We might tweak something, but that isn't really creating a dish.
- Riess: That makes me want to ask you about the Pillsbury Bake-Offs. That was the idea, that something new could be created.
- Cunningham: It seems to me that I was a judge one year for Pillsbury. I know I've done a lot of this hamburger judging up in--every year they have it up in Napa. I've done it three times. It's a winery that puts this on; Sutter Home Winery puts on this hamburger contest. And from all over the world--and the money--the first prize is huge. I'm trying to think. Is it \$25,000? It's a lot. So they get entries from everywhere. I am telling you, I've been a judge there. It's the worst hamburger stuff you've ever eaten in your whole life.
- Riess: You mean hamburger as an ingredient?
- Cunningham: They call it a hamburger, but some of them do things like put layers of pineapple and layers of--they don't use ground meat. You cannot imagine. This last time I went--what is his name? He's so nice, and he does it every year and chooses who's going to judge. He's written a lot of books, himself. You'd know him, probably, if I could think of his name.
- Riess: Are you well compensated for that?
- Cunningham: I don't know. They give us something, but it's tokenism. I like to go. We stay up there, and I see a lot of people up in that area that I don't usually see. It's a weekend. I go on a Saturday and come home Sunday afternoon. I like to do it.
- Riess: Can you taste without swallowing, in that case?
- Cunningham: You can if you want to.
- Riess: Like the hamburger with the pineapple and everything.
- Cunningham: I just eat it, swallow it. But people try to be bizarre, see, in the hope that--and those people, they're not tasting, they're trying to cook in their head, and that doesn't work, so we get odd things.
- Riess: I think that's an interesting thread, the competitions. Maybe it's very American, do you think?
- Cunningham: I don't really know. I don't really know. I know that it's pretty hard to be original, and it's pretty hard to be successfully original. I mean, you can think

of things like pineapple instead of tomato or something, but it's not good. And for contests, the problem is what you're left with, the finalists--that's what you've got, and often there's nothing that you would buy if you had the opportunity to buy it. They tend to, I think, be rather disappointing.

Riess: When you go out to eat, as you do, five nights a week, are you looking for originality?

Cunningham: No, not particularly. No, the reason I go is not about the food. The thing that is interesting to me is that you're inside of somebody's dream. They thought, "This is going to work. This is what everybody has been waiting for." And that is the way they all think. It costs a lot to do a restaurant. It's a risky business. They all know it. This is not a real business, usually, in the sense of just a black-and-white, "I'm going to make money and this is why I'm doing it." They think this is going to draw people and they will become known, and it's a field they love.

But unfortunately, 86 percent of all restaurants close within two years. The few that excel well enough to really make it pay are so few. There are very few. It's one of those things. People have to get it out of their system. They have to try it. And then there are those very exceptional few that have succeeded. They have understood how important the staffing is. They somehow have some magic about them.

[tape interruption]

Riess: Were you buying cookbooks when you married, such as Julia Child's books?

Cunningham: Yes, I think I was buying cookbooks. I've got them all. I wasn't cooking much out of Julia's book because it's French, and I was really never terribly interested in French food.

[End Tape 3B]

[Begin Tape 4A]

Cunningham: I think that fewer and fewer people are cooking. I base some of that simply on being at the supermarket, shopping every single day, or at least turning up down there and taking a look at people's baskets while I'm waiting to be checked out. It's about all kinds of shortcuts, all kinds of "heat and eat." It's about fast food. I also know that fewer and fewer people know how to cook because--just because. There's available ways to eat that don't require going in a kitchen except to use a microwave to get something hot. People's lives are so separate in that everybody works, the youngsters go to school, they often have places they can go until the parents are home from work. It's a struggle for I think many women. I don't think it's easy in any way, but that's an aside.

I think that's kind of currently the lifestyle today. What I think about it is that it we're losing--I'm repeating to you, I think, about this thing--we're losing the glue that makes a home, that makes people feel they are connected. That happens during this metaphor of sitting together at a table, passing food, interacting, looking at one another, and making exchanges about each individual life, what went on. Without these trappings and that kind of seamless experience of sharing food at a table, we're losing--and it has kind of real spin-off--losing a sense of community, losing the togetherness that is essential, I think, for a healthy life.

Riess: You say community rather than family.

Cunningham: I say community because there are different configurations of people. There are lots of gay people in our area, and thank God for them. They have contributed a good deal. There are a lot of single people who feel very alone. I found that when I was teaching for two years these adults who didn't know how to cook at all. It was a revelation: how they lived, how they felt, why that happened, all of it. What is interesting to me, once you get a mission and it really absorbs your whole main path, I can see that this didn't just happen. In the *Supper* book I came across--this is a long time ago--a quote, it's a paragraph. It isn't long. [goes to get book]

[tape interruption]

Cunningham: For years I've been going back to the Shaker community. They're the last living Shakers. There's this whole story I wrote in here [*Saveur* magazine, No. 50].

Riess: Yes. And a recipe for Shaker Lemon Pie.

Cunningham: Yes, and I'll tell you what. After that article came out, I had three chefs that called me and said, "We made that pie. We've never made anything so good." This is from Sister Frances Carr.

[Talking about *Saveur*] Three people ran that magazine: Dorothy Kalins, Christopher Hirsheimer, and Coleman Andrews. The ownership of the magazine changed hands several times, and it's pitiful. They decided that Coleman should be doing it by himself. Dorothy Kalins now left. She had the magic of getting ideas. She's now editor of *Newsweek*. Christopher Hirsheimer, who is a woman--and she was born out here, and I'm in touch with her--does these wonderful photographs and a lot of the writing. She gave up totally and went to Rodale Press--she lives in Pennsylvania, so now she's there. But those three people together turned out this magazine. I know Coleman, because I know him from Los Angeles. He worked with Ruth Reichl a long time. I don't think he's going to be able to pull it off. I think the magazine is lost.

Riess: It's gotten all sorts of design prizes.

Cunningham: It's a wonderful magazine. Christopher Hirsheimer did all the photographs for my last book.

Riess: Did you write the whole article on the Shakers?

Cunningham: Yes. Well, I kept notes for the last fifteen years on the Shakers. I went down to Lexington [Shaker settlement, Pleasant Hill]. So it wasn't that I went just then and had those notes, you know? I had been collecting all of it over a long haul.

Riess: Did you find the whole community very attractive?

Cunningham: Oh, I'll tell you, that was the thing. Matched against how we are living today and how they're living, I'm telling you, it's a lesson. I find them so extraordinary.

[tape interruption]

Cunningham: [reads from *Supper* book] "Jean-Jacques Rousseau observed that civilized man has become more and more separated from the world of home and family, orchards and farms, and all our deep human links with life. He believed that the sophistication, modernization, and urban life tend to corrupt the ideal integrity of the rural, simple, and traditional. 'In every city dweller there is a displaced yearning for the rustic farm and the land, the taste of homegrown, all the natural foods. The paradox is that we do want authentic country flavors and integrity, but we do not seek the discomforts of the simple life, so we rediscover regionalism vicariously amid modern convenience and luxury.'" It's somehow both alarming and consoling to know that Rousseau wrote these words over two hundred years ago.

"I think the best cure for the separation is home cooking. Looking for and buying raw ingredients, handling and preparing them in your familiar kitchen, and eating at your own kitchen table will daily restore a feeling of connection with the natural world."

I was amazed that--see, I joined AIWF [American Institute of Wine and Food]. I don't like these organizations very well, because after they get going--I think I told you--they tend to get little power groups, and money begins to matter, and on and on. I know a lot about these organizations because I have belonged to them and seen the problems that arose.

But early on they had a program called "Resetting the American Table," and I joined that. That was a great leap into talking to these public school teachers about the children and how they were eating, and how hard it was for parents

and how everybody left home to work, and on and on. So it's been a very slow evolution, but I certainly do feel that we're losing things of enormous value.

Riess: Don't you think that sometimes when people go to restaurants they're trying to achieve the same thing, the sense of community?

Cunningham: No. I think because it is not an obvious thing, that's the biggest problem. This is not an obvious--it doesn't show itself. People would answer immediately and say, "What difference does it make whether a stranger cooked that food or whether I cooked it?" That's the big bottleneck in this whole thing, to convey the thing that you feel really is being lost. It's not the food per se, but it happens that the gestures, the metaphor of all of this is that someone cares enough. Even if they're impossible, even if they're a terrible cook, they are trying. They are cooking, and they're giving it to you. That in itself is an act.

Now, it may never come to the surface, and people may never understand, that the sitting together is what really counts. It is the connection that you make with regularity, the willingness to talk about your day and share all of this. That's the thing.

Riess: I wonder how James Beard--I mean, would anyone argue with you about that?

Cunningham: Yes they would, sure. Number one, I think as a gay person, James would have a harder time seeing this. But I'm not sure of that, I'm really not sure of that. He might very well have understood it. He liked people. He liked being around them. People loved James. I guess it's too late for me to find out what he really thought.

Riess: Chuck Williams talks about a group of friends who ate together, back in Sonoma, in the fifties.

Cunningham: I know he had that club.

Riess: And is that really the same thing?

Cunningham: I think it is. I think it is, in many ways. I think it gives glue to the group. I think it really does. For one thing, people don't have time to do a lot of these things anymore. As I say, I don't think anyone is a villain. It's just the way it happens.

Riess: Is that how M.F.K. Fisher started out, too, would you say, getting people around the table?

Cunningham: Well, M.F.K. Fisher was a very hard human being to understand. We all admired her enormously, but she was hard to understand. I really couldn't say. Alice and I visited her, and I used to go up with James Beard and visit her.

She certainly was very, very talented. She was also very close to her sister. I think she had two daughters.

Riess: But hers was not a communal table.

Cunningham: I don't think so, but her daughters were grown by the time I knew her, so it was hard to know.

Riess: When Alice started Chez Panisse, I think it was about friends eating together.

Cunningham: Yes, it was everything. She thought it was everything. That's what mattered the most.

Riess: I wonder--how about Thomas Keller at the French Laundry? Would he say that?

Cunningham: I don't really know. I honestly don't know. I don't have a clue.

Riess: I'm wondering whether it's at the heart of all restaurants.

Cunningham: I don't know. I don't know. I rather think that many chefs love what they do, but it does fall into the category of becoming a star if you can really succeed. I don't know. That would be a hard one. You'd have to really ask some questions there.

Riess: It's not something that everyone can achieve. You do know that, don't you? It's rare.

Cunningham: What do you mean?

Riess: A communal table. It just seems very hard to do.

Cunningham: It really wasn't hard to do. It was a way, during the era in which I grew up--and for many years there was somebody in the house, cooking a meal, and everybody sitting together and sharing that food. So they had the opportunity to experience--to have a bonding experience, and that's not what we're having today. I mean, sitting together and watching TV isn't the same thing.

Riess: This is interesting because you said in the beginning that if you had been in another profession and getting five dollars an hour for all the people that you had to listen to--and here you're talking about bonding experiences. You really are deeply invested in good relationships.

Cunningham: Yes, I think it matters. I do. I think it matters a lot. Otherwise, we're alone.

Riess: In your books you articulate this philosophy. That's why you quoted Rousseau.

- Cunningham: I wasn't aware of it for a long time. I mean, I wasn't aware of it for a long time.
- Riess: It's nice. It's interesting. Of course, the reason maybe that *Taste* wants to photograph Thanksgiving is that Thanksgiving is supposed to be--
- Cunningham: Yes, it's the one day--
- Riess: --the best example of this.
- Cunningham: I know. Judith Jones sent around a questionnaire. We put it together, together. And I sent it around. But at Random House she was able to get it out to an awful lot of young people about how often did they sit and share food, and how often did they have a family gathering--or something to that effect. The returns were shocking. Maybe once a year they sat down with a family. Everybody ate on their own agenda, and they were too busy, and they really didn't think they were good cooks. You know, that was the story.
- Riess: It's the Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving we're thinking of.
- Cunningham: Yes, it is, exactly. [phone rings]

Interview 3: June 28, 2001

[Begin Tape 5A]

Riess: I read in *Diablo* magazine [November 1992] that you taught yourself to cook by asking neighbors for recipes. That was when you were thirteen, you say?

Cunningham: Yes, in La Crescenta. And even earlier--I remember, when I was much younger than that, on Mondays, when everybody washed and were hanging clothes out in the neighborhood, people had little samples of food often. It was very typical, I think. It wasn't unusual to one neighborhood. It was just a common thing. We're talking about in about 1928, 1930. It was a routine--of course not everyone did it, but certainly in most neighborhoods: wash on Monday, iron on Tuesday, clean house on Wednesday, mend clothes and do fix-ups on Thursday. And then Friday was planning for your meals for over the weekend. People would talk as they hung up clothes. But you see, just the evolution of things, the evolution of technology—we're all shut off from one another. We have dryers. We don't see any neighbors. We don't interact in a way that was very common then. Women aren't in houses, they're in offices. Or stores. Bit by bit by bit, we have become detached from one another, and it's from family life right on out there into city life, on and on and on. It's a big loss.

Riess: What happens to the woman who does her wash on Tuesday? It brings up the specter of "having to" do everything the same way your neighbors do things.

Cunningham: I don't know why that would trouble anybody. If you didn't do the wash on Monday I don't think anyone would penalize you. No, I never had that sensation. It was because it was a formula that got you through the necessary chores of the week, you know. That was it.

Riess: And the exchange of food?

Cunningham: It was often the common subject that people talked about. You would get a sample and bring it out.

Riess: Mostly sweets, was it?

Cunningham: No, not at all. It could be anything. It could be a meatloaf. Meatloaf was very important then. It could be anything: savory, sweet. It was simply a method of trying to change and find new things which are stimulating. It was just a very good link to remaining in touch with your fellow man.

Riess: That I definitely can hear in what you're saying. Was there an element of competitiveness?

- Cunningham: I don't remember anything like that. It would be hard to say. I don't think the essence of human being--there's a whole range of different desires, different needs, different attitudes in the human. To say that it was a perfect world is hardly real, but I would say it came a lot closer than what we find ourselves living in today.
- Riess: This was the world of state fairs and local county competitions for canning and pies and things. I guess I'm asking because I think--don't you think competition was part of pleasure?
- Cunningham: Well, it probably was. I just personally didn't experience that, but I'm sure it existed.
- Riess: Did you have, as I did, a three-by-five box of lined cards for keeping your recipes on?
- Cunningham: I really never did do that very much, no. But I know exactly what you mean. I've seen them. In fact, somebody gave me a little, yes, three-by-five box of Fanny Farmer--I think they're Fanny Farmer, I've got them in the bedroom--Fanny Farmer recipes. That was a very typical way to keep a collection.
- Riess: How did you keep yours?
- Cunningham: Oh, I often had a little notebook, and I put little tabs on it, saying "Cake," "Savory," whatever--I had a ton of recipes, after a time. I gathered them.
- Riess: With a ton of little addenda, too?
- Cunningham: Well, I don't remember that. I really don't.
- Riess: One thing that strikes me is that these early cookbooks, like Helen Evans Brown's book, seem very simple. Rounded amounts, not halves of ingredients, or quarters.
- Cunningham: Yes, it's like one teaspoon.
- Actually, I suppose it was very primal when it all started. I mean, I remember Edna Lewis, who was raised in Virginia.
- Riess: Tell me about her.
- Cunningham: Her grandfather--they were on a plantation, her grandfather and a variety of families. I think there were ten families on this plantation. The plantation owner released them and gave them each ten acres. This was in an area that they called Freetown, in Virginia. So the work they had then was to cultivate and try to survive on the land they were given.

Edna's aunt, who also was named Edna and lived, of course, very near there on the plantation, used to do wonderful baking and cooking. They were illiterate, all of them. Furthermore, they didn't have any measuring devices: no cups, no spoons, nothing like that. So she had a quarter and a dime and a nickel and a penny, I think. There were four coins. And her aunt used them as measuring devices. She would put baking powder--the critical ingredients--she would put baking powder, say, on a nickel, and when it started to fall off, that was enough. She had that as a marker.

So the evolution of more direction and more information on recipes has happened slowly but steadily through all of these centuries of people cooking.

- Riess: Weren't you telling me--this was before we had a tape recorder on one day--about Edna's experimenting endlessly with a cake?
- Cunningham: Yes. And she finally listened to it, during the process of its baking, and found that that was the reason it wasn't really a perfect duplicate of her aunt's, was she was baking it too long. She took it out and listened to it, and if it was bubbling with batter, she knew it had to bake more. And as soon as that stopped, it was done. And that was the trick, really, that worked.
- Riess: How did she become a person in the cooking world?
- Cunningham: She had left home--was very brave--and went to New York. What was it she wanted to do there? She was with a group of young people, of a mix of people, black and white, and I think she originally wanted to work--I'd have to remember that. But what she did do, she ended up in New York--because she was such a wonderful cook, everyone kind of camped out when it was possible in New York. And she did the cooking for them, pretty much. It's a little bit like Alice Waters at Chez Panisse, cooking for friends. And then she was able to be cooking in a restaurant that people still remember. And famous literary people came. I did know the name of this place--Judith Jones would know it, my editor, who is the one that has helped Edna become known.
- Riess: This was after the war? I don't know how old Edna Lewis is.
- Cunningham: Edna now is probably eighty-eight--eighty-seven, eighty-eight.
- Riess: So she came to New York in the forties?
- Cunningham: Oh, yes, this was early, probably forties. And she sews. That picture of her in the hall--I think she made that dress. It was stunning. It was beautiful, just beautiful.
- Riess: Now, the cooking world in some ways is very sophisticated. But maybe Edna Lewis wasn't?

- Cunningham: Well, I don't know about that word "sophisticated" for a lot of people. What is the real definition?
- Riess: Maybe I am confusing cooks with restaurants.
- Cunningham: Yes, you are. But even restaurants--many of them are not in the least sophisticated. That doesn't go with the territory necessarily. It really doesn't. What a lot of restaurants do is copy one another. We're probably defining "sophisticated" differently. I think of it as being more complex, more complicated, the effort to impress. Sophisticated--it would be interesting to look at a dictionary and see exactly how they define it. It means very knowledgeable, I think, and worldly.
- Riess: The cooking world embraces a great variety--
- Cunningham: Absolutely. I mean, in New York, one of the most exciting chefs, who does Latino food, Douglas Rodriguez--it's just straightforward. I would say that that food, because of its uniqueness and the way he can transform things--that's very sophisticated. But I don't know that that really applies. I think there's a whole range. I think there's lots of not-sophisticated food that is very good. I don't think of that. You will certainly probably say the epitome is Thomas Keller.
- Riess: Also perhaps there's something about East Coast and West Coast here, too.
- Cunningham: The people that I sort of respect their opinion--and you know about Clark Wolf. He travels constantly everywhere. He had the Markham [5th Avenue at 13th St.] in New York for a while, that restaurant. It was really good, I thought, and so did others.
- Riess: I don't mean to derail us with the word sophisticated. Maybe glamorous is more what I mean.
- Cunningham: Well, that may be, but I know this restaurant [that Edna Lewis had]. People still remember it. It was a haven for these literary people that were famous. I can remember. They loved what she cooked. Greta Garbo went to her restaurant all the time. It was a very simple, bare-bones kind of place, but people do recognize good cooking, no matter how it's expressed. If it's just with potatoes, you get it, if it's good.
- Riess: And it's nice the way people pass the word around.
- Cunningham: Oh, yes, the word gets around a lot. You've got a good place in Berkeley now called Bistro la Rue, on San Pablo. It's six weeks old. I think it's six weeks old. And they do some dishes in there that are absolutely tops. Do you know where Acme Bakery is? It's two blocks north of that, on the opposite side of

the street, and you have to kind of look for it because it's a house. I think it used to be a restaurant called Bistro Viola.

Riess: Yes, I remember.

Cunningham: Well, this one is worth a visit. Something suddenly happens, and you never know from day to day. The chef could take a walk, and that's it.

Riess: Yes, that's another part of the outsider view, that chefs are volatile characters who might take walks.

Cunningham: No more than many people. They do have a huge responsibility. It probably makes them more expressive about their feelings. I don't know that. But there's an awful lot of very steady, down-to-earth people. I just think it's such a demanding business that it's emotionally trying.

Riess: When you were thirteen you were accumulating recipes. That made me wonder whether you had a home economics class in school.

Cunningham: I didn't until I was in high school.

Riess: And what did you learn there?

Cunningham: Nothing I have carried through with my life, particularly. The one classic thing was white sauce, and my recollection is it was sort of gluey and tasteless, unfortunately. Home Ec did familiarize one with using a pot or a pan or cooking. You couldn't help but learn something useful. But so many of the recipes--I can remember vividly, and I thought it was dumb then, and I still do--involved making picturesque things like, oh, a little horse and cart out of vegetables on a salad plate. Do you know what I mean?

Riess: I do.

Cunningham: I thought that was the dumbest thing I'd ever seen. You know, it wasn't appropriate. I didn't want to eat a horse and cart. That was an example of how this was perceived, and the kind of thing we learned and then, as an aside, things like the white sauce. But that wasn't good then. It really helps a lot to heat the milk for white sauce, you know? Which is bechamel.

Riess: James Beard's--I think in his book on *Theory and Practice of Cooking*--talked about attending a cooking class in France, and the teacher, who had been one of his students, was having her students go over and over making white sauce, because she wanted them to learn to incorporate a bit of butter. How to incorporate butter.

Cunningham: There has to be a fat in there to melt down.

- Riess: But this is after the sauce is done. Keep adding butter until it practically comes apart again.
- Cunningham: I'll tell you, butter is everything. It is. I was making a tomato sauce. The one thing I notice is that tomato sauces for pastas and pizzas and whatever usually are very flat. They really aren't very good. They just aren't. The thing that really makes them good, that you can fix it up right away, is a lot of butter in a tomato sauce. It gives it the depth it needs. There is not a flavor that is other than very superficial in a tomato. You'd be amazed. A chunk of butter will make wonders. Olive oil won't do it. Only butter. You'll be amazed.
- Riess: Sometimes they suggest adding a little sugar to tomato sauce.
- Cunningham: That's right. And you've got to add salt. All of that helps. And today our tomatoes and all of our vegetables that we buy in supermarkets are very inferior. Flavor is almost gone. So you're fighting that, too.
- Riess: Julia Child's TV series started in 1963. Was that a big thing for you?
- Cunningham: I was like everyone. I've always been an enormous admirer of hers. Yes, they were doing it in Boston, and actually, it was because of my editor, Judith Jones. She's the one that set that up. She's, as I told you, the one that discovered Julia. Everybody had turned down her book. They didn't think there was any place in this country for French food. At least the publishing houses thought that way.
- Judith, because of her experience, saw the value. I probably said that. She's the one that discovered Julia Child. Julia Child could get nowhere with that book, that first book. Or, the three of them. Let's see, it was Julia and Simone Beck and Louise [Louisette Bertholle].
- There you are. [addressing her cat] Get over here. You're not going to eat cookies now. No, she doesn't need a cat in her face. Come on.
- Riess: I love a cat in my face usually.
- Cunningham: Julia met Simca, or Simone Beck. They had formed a friendship, and so it was decided between the three of them that they would do a book, which is what they did do. So then they tried to sell it here, and it was rejected. Judith was the one that bought the book, and she has done all of Julia's books, all of them. And she's the one that set up the television series.
- Riess: Knopf had been publishing cookbooks before Julia's?
- Cunningham: Oh, yes.
- Riess: So they have a reputation for cookbooks.

- Cunningham: Yes. Well, of all kinds of books, really, but they certainly had that. No, I'll tell you, we would be living a different--when you stand back and think about it, without Judith we would have missed a lot of things, that being one very important one. Here [to cat], you're not supposed to eat that. I'll give you a piece over here.
- Riess: You have trained this cat to eat cookies.
- Cunningham: Yes, he likes cookies. This is the best cat. He comes when he's called. He's no trouble at all. He purrs all the time. Until we got Calvin [the new dog].
- Riess: Julia's cooking show, by the time you were taking your cooking classes, which were several years later, that was one of the impetuses for the interest in cooking.
- Cunningham: Oh, absolutely. I think it mattered a lot. I think it affected people a lot.
- Riess: Now, you had said you were going to look at some of your notes for some of those classes. I wondered if you had.
- Cunningham: Oh, I forgot. Let me write it down, because without writing it down, it just falls through the cracks.
- Riess: [Tears a sheet of paper off her lined pad and gives it to Cunninghamham.]
- Cunningham: [Writes note to herself]: "Look for class notes." Okay.
- Riess: What did your husband think of all of this, and your children?
- Cunningham: Well, that's hard to say, you know? I don't know. It really is hard to say. It happened slowly and evolved slowly. It was part of life. I don't think they really thought a lot about it.
- Riess: I mean as you gradually started taking all of these classes and becoming much more involved.
- Cunningham: I don't know. I really don't know.
- Riess: By 1967, when you were taking classes, were your children out of the house?
- Cunningham: No. Wait a minute. Here, come on, Sunshine—don't let him bother you. They were born in what? '52 and '54. They're nineteen months apart. No, they were still here, yes.
- Riess: Well, let me ask you how you met James Beard.

Cunningham: I met him in 1972, I think it was, at his first classes, in Seaside, Oregon, and then he started probably in '73 coming to San Francisco a lot. He had come to San Francisco, but Jim [James J.] Nassikas made it possible for him to teach and be comfortable, and he liked coming. He had a lot of friends here. So it was then that I began to work with him even more.

Riess: Did you go up to the classes with other people?

Cunningham: Just one, a friend, Betsy Pipe-Myer {?}. I think maybe the second year, a group of us went together. She was born in Portland. Her mother was a wonderful cook, and so they knew James and encouraged us to come up to the class, so we did.

Riess: Was it in any way really different from all the other classes?

Cunningham: It was different in that we all participated and cooked, too. That's a big difference. It's very hard. You have to have supplies for all these people, you have to have recipes for all these people. Even the recipes are simple. But you have to have equipment for all of them to work. I mean, it's an overwhelming way to go for many people. It's much easier to just stand up there. The audience is sitting, and they're watching. That's not hard. What's hard is to have what's necessary to let everybody participate.

Riess: And what was the set-up in Seaside?

Cunningham: It was in a home ec room, so they had little kitchens, all open, in one room. It was a perfect place to go because it accommodated--I think there were probably twenty, twenty-two of us or something, and everybody worked in a little team in these different little cubicles all open in one room.

[End Tape 5A]

[Begin Tape 5B]

Riess: You were saying James Beard had to do the classes. Couldn't he live by his books?

Cunningham: No. Nobody's is supported, hardly, on their books. Julia. But how many times does that happen? No, books don't do it for you at all. And even then, there were tons of cookbooks out. After the first year or two--his main book, the big book that he did, I think it's called *The American Cookbook*--steadily sold, but that didn't provide enough money. It's a real mistake [to think you can make a living from the books], and I think most of us believed that. Until you get into the business, and then you know that isn't the way it works, not at all.

Riess: Was 1972 the beginning of his classes, or just the first one that was out here?

- Cunningham: Yes. The first one he had in Portland or Seaside, Oregon.
- Riess: And did he come with an assistant?
- Cunningham: Yes, he always had an assistant. He always had a young man as an assistant. But he did more than that. He needed the help that the rest of us provided, too. I mean, it was a big deal.
- Riess: What do you mean, the help? You were a student.
- Cunningham: Yes, I was a student, but he had an assistant and he had another man he had known who was there from his early days in Portland, who was a very good cook. They helped, walking around, watching what people were doing, whether they were following the recipe properly, a million questions being asked. It's a wonderful way to learn to cook, but it takes a lot of help to do it.
- Riess: I should think a lot of patience, too.
- Cunningham: He liked it, though. He really did. It's enjoyable. It's a sociable business. That's what it is, a sociable business.
- Riess: Teaching cooking.
- Cunningham: And interacting with people who want to cook.
- Riess: So you shouldn't go into it if you don't want that aspect.
- Cunningham: Well, it would get you a lot further if you like it.
- Riess: Were you a star pupil?
- Cunningham: No, not really at all. I wasn't. No, I don't think he singled me out because of that at all. I have no proof of this, but I think the thing he liked was just by nature I've always been gregarious, and I think that was something that he liked. You know, it's hard to know. I don't know. I never asked, and he never said. Certainly he had a lot of people in those classes that could cook as well as I could, and better. So there's no way to know.
- Riess: Describe that Seaside class a little more. It went on for, what, a week?
- Cunningham: No, I think it was two weeks long. Some of the people only took it for a week, but I was there for two weeks. Well, it was simply we all liked one another. That's the thing about cooking. You interact with these people and become friends, and it's very convivial. It was just that. It was very, very pleasant, and we were all impressed with him. He was very down to earth. There was nothing snobbish in James Beard, at all. It was fun, that's all. It was just fun.

And Seaside is very appealing. It was a beach town. We liked being there. Yes, that was about it.

Riess: Did he know the level of facility that the people would have, or did he have to size that up?

Cunningham: No, he didn't know. I don't think he cared. He didn't care how good or how amateurish we were.

Riess: He knew what he was going to teach ahead of time?

Cunningham: Yes.

Riess: I've seen one of his books that's organized around technique, steaming, broiling.

Cunningham: He had a variety. Because what we ended up with was a meal. Each time, we had a full meal, meaning salad, dessert, savory, and a baked something. So that was really it.

Riess: The class started in the morning and ended at dinnertime?

Cunningham: Oh, no. No, we started in the morning, and we had lunch, and then we would sit down and eat at 12:30, and then it would be dismissed for the afternoon, and we could do any number of things.

Riess: Oh, so the meal was at midday.

Cunningham: Midday, yes.

Riess: How do you feel about the midday meal being the largest meal of the day?

Cunningham: I can see a lot of advantages to it. I think it probably is a good idea to eat more heavily at noon and light in the evening. I think that makes sense. But it simply isn't possible.

Riess: So at what point in all of this did he approach you to help him?

Cunningham: It wasn't until I got home that he had written a letter, asking me if I would come and help him the next year. And then by chance Stanford Court was built by Jim Nassikas. He and James Beard were good friends, and had been, because Jim ran the Plaza in New York. Anyhow, he wanted James to come and teach classes in Fournou's Ovens. So that's what he did. And he loved to come out here because he knew people. The hotel was wonderfully comfortable. It was the perfect way for him to get away, so he did a lot.

Riess: "To get away"?

- Cunningham: To get away from New York and a lot of pressures. You know, it was good for him. So that worked 100 percent. Of course, that meant that I was assisting him a lot, really a lot.
- Riess: And did he continue in Seaside?
- Cunningham: Yes, I think for quite a while. I don't know how many classes now, but for quite a while he did those classes.
- Riess: Did you assist on all his classes?
- Cunningham: Yes.
- Riess: No matter where he was?
- Cunningham: Well, I didn't do--back in New York, I didn't go to his school. He had a very nice young man that helped him there. He could always call upon somebody there.
- Riess: What happened to Fournou's Oven?
- Cunningham: Well, nothing happened to it until the hotel was sold, but as long as Jim Nassikas had it, it did very well.
- Riess: If you were assisting in the class, did he send all the material to you? Tell me how that role worked.
- Cunningham: It really was very simple.
- Riess: What preparation did you have to do?
- Cunningham: I didn't have a lot to do. It was very easy because of the hotel and the staffing they had to order all the ingredients we wanted through that, because they ran a restaurant. They ran two restaurants in the hotel. And so we'd get everything and get it set up. It really didn't entail all that much.
- Riess: These classes were still for—pardon the expression—"housewives."
- Cunningham: Oh, no. There were a lot of men in the class. A lot of businessmen came to the classes. It drew on all manner of people, all ages.
- Riess: When did you start noticing men coming to classes?
- Cunningham: They'd always come, from the very beginning. Yes, from the very beginning. We had a lot of men in the first class in Seaside.
- Riess: In your earlier classes with Lonnie Kuhn and Joyce Goldstein?

Cunningham: Then you didn't see as many men, but you did see men. There were some, yes. Yes, absolutely.

[tape interruption]

Cunningham: We're losing home cooking, and that is a fact, that people are not cooking at home. The numbers are surprising. Like MPD in Chicago--I've mentioned them to you. They're very good at surveys. They've studied 20,000 families at a time over I think a two-year period. People are buying heat-and-eat and a lot of ready-made dishes. People are eating alone. They're not eating at a table. They eat on their own agenda.

Riess: Are they paying any attention to what they're eating?

Cunningham: I don't think so at all, no. In fact, we're losing a lot of ground. I was talking to Judith, my editor, this morning. I said, "It's a very sad fact to me that today the younger generations haven't a clue as to how ripe fruit really tastes. Everything is harvested unripe. It's shipped." Take the strawberry, which used to be very small. It's very large. It's very tasteless. It's very hard to find any fruits or even cantaloupe--I could go on and on.

What we're losing is appealing products, appealing in taste, ingredients that we could use. I'm sure that there are a lot of people that don't feel this way, but just basically I'm satisfied that we're losing this community table, which is a terrible loss. But also, along with that, we're losing home cooking. These fancy kitchens are not being used. I mean, people laugh about it and they think it's funny. I think it's pathetic, myself.

I just don't believe that we have a lot of active home cooks anymore.

Riess: Yet there is a lot of attention to cooking, for whatever the results. There are more cookbooks, more cooking shows, more cookware stores,

Cunningham: See, most of the people that are doing this are professionals. They're professional chefs, they're professional in many ways. You have to separate that, and really see the division of what a home cook is all about. It has nothing to do with a chef. Really nothing. They start with *mise en place*. They start with fresh things every day. They're doing an entirely different thing with ingredients.

Today that isn't the way a home cooks is doing it because there aren't very many home cooks anymore. We don't cook like that. We make do and relay food. And the style of food is different. It often is very homey and reheated, refurbished with something to make it taste good. It's another world apart.

- Riess: I can see how what is going on in the home or isn't going on in the home is influenced by what's in the supermarkets.
- Cunningham: Yes, it's true, absolutely true. And organic, which can be far the better, is very expensive in markets. It's out of sight for a lot of people. Furthermore, a lot of people don't see any value in it. They don't understand. See, I'm looking at a different picture. What I'm saying is, I don't see that home cooking is a booming thing. I certainly agree about the books. I've seen many of the books, because they get sent to me. I see all that, but I don't see evidence that they're playing much of a part in homes, private homes.
- Riess: I read cookbooks, they all sound wonderful. And I get food magazines. But I'm not going to drop everything and make new recipes, because I'm perfectly happy with--
- Cunningham: What you've been turning out.
- Riess: --for my entire life, practically.
- Cunningham: That makes sense.
- Riess: This is a small dilemma, it seems to me, if you think of the business as having some economics attached to it. Your audience is new, new young people isn't it?
- Cunningham: Right, yes, such as it is. And I don't think it's too great. I mean, we have diminished in numbers, in spite of the fact that there are a ton of cookbooks out there. But an awful lot of them don't go along. They really don't. They're not selling over and over again. And these big, excuse me, "mega" bookstores, you know, Barnes and Noble and all of them--they don't--. It's the same picture that you see all over today, these mega-companies. It isn't like the old friendly bookstore. They pack a million books in some of these stores, and then they're off the shelves, gone, and the new ones come along. I don't think people are making a lot of money on books.
- Riess: If you were to try to think of how you could remedy all this, what could you do?
- Cunningham: That, of course, is the hardest question of all because it's not a blatant, easily understood loss. Most people feel, "As long as I am fed two or three times a day, what's the dif? And what does it matter whether I'm sitting and eating with anybody? What's that got to do with anything?" It doesn't make any sense to them. They don't get it, because it's not easy to understand that you're not born civilized. Babies cry and want food. They don't just say, "Please give me a bottle." They're crying and carrying on, and then they get beyond that and they can find it for themselves. But it doesn't relate to them. This is a concept that isn't very clear.

But the fact is, I totally believe, it is a powerful loss that we have no substitute for. The only way we're going to get back to the table might be--like the Dark Ages. Everybody had to huddle together to survive. If that could be, I would vote for it.

Riess: Surely you have thought about the parallels between broken families and broken dinner tables.

Cunningham: Yes. Marriages aren't very stable. As I say, our whole private life, our home life--really, most people are almost not occupying a home. It's a motel. They check in, check out.

Riess: This is a sorry thing that you're contemplating.

Cunningham: It certainly is. I think it's serious.

I think I told you, it started for me long back, with the American Institute of Wine and Food, when they started a program called "Resetting the American Table." That's where I met a lot of public school teachers, who were very concerned about how the children were eating and how many of them weren't eating. And people were working, away from home, both parents, and they saw it as a tragedy. So, you see, that's the way I see it.

Riess: Alice Waters wrote to [former President] Bill Clinton to interest him in what people are eating as part of the American agenda.

Cunningham: She shares this very much, the whole idea. She also feels that organic treats the Earth kindly. She feels we're not only losing the family table, which is very serious, but we are losing the care of this world, and that that is an equal problem.

Riess: I wonder if it's just worst in this country.

Cunningham: I don't think so. Slow Food has a lot of reports out, and no, I think this is universal. Less, probably, in many places, but certainly it's not just here.

Riess: You bring up Slow Food. It's interesting to me that that began in Italy [in 1986], which is what we think of as the last bastion of the together family, around the table.

Cunningham: It was started--oh, I can't remember his name. In fact, I've met him, the man that started it [Carlo Petrini, first president]. McDonald's started a McDonald's in his little town [Barolo], and that's what started Slow Food. He saw it as a real threat to home cooking. Slow Food also has some other agendas, all of which are fine, but I'm not interested in them. I belonged for a long time, but--. Alice went to the--they had a big gathering in his hometown. There were

thousands and thousands of people there. But some of it isn't as relevant to me as just the simplicity of people not cooking at home.

Riess: You mentioned the organic foods, and it reminds of the natural food movement. I remember *Stalking the Wild Asparagus*, by Euell Gibbons. Did you know any of those people? Also, where were you on DDT?

Cunningham: You know, I know exactly what you're talking about, and much of it was a good idea.

[tape interruption]

Riess: I looked at a book that was put out [in 1984] by the Beef [Industry] Council. It's called *Dear James Beard*. It has some quite wonderful quotes and sort of suggests some anecdotes, so I thought I'd run through some of it.

Jeremiah Tower talked about James and you posing on the ranch of Emil Norman. And attending a dinner that Jeremiah was doing for James Beard at Ventana. So who is Emil Norman?

Cunningham: You know, I really don't remember. This all took place, yes, down at Ventana, down by Big Sur. I remember the dinner very well, and I remember that picture--I mean, the picture's right here on the wall. I don't really remember. I can't remember who he was. But I remember the dinner very well. I guess Jeremiah would be one of those people--when you're talking about sophistication, that is what he represented. He did very sophisticated things with food.

Riess: So tell me what you think is sophisticated.

Cunningham: Well, it was with great style. That's a lot about what sophistication is about, is style, of a kind. The first plate that came to us was a lovely white plate, as I remember, and in the center, on everybody's plate--there probably were fifteen to twenty of us at this long table at Ventana--the first thing that came was one big black truffle. And I put my truffle in my purse. [laughs] The food was like that.

At the end of the dinner, the dessert came out. They rolled out a huge tree in a box with casters on it. You know, very good looking this way. And they had these tangerines that were hung like Christmas balls, real tangerine shells that contained tangerine sorbet, and they rolled this tree over to the table and passed around these filled tangerines. And then they had little cakes that went with it that they passed around the table. I mean, that's what I would call sophisticated. It was food that was very stylish. And he was very good at that.

Riess: Like Thomas Keller, it seems to me.

- Cunningham: Yes, Thomas Keller has the same thing. The way I look at it, I call it "chef on a plate," because that's what you're looking at, is how clever he was. You're thinking about him. There's a place for it, as we obviously know, but I like food that doesn't have to attract you. You eat it and you like it and you talk to the people you're with. It's about communion, communicating.
- Riess: One of the more disturbing things is it's not just "chef on a plate," it's "money on a plate."
- Cunningham: A lot, a lot, yes. Really a lot. This year the white truffles cost something like \$4,000 a pound, \$2,500, \$2,800 a pound for the kind of lesser truffles. You have to ask yourself--I always think--you know, if truffles cost a dollar a pound, how many would we be buying? Would we be talking about them? Probably not.
- Riess: Jim Nassikas says he met you through James Beard. He refers to you as his "closest assistant at cooking school, the world-traveling companion and confidante."
- Cunningham: That only means that you have a friendship aside from a "workship" kind of thing.
- Riess: "Marion was then struggling with the formative stages of a whole new career outlook, that of culinary author and cooking school teacher."
- Cunningham: Well, it happened. I don't know that I thought of it as something for the rest of my life. I was grateful because I liked doing it so much. I remember James Beard said to me, "You know, this is going to change your life." I had no idea what he meant. It didn't mean anything to me. I didn't foresee anything, which he did. So it really just happened.
- Riess: He saw how taken you were with it?
- Cunningham: I think he thought that this was going to open up further doors, and I would be able to make a business career out of it, aside from liking to do it so well, and I didn't understand what he meant exactly.
- Riess: Nassikas says [reads from Beef Council book], "Together we began annual cooking classes at the Stanford Court. Amongst the happiest moments I've ever witnessed was the day the phone rang in the tiny service kitchen...and it was Judith Jones of Alfred Knopf offering Marion the assignment to dramatically revise the Fannie Farmer cookbook...James had recommended Marion."

[End Tape 5B]

[Begin Tape 6A]

Riess: At that point, had you met Judith Jones? How did she know that you could do any of this?

Cunningham: Because James told her I could. I hadn't met her. I'd never seen her. I'd never gone to New York. She asked him if he knew of anyone that was non-professional, and so that was how--

Riess: Non-professional?

Cunningham: Non-professional. And that was very smart of her. She really is remarkable. She saw the value of having someone who was legitimately a home cook, without the trappings of restaurants and business and making careers and all that. I didn't even want the job. I didn't think I could do it.

Riess: It must have sounded daunting.

Cunningham: Yes, there were 1,800 recipes in that book that had to be revised or redone or dumped or something.

Riess: Did you have a deadline?

Cunningham: Oh, yeah. I can't remember now what it was, but every one of those recipes was tested.

Riess: Here?

Cunningham: Yes, mostly here. I'm thinking, I went back--in the early part of it I was with a woman named Jerry Labor, who had lots of personal problems and had to drop out. I was glad. It's much better working alone, where you can make all your own decisions and do it so you like what you do.

Riess: What was the contract like, then? Did they provide all--?

Cunningham: No. I spent a ton of money on all the ingredients, and I worked--as I say, it took five years to do that revision, and I bought all the ingredients for all the recipes, and I got \$30,000 for it, for five years. I lost money.

But at that point, this was the thing that really gave me a life in this world of food. I thought about it, and I thought--I had learned so much from Judith. Everyone will agree, she's the best in the business. She is. I don't think anyone can do it any better than she can do it, editing books, understanding all kinds of things.

So I thought, "I'll never work with her again." I mean, I've done the book, it's gone. And if I want to continue to learn, I'm going to have to do another book. So I proposed to her that I would do--using the imprimatur of Fannie Farmer--I would do--and at that time the Fannie Farmer Candy Company was going--I would do a baking book called *The Fannie Farmer Baking Book*. And she bought the idea. That book did very well. It's still in print. And how many years is that? [published by Knopf, distributed by Random House, 1984]

Riess: Was it based on the baking section of the cookbook?

Cunningham: No, it was all my own material. No, it didn't have anything to do with Fannie Farmer at all. It was just given the name.

Riess: Now, tell me how Judith Jones worked with you. The first year, for instance. How did you know you were going in the right direction when you started out?

Cunningham: She was very helpful. And I had looked and read--I had been cooking long enough, I had read endless libraries of cookbooks. I had my own sense about it. Because you get that way. You know, you like this and you don't like that. Culling through the heap and trying to find something you do like. And so that was not a problem. I can make all those decisions.

The problem was to understand what was wanted by the publishing house, how you met their demands, their needs. And I can't remember all of them.

Riess: Did you have to write original text?

Cunningham: Yes, all of it, all of it. But she edited, because I didn't know where to put periods and commas, and she edited everything. She's very helpful. She's very subtly helpful. You learn. She would say, "Well, it's a little excessive. We don't want it to read that way." She's very good. She doesn't hurt your feelings. She has a very, very strong but subtle manner in putting across her ideas, and she is terrific with words. So it was enormously helpful.

That baking book, I am certain, wouldn't have ever had the life it's had if I hadn't had her as an editor. So that's what—every time I finished one book, I would go to another book. I'm working on the eighth now.

Riess: The one that really made your reputation is the Fannie Farmer.

Cunningham: Well, that's had a long life. It's still selling. And the baking book is still in print. The *Breakfast* book is still in print. The *Supper* book has reverted back to me; they are not reprinting that. But Whitecap in Canada want it very badly. The Morrow publishing house wants it. So I don't have a problem about getting it back in print, selling.

- Riess: That's certainly a testimonial, that your books don't need revising, your recipes.
- Cunningham: So far they don't.
- Riess: When you talk about her editing, is the voice--
- Cunningham: She keeps, she gets the voice of the person. And this book is so good. It's Edna [Lewis] talking--it is, really.
- Riess: Which book?
- Cunningham: Well, Edna's got three books, I think, or two books with Judith, out. It sounds just like Edna. That is a gift. That's what Judith can do, and that is a real gift, of being able to keep the voice, the sound of the person that's doing it.
- Riess: And does your voice come from your voice as the instructor?
- Cunningham: No, I don't feel that way. I'm not a teacher. I'm not really that.
- Riess: So it's just a voice around the table.
- Cunningham: Yes, it is. Isn't that funny?
- He [Sunshine, the cat] likes those cookies. He's so excited about it.
- Riess: Who are some of her other authors? Edna Lewis and you. Did Judith have anything to do with James Beard?
- Cunningham: Oh, she did his books. That's how I made the connection.
- And she does--what is the name of that man? He's done so many books. He's a wonderful author. I thought I would never forget his name. And she does Ann Tyler--Ann Tyler, Anne Rice. She does a lot of poetry. You would know the names.
- Riess: And the cookbooks that were Judith's?
- Cunningham: Well, let's see, who all has she done? She does Joan Nathan [who writes on Jewish cooking]. She does--oh, what is her name? She's back in the East Coast. I'd have to think about it. She has a very impressive stable of people. She turns down I couldn't tell you how many people. She's really a wonderful editor. And she's very interesting.
- Riess: Each time I've come here, you've been talking to her just that morning.

- Cunningham: I talk to her two or three times a week. We both have dogs. We both love dogs. We have a lot in common. And she is, I think, two years younger than I am, so--no, it's been a very good friendship, I have to say.
- Riess: What book are you working on now?
- Cunningham: The main thing is, it's about family tables, and it's about lost recipes. I'm interested in that. It's like clothes, it's sort of about style--but why don't we still do beef Stroganoff? Probably because people, those who are cooking, many of them are fat conscious, so they don't like things with sour cream. But I've got to get a lot more done. I'm getting very worried about it. I have never stalled this way.
- Riess: How do you identify which are the lost recipes?
- Cunningham: Oh, it's very easy. It's very easy. Nobody I know is cooking them. And I know a lot of people who are cooks, so I sort of know what their menus are. And I never see them in restaurants —not that they are restaurant food necessarily, but they do a lot of things like lamb shanks. You'll see lamb shanks, but there's so many--it's not hard to know what isn't being cooked. It's very easy to know.
- Riess: Gee, I thought that beef Stroganoff was something that had been discovered only about forty-five years ago!
- Cunningham: It doesn't have to be old to be lost. There're tons--we don't really see sweetbreads anymore. Just try and buy them. You can't, unless you go to a very--you know, Lenardi's or someplace.
- Riess: There is that column in the *Chronicle* that Karola Saekel does, where people write asking for old recipes.
- Cunningham: Well, a lot of them have disappeared. They really have.
- Riess: So the theme is lost recipes, but also lost community.
- Cunningham: That's right, the loss of the communal table. So we'll see how that works. This book troubles me because I started with a different topic and didn't like it and told her I wasn't going to do it, and so with that, I've got this other goal, which I *do* want to do. I think it's going to make me feel good to do it.
- Riess: What was the abandoned book?
- Cunningham: What was it I was going to do? I was going to do--oh, I think I was going to do some recipes that would take somebody maybe fifteen minutes legitimately to put together. Something that if it's really that miserable and you can't find time and you're eating all that heat-and-eat food, gives this a try-type attitude.

But I decided I didn't want to do that, and I'm worried about this not eating together, and so I've come to this other. I kept shifting, see. But I'm happy where I am, I just haven't got anything much about it. That's what's wrong.

Riess: A favorite cookbook was Craig Claiborne's *Thirty-Minute Gourmet*.

Cunningham: You know, I'd forgotten that book. I really had. I'd forgotten that book. I have many of his others. Yes, he was a very good cook. I knew him quite well, because he was very close to James Beard. And he also was very close to Jim Nassikas. He used to come to Stanford Court a lot. He was very witty, too. A cynic. He was a cynic. But he was funny, quite funny.

Riess: Didn't he have a column in the *New York Times*?

Cunningham: I think that was just sometimes.

Riess: I'm wondering how he made money.

Cunningham: I'll tell you how he made money, and it carried him through most of his life. He was writing for *The New York Times*, and he decided to take all of the recipes he had had published in *The New York Times* and make it into a cookbook, and *The New York Times* didn't think they were of any value at all, and so they said, "Go ahead. It's yours." And he put that book together, and that book sold and sold and sold. You cannot imagine the amount of money he made from that book.

Riess: The *New York Times Cookbook*.

Cunningham: Yes, and that's what got him through. That was what enabled him to--I remember because he would talk about it. I knew him on these many visits to Jim Nassikas. I remember he said to me, "I thought I was really going to have to sell my house because I wasn't going to be able to get along."

[tape interruption]

Riess: You tell a lot of your own story in your cookbooks, particularly in the *Supper* book, and that's very charming.

Cunningham: It's more than eating. You meet people who share the same interest in food. I don't know, it never fails to be interesting. All the people are. I mean, maybe dot-coms find dot-coms interesting. I'm sure they do. It's hard for me to imagine it being like the food world, but it may well be.

[tape interruption]

Cunningham: You know, about the Cuisinart--you know, this Baker's Dozen that I started with Amy Pressman thirteen or fourteen years ago now? One of our members --I told you we have 425. I remember her, I know her well, her name is Nancy Cux. She called me several days back, and she said--this was a triumph, I felt--she called, and she said, "Marion, I have lost a recipe that meant so much to me. Would you by any chance be able to track down this recipe so I could get it again?"

And I said, "What was it?" And she said, "Well, it comes from June 1978, one of the issues of 'Pleasures of the Table,' I think it was, by Carl Sontheimer, who brought Cuisinart here." And she said, "It was a flour-less chocolate souffle." And she said, "I want it more than anything I can tell you."

The first thing that came to mind was Abby Mandel. We've been very, very good friends. She worked very closely with Carl Sontheimer--I mean, she was his right hand. I have some of those [issues], but I don't think I can track them now. They've been stored. I said, "I'll call Abby Mandel and try to catch her tomorrow, although she travels a lot."

Couldn't get Abby the next day. I began to think about it. I thought, I've got everything, they've got to be--. So I started one night, late--it was about 10:30--going through the garage, where I had things such as this. Finally I found it. I called her the next morning. I said, "You're not going to believe this, Nancy. I have this recipe in this little booklet, and I'm going to send you the booklet."

Oh, she was so thrilled. Wasn't that wonderful? I was so happy when I got that. I couldn't believe I had it!

Riess: And I think to myself, "The nerve! Doesn't she know how busy you are?"

Cunningham: Well, you know, everybody feels busy in this world. That's not new and different. They feel like they're always dragging behind. I always need to get a column over to the *Chronicle* or *Los Angeles Times* or over to the *Minneapolis Star*. The thing that is really making me agitated is the fact that I'm delayed on this book with Judith. That's what's really troubling me.

On the one hand, I'd like us to see this through so we get it completed and it's done, you know? Without putting it off. I'm torn about it. That's what I'm telling you. Frankly, I'm torn.

Riess: I think you could use some breathing space on this [oral history]. I think it might be productive, actually.

Cunningham: Why don't we do this: Why don't we see how a month works, and if I can really get the groundwork, then I can move ahead with this.

Riess: I like the idea of your having that breathing space and then telling your friends that you're doing it and having them kind of remind you of the things that are interesting and making some notes about what *you* would like to do. Think of yourself doing an autobiography.

Cunningham: I'll tell you, I've just gone through that. Honestly, I don't want to do that. Again, I'd rather have you ask me questions. Billy Cross. Alice hired Billy Cross to come, and he spent five days here, and all we did--see, that's another thing--.

Riess: I don't know about this.

Cunningham: Well, it just happened about a month ago, less than a month ago.

Riess: Oh, you poor thing. So what did he do?

Cunningham: He taped, hour after hour after hour, my whole life.

Riess: You should have told me. That's awful.

[tape interruption]

Riess: Billy Cross? He's a writer?

Cunningham: You remember "The Great Chefs of France"? Michael James, his friend--I had met them through James Beard. He knew them. Michael James is a wonderful cook, but Billy is a very good cook, himself. They started, I think it was in 1968--I'm not sure, it may have been '70--they started a program called "The Great Chefs of France." It was a genius of an idea. They imported the Trois Gros Brothers and brought to this country the first time these famous, famous starred chefs, and they gave cooking classes. They had people with great sums of money--it cost a lot to do this, to go to these classes--they had people coming from all over the country.

They had Simone Beck. Simone Beck was a mentor to Michael James. They had both spent a lot of time in France. Billy Cross has traveled everywhere. He knows the food world very well. Michael James died of AIDS about fourteen--I don't know; maybe it's not that long--fourteen years ago. Anyway, tragically.

But they ran that "Great Chefs of France," and ultimately Robert Mondavi bought it, on the terms that they would come and continue to teach at Mondavi's, and then at a given time they could choose to leave if they wished. So they did that. Billy Cross is very artistic. They both, both of them--I would say part of their talent is that they're not bound like some of us humans, myself included--they live in kind of a fantasy world. They're not practical.

They spend everything they have, and then if something doesn't happen, they would be starving to death. They don't know how to handle money very well. Billy has certainly never known that.

Anyway, we met in '72, and they asked me if I would come to "The Great Chefs of France" classes and help them. It was a wonderful opportunity, and I really had a wonderful time working with them. I did that--well, until they left. Ultimately, Robert Mondavi bought them out totally, and they went on with different projects they had in their lives.

Riess: Was that filmed at all?

Cunningham: You know, that's a good question. It surely must have been.

You have no idea. I can't think of a French chef at that time that they weren't able to bring over. They paid them enormously. The classes were absolutely wonderful, just wonderful.

Billy and I have remained very close friends. He does expeditions down in Mexico. He lives in San Diego--.

Riess: You mentioned going down there. And he was the one interviewing you about your whole life?

Cunningham: Yes. Well, Alice felt he had known me a long time and knew a lot. I traveled with him quite a bit. We went down to Oaxaca a couple of times, and we did a lot of different things together.

Riess: So why was he doing the interviews?

Cunningham: He was doing the interviews because Alice wanted--she even gave me one of these [tape recorders]--she said, "Please record the story of your life on these tapes for me." Well, I didn't ever do it, you know? So she hired him to do it. So he came and taped them all, and she's got those tapes. So there you are.

Riess: Will they be transcribed?

Cunningham: Yeah, she's looking for somebody to do it.

Riess: Well, this is amazing news. I wish I had known.

Cunningham: Well, you're more on the subject of food, you see. You're following more the story of food. That isn't the way this was. This was where was I born, what was my mother like, what was my father like, what was Glendale like, what about Los Angeles--you know, it's a story, it isn't emphasizing food.

Riess: But he's a food person.

- Cunningham: Right, right. Well, there you go.
- Riess: Well, speaking of food, I want to ask you what you had for lunch today.
- Cunningham: I made--I was making that tomato sauce with the butter in it. I made a small amount of that, and I cooked some noodles. It was really spaghetti. And then I toasted an English muffin, and instead of putting Parmesan on the spaghetti, I put in on the muffin. And then I made a salad. I had some lettuce and cucumber. And I used olive oil. I like a very simple dressing. And there's the best vinegar--I just can't tell you how much I like this vinegar. Chris[topher] Kimball. You know who Chris Kimball is? He writes the *Cook's Illustrated* [magazine].
- Riess: I don't think so.
- Cunningham: Don't you know him?
- Riess: I don't.
- Cunningham: Well, let me show you. And he's done books.
- Riess: And makes his own vinegar?
- Cunningham: No, he doesn't make it. Wait a minute here. You should--let me show you what this is, because it's very unusual. [moves away from microphone] In fact, he has a television show now.
- [tape interruption]
- Cunningham: He also does books with a compilation of what they find. He, himself--I went and stayed on his farm in Vermont. He's based in Boston. He self publishes all of that. He's amazing. And he is a wonderful cook, a really, really first-rate cook. I stayed a week in Vermont with him. Made sugar maple. They have four little children. He cooked all the meals himself, and the children helped him. His food was really memorable. I never knew how he really could cook until I did that.
- Riess: [looking at magazine] What about him and the vinegar?
- Cunningham: Oh, he told me about this vinegar. Well, he made a salad, and I said, "You know, Chris, this dressing"--dressings often have the blahs, they're not very good. This is what it is. [moves away from microphone, goes through cupboard] Somehow with oil and lettuce it's fresh, it sparkles. Here. [returns to microphone] You can have this, because I've got a lot more in the garage.
- Riess: Oh, it's a white balsamic. How interesting.

Cunningham: It's only, I think, \$3.50. But mixed with olive oil and a little salt, I think it's delicious. So that's what I had for lunch, was that salad, tomato sauce--because I wanted to do a column. I think tomato sauce is flat. It often doesn't taste like anything. And one of the worst mistakes, to my mind, that is made is pizzas and pastas--here in America, we just slather on the sauce.

[End Tape 6A]

[Begin Tape 6B]

Cunningham: When my grandmother put sauces on pastas, she did it sparingly, so that you enjoyed the pasta, too, you know? I don't like it when it's so heavily sauced.

Riess: Thank you for the vinegar. And what olive oil do you use?

Cunningham: Well, this is not fashionable in the least. What I like is Pompeiian. I've been buying Pompeiian for years and years and years. They have always had a blend of Spanish and French oil that they have made. What I do, because I've been a customer for so many years--and I have all kinds of olive oils, Alice's husband imports olive oils.

I have a palate that likes what I remember from my youth. It isn't the green oil that has a certain fire to it. I don't like it. Forget it. And I go to Nan McEvoy's every year, when she has that pressing and everything. She's really wonderful. But I don't like that. This year it was the best because it's beginning to mellow out.

So I buy that Pompeiian, and I get four gallons--in one-gallon cans. And I'm not trying to save money. I do try to save money, but not there. That isn't why. I have used it for years. It's familiar. It makes me feel at home, and I like it. I think it's good. I like it. It tastes like olives to me, a bit.

Riess: How do you dispense it from your one-gallon cans?

Cunningham: Well, I just pour it into--I think you can see it, with the long spout? That's all I do. But it's very inexpensive buying it that way.

Riess: I remember it in a hexagonal plastic container.

Cunningham: You're right. That's exactly the way it was. I'm just so happy that I can get it in quantity. I don't have to keep ordering it. I order that in quantity. I order vanilla in quantity from this mother and daughter--where are they? They're not in Boston, but they're near there, and they make vanilla--the family has for years. They make three things: a lemon oil, a vanilla, and they've got a third thing, but I just get the vanilla, and it's wonderful vanilla. Really, really good. That matters.

[tape interruption]

Riess: One of the things you do every week is write three columns? Or every two weeks.

Cunningham: Every two weeks.

Riess: Three different?

Cunningham: No, two are alike, and [they] go down to Los Angeles and the *Chronicle*, and then I often do a different column for Minneapolis. I'm not doing as many for them. I like the editor awfully well there, but I don't know that that job will go on for a long time.

Riess: And that's syndicated?

Cunningham: No, that was just for the *Minneapolis Star*. And then it goes out on the New York wire, the ones that I do for the *Chronicle*. Michael Bauer sends it.

Riess: How much do you get paid?

Cunningham: Oh, you'd hardly believe it. For each column--see, I don't want to write more than one recipe anymore. I used to do pages for him, you know, back a time. They don't pay anything. I get \$200 for each column. But the fact is that people are reminded that there's somebody out here named Marion Cunningham--at least a few.

Riess: Are you working on a theme in those?

Cunningham: Not really. I'm going to write about tomato sauce because I just think that we mess it up.

Riess: So this could be fun, writing these columns?

Cunningham: Oh, I like it. That isn't the problem. It's that there are just so many things in the course of a day. That's the thing. No, I don't feel that way about it. I think it's interesting, and I'm grateful to be able to talk about what I think is good. That's an indulgence. No, I like it. But it's just too much. I get up, I go swimming, I'm on the phone an awful lot. A lot.

And more and more as I get older and older and older, a lot of young people call me and want to know how they can get started and what they can do. I like to talk to them. I try to limit myself, and I have a formula for them, which I think works and helps them, which is they need to join the San Francisco Professional Food Society. That is a good place, where you can talk to everyone about what they do and the variations.

Anyway, so I'm on the phone a lot.

Riess: What else is in your formula?

Cunningham: I suggest to them that they don't go to CIA [Culinary Institute of America] and spend thousands and thousands of dollars. Either go to a small restaurant and beg to work free for a while, and get another something. Try to survive. Do that. But you need to taste the food. If you think it's good, be willing to do it that way. Or go to City College over in San Francisco, which does a good job. This is another thing: the kind of money they demand for this [culinary schools], and what they get out of it—it's two very different things. So I think that's a good thing to do.

And where you can get in and meet the Professional Food Society group. They're great about this. I know a lot of them.

Riess: Are you a member of that?

Cunningham: I was for years. I was, along with the four people that started it originally, or five. There was more. Two of the men—one in particular, who worked for Chuck Williams, started the San Francisco Professional Food Society. He has been up in St. Helena. He has a shop—it was “something” Roosevelt. I can't think what it is now. But it was with a lot of cookware. But it was his concept. And it was a wonderful idea. It's a great way for newcomers to find a path. Otherwise, it's not easy.

Riess: And if they're women, do you recommend that they go to the women's professional groups?

Cunningham: Oh, well no—. Well, for instance, I like--Traci des Jardins is one of them. I know her very well, and I like her, I admire her tremendously. But some of them--I don't think that's the best way to go. But it certainly doesn't hurt to look into it.

Riess: So your morning is often consumed with phone calls.

Cunningham: Well, it's telephone calls, and even to keep up--I live alone. I have four hours of help a week, and that's it. It's not a lot. It requires a lot.

Riess: And a secretary who helps?

Cunningham: Once a week she's here, and she pays bills and she looks into all kinds of--she's wonderful, but I'm busy from morning until late afternoon, and then I go to the city.

Riess: How do you keep up with all of the magazines and cookbooks that come over your threshold?

- Cunningham: I don't read them carefully. I can't anymore. I scan them. Yes, because it's perpetually something.
- Riess: Do you see trends in them as you're reading them? When you back off, do you realize, "Ah, this is what's happening."
- Cunningham: Well, there's sort of a thing that's been going on recently, I see in the restaurants. It's for things like lamb shanks and, oh, pork chops. I'm seeing those again. I think a lot of people kind of yearn for home stuff.
- Riess: Macaroni and cheese.
- Cunningham: Yes. I love macaroni and cheese. I have a recipe that I think is just wonderful. I think I might have mentioned it to you. It's using sour cream. It's absolutely delicious. And it's simple, it's very quick to make.
- Riess: Do people expect you to review these books?
- Cunningham: Yes, I've got a lot of them. Kim Seaverson just sent me this book yesterday. I'm reading hers. It's about Alaskan food. She lived there for years. And she's a very good writer. But I've called--these last two manuscripts, I can't do it, I turned down these last two because I don't have time.
- Riess: Yes. In fact, do you have time to read anything else? What's the last honest-to-goodness book you've read?
- Cunningham: I just read--my husband's old law partner, Ed Heafey, was telling me on the phone--he said, "Have you read?"--it's a thin little book, takes about an hour and a half to read--*Who Moved My Cheese?* You know what I'm talking about? What it's about is attitude. And what it is, it's about not being flexible when things change. You've got to move with it and don't look back. That's the message there. He said to me, "You've got to read this."
- And he said, "You can do it. It's only fifty pages." So I did, and I thought, "Where does that apply to me?" [laughs] Probably everywhere.
- Riess: And how about cooking shows? Do you watch them?
- Cunningham: No, not very much. I don't. I don't.
- Riess: What are you doing when you're going to the city five nights a week? Who sets the agenda? They're all friends of yours?
- Cunningham: Yes, they're all friends. I usually go with Michael Bauer once a week. I went with Peggy Knickerbocker the other night. Wait a minute. Who else do I see a lot of? Tomorrow night I go with John Goyak. He owns Casa Orinda and runs it. I go with a friend named Betsy Feitchmeir. Some people who are just

visiting the city call me, that I know, and I did that the other night. Went to the Black Cat again.

Riess: They say, "What's good? We want to take you to dinner."

Cunningham: Yes, they like to. And I like to do it. I like to drive.

Riess: Are you recognized in all of these places?

Cunningham: Well, I've done it for so many years. I did it with James Beard. Very often I would have dinner with him in the evening, early. So when you're around so long--see, most of the staff and all of that--these people are moving around and have been for years and years, so you come to know them. They're just in a different restaurant. And I like them. They work hard. You know, it's such a tough job.

Riess: Do you order from the menu, or do they suggest things?

Cunningham: No, I like to order from the menu. Usually they will send out a dish or two, which is generous.

But it's just a diversion. Always I had cooked dinner starting at five o'clock. It's at five o'clock that I get depressed if I'm here. I don't do it so much anymore because I've got things to catch up on, but five o'clock feels wrong to me.

Riess: Since you've been widowed?

Cunningham: Yes, well, since the children have gone. And I'm alone, yes. So it's a lot better for me to get in that car--and I've never found big answers to anxieties and depressions. The thing that works is distraction. That's it. In a nutshell. Shallow but true. It isn't profound. And I am distracted. I love to drive, I don't mind traffic. And I like restaurants. So that's what works. And I'm home by ten o'clock at night. I get up at six, and all summer long I have to get at the pool at 6:30 because they have a swim team coming early.

Riess: One more question, if I'm not going to see you for a few months. What are you doing about the Thanksgiving dinner filming?

Cunningham: You know, they--it's funny. I forgot. I was going to call them today to make sure. I think that it's been decided that they will cook the food over in San Francisco and bring it here, and we will make it look like it was just cooked here. That's ideal. Oh, you can imagine, if you get these people in with cameras!

They sent this woman over who took all the photographs of the kitchen, so they can see with their own eyes that this is not going to accommodate five, six people in there.

Riess: And you'll have guests?

Cunningham: Chuck Williams and Wade Benson {?} and James West, who works at Williams-Sonoma. Michael Bauer, Michael Murphy. And Edith Goldstein. My daughter will come, I'll have maybe another two women, and who else?

Riess: Well, that's one more thing to get behind you. And what I suggest for you, if as you're walking down the hallway, walking past all these pictures of your friends, think in terms of "How did I meet that person?" and "What did I learn from that person?"

Cunningham: Well, I can do that.

Riess: It could be fun. And it's really what would make good oral history—what you did together, what difference it made.

Cunningham: Right. Well, you certainly never know when you meet people what will happen, do you?

[End of Interview]

Interview 4: July 19, 2002

[Begin Tape 7, Side A]

Riess: We've talked about the classes you did with James Beard, but I wondered if there were any particular anecdotes or incidents or disasters to tell about. Or did they go smoothly for eleven years?

Cunningham: Well, I would say they did go smoothly for eleven years. He was very, very good at what he did, and he was a wonderful teacher. He believed in teaching, and the students doing the cooking for the different recipes. And of course, that is the best way to learn, because you're doing it, and not hearing about it, even viewing it. If you know something about cooking, it makes it easier. But, I think his method was the best of all, where everyone pitched in and made the same thing.

It wasn't always that way. He would plot out a lunch or dinner, and people would do different parts of that, and then he would walk around and he could correct them. It was a very ideal way, I know, the best. But it is more expensive. Let's say I wanted to do that. You'd have to have all the ingredients for all the students and, you know, it's a big deal. So you don't get that kind of teaching very much.

Riess: When you were assisting him, you were the one who was providing all the ingredients and doing all of the shopping?

Cunningham: Yes, I would do the shopping. Chuck Williams was doing a lot, too, to help him. Both of us were helping him through all those years—assisting him. Chuck is a very, very good cook himself, as you would know. And he liked it, you know, just as I did. It's very pleasant. It's a very communal experience to cook with others, or be in a cooking class. People interact, and make friends.

Riess: So it's something you might volunteer to do?

Cunningham: Oh, absolutely. You learn all the time, you never know it all, and so it's always welcome. James Beard was an outstanding teacher and his passion for food was totally genuine, and that isn't true of everyone, that isn't always true.

Riess: Did the format change at all over the years?

Cunningham: No, he always used the same process. We did the same thing at Fournou's Ovens. As he was aging, it was sometimes a little harder for him to move around a lot, but everyone could bring up what they were doing, and show him, and let him taste it, and tell them, which he did.

Riess: The same people would come back, year after year?

Cunningham: We got new people with time, also, but there were certainly those regulars that would never miss it.

Riess: Did any of them turn out to be professional?

Cunningham: Well, yes, I would say they did. Sharon Kramis {?} up in Seattle. She does all of the food programming for a chain of restaurants up there. She herself is absolutely a wonderful, wonderful cook. I can't think of any famous chef that was in a class, but Jon Carroll who lives in San Francisco, he's done some wonderful cookbooks, he is working with Chuck now on some books.

Riess: Jon Carroll the *Chronicle* writer?

[interruption for telephone call]

Riess: One of the things about this oral history is that it will show what your life is like. That was someone arranging for an autographed book?

Cunningham: Yes. These fundraising auctions are all over the place at this time of the year. I am giving them the basic *Fannie Farmer Cookbook*. Crondolet High School—that's here in Walnut Creek—I always give them two or three books.

Riess: Okay, so you were saying that Jon Carroll—?

Cunningham: Yes, he learned a lot from James.

Riess: Were those classes a place to introduce new cooking equipment? Was that one of the reasons Chuck Williams was involved?

Cunningham: No, not at all. Not at all. He didn't care about that. No. It was simply to learn to cook, and to enjoy this collection of new recipes, and that was all it was.

Riess: There was not a kind of sponsorship?

Cunningham: No, not at all. No, we all paid.

Riess: Did Cuisinart come out during that time?

Cunningham: It did. In fact, the first Cuisinart that we all saw I think was up in Seaside. I think it was.

But there was none of that trying to make money on it, other than the cost of classes. There was none of that. The man that developed the Cuisinart, or brought it here from Europe, he was a friend of James's, he lived in New York. I can't think of his name now, but we all knew him {?}, and Abby Mandel, who has been very involved in the world of food for a lot of years, was sort of the one that ran the sales and demonstrated the Cuisinart.

- Riess: Do you think it's been a huge help?
- Cunningham: The Cuisinart? Oh, I think it's been a great help. It can make breadcrumbs; it can do a lot of things fast. Yeah, I think it had a real place.
- Riess: Bill Jorgenson's name is associated with your writing the Fannie Farmer book. Who was he?
- Cunningham: Bill Jorgenson owned the Fannie Farmer Candy Company. So he and Judith Jones made the decision jointly to hire me to do the revision, the first revision. That's what Bill Jorgenson is all about. He owned the rights to the book.
- Riess: Since I've last seen you, I've read Ruth Reichl's more recent book, *Comfort Me with Apples*. In her first book, *Tender at the Bone*, she refers to you. Would you tell me about your friendship with her?
- Cunningham: We met, so many years ago, at a party given for James Beard in San Francisco at Bill Jamie's {?} place. This was long, long back. Ruth was invited. I didn't know Ruth, I'd never heard the name, and I can't quite remember what that link was, because James had never met her. So anyway, she had come hoping to meet James and talk to him.

I think she says in the book—and it wasn't like him, and she may have misinterpreted something, because he was basically a people person, and this was a party, and he was kind of the center of the deal—but she said he hurt her feelings, he was rude to her. It really wasn't like him, and I never quizzed her about it. I thought, "Why?"

So she kind of stuck by me then, and I think she felt--she was tempted to leave, but it seemed awkward, so she was, you know, there. And I was sorry that happened. We talked for a while--and I don't know who wouldn't like Ruth right away--and we decided to get together and we did that a week or two after that.

We have shared many, many wonderful times together. I've traveled a lot with her. So we became very good friends. She was based in Berkeley. She was living in what I call a commune—one of those big, old shingled houses—and I think there were about eight people living with her, and they all paid thirty dollars a month and they were buying the house they were in. But they had no money to speak of, and she did all kinds of things.

She was working in a restaurant in Berkeley. But they used to go around--they'd go to a restaurant where food would be in the trash bins, and they would take that out and cook it so it was safe to eat. They were struggling. So we were friends, I saw a lot of her, we met very frequently, and we have been friends for years and years and years, and it's wonderful to see her so successful.

- Riess: Her second book brings up her relationship with Colman Andrews. And now he has *Saveur* magazine and she is editor of *Gourmet*. I'd be interest in your thoughts about *Gourmet* and *Saveur*.
- Cunningham: Oh, they're very different. Very, very different. *Gourmet* is a very stylish food magazine. The pictures are stylish, they are deliberately fixed to look beautiful. *Saveur* is just the opposite. They make the food look like you might have it in your own home. It's very real. The magazines are totally different concepts. Both of them are equally good. *Saveur* is having trouble financially, you know.
- Riess: *Saveur* seems more like what Ruth Reichl would want to be doing. That's what's mystifying about the whole thing.
- Cunningham: Well, I don't think that she has the final say, necessarily, about how *Gourmet* is laid out. And what's his name that owns it—Newhouse. S.I. Newhouse, you know, she follows what the owner wants, and that's why you see it the way it is.
- Riess: She also was with *Metropolitan Home*. What is that magazine?
- Cunningham: *Metropolitan Home* is about homes, design, furnishings, and what's-her-name, Donna Warner [is editor-in-chief]. Dorothy Kalins, Colman Andrews, and Christopher Hirscheimer did run *Saveur*. The owner now of *Saveur*—who I believe to be different—decided that Colman, being a man, would be ample to run the magazine. So Dorothy Kalins was dismissed, which was a damned shame, because she has so much that Colman doesn't have. She's now editor-in chief of *Newsweek*. But she wants to be with *Saveur*. It was her concept. She's the one that conceived it, and it was, to me, a stupid move on their part to choose Colman rather than Dorothy, because the magazine—she's the one who has the creative ideas. And Christopher's wonderfully good herself. She's wonderful at photography, she's wonderful at writing—so she's kind of free-lancing. She's in huge demand anyway.
- Riess: Christopher Hirscheimer is a woman?
- Cunningham: Uh-huh. And she's lovely, everybody loves her. She was born and raised in San Francisco. She has four older brothers. Her mother is very eccentric--I've had dinner with Christopher and her mother. I've known Christopher very, very well. She is absolutely wonderful, and her mother is rather eccentric. The story is that her mother and father had a great deal of money, but upon his death it was discovered that the money had run out. And the mother drank too much, was always partying and everything, but she decided that she should get a job. The older brothers were all in other parts of the country, and so Christopher came out. She said, "I couldn't imagine what she could do, because she had never done anything." And her mother—this really is funny, and I wouldn't print it without finding out if it would hurt her, because her

mother is still alive. Christopher said, "I felt we could all work and chip in together and take care of her and give her the money, because she's not qualified to do anything." But then her mother got a job in a mortuary! Christopher thought she'd better stay another week and just make sure it was all right, and so she continued to be with her mother. Well, her mother's job was to sell caskets.

This one morning Christopher said she was watching her get ready, and she was combing her hair, and then she took—I don't remember what the pill was, but by mistake she took one of Christopher's pills that were to be used only rarely, a potent pill. And Christopher said, "My God, I saw her swallow it and I went in and I said, 'You are going to get very, very sick, and I'm going to have to take you to the hospital. You better have your stomach pumped right now so this doesn't affect you.'" And the mother refused, she wouldn't do it, and she went. And Christopher said, "I just sat by the phone. I thought, 'I'm going to get a call.'" But she didn't.

When her mother came home late in the afternoon she said to Christopher, "You know, I got to work, Christopher, and I was so groggy and kind of shaky on my legs that I took off my dress and some of my clothes and hung them up and climbed in the casket that was open and went to sleep." And she said, "Then, Christopher, you know what?" I remember Christopher telling me this exactly. She said, "I got a call from a man late in the afternoon, and he said, 'Madam, I came to buy a casket.' And he said, 'I went in and there was a naked woman in a casket, dead!'" [laughter] Christopher said, "I just can't cope with my mother!" You'd believe every word if you met her mother.

- Riess: I asked about *Metropolitan Home* because I think Ruth Reichl was writing for it.
- Cunningham: Well, you see, Dorothy Kalins started that magazine, *Metropolitan Home*. She was editor for a long time, and then Donna Warner took over. Donna comes out here, she is wonderful. We've traveled together a lot. Not a lot, but we've been in Paris together. She's great, and I think she does a good job. It is what you expect.
- Riess: Mostly a shelter magazine? More shelter than food.
- Cunningham: Yeah.
- Riess: I didn't even think to ask you about Martha Stewart, but how could we talk about magazines without asking your considered opinion of Martha. Have you met her?
- Cunningham: I met her once, and so briefly it almost doesn't count. Well, I'm sure that you do know that she is totally despised and always has been. She is a dreadful

human being, she really is. I used to do classes in Connecticut--that's where she lived, originally.

Riess: Westport.

Cunningham: Uh-huh, that's where it was. And a woman named Sally Van Rensselaer owned a group of beautiful shops called Hay Day. They had fresh produce and wonderful cakes and pies that were sold there. I did a lot of cooking classes for her over a few years. When I went to Connecticut—this was way back—she was telling me, apropos of something, she said, “You know, Martha Stewart has her catering business here.” She said, “She's, I think, trying to do other things, too,” and she said, “She'll come in quite regularly, she'll buy possibly three or four pies and cakes and take them and go, and then about four hours later she brings them back and wants her money back.” And she said, “She's doing photo shoots.” This is absolutely true. If you knew Sally Van Rensselaer, she'd never tell you anything that wasn't true.

Riess: And claiming this as her own production?

Cunningham: Uh-huh. And Sally said, “We're in such a small community, I just put up with it. It's not worth having a fracas. It won't serve me well.” I have heard vile stories about her [Stewart] for the past twenty years. I can tell you, I have never heard a good story about her. Not one good thing. Ever. And you would have a hard time getting anyone in the food world that could tell you anything nice about her. She's really despicable.

Riess: It's so interesting, because if you look at her magazine it's all about “friends,” her friends, eating together. And her famous calendar of doings with famous people.

Cunningham: I know, and people love the magazine. But trust me, she's really despicable. And I think that if people could give vent to their real feelings, there would be a big party because she has lost money in the market. [laughter]

Riess: In Ruth Reichl's *Comfort Me with Apples*, she talks about “foodies.” She has a whole chapter about “foodies.” I wonder, for you, what does that word mean.

Cunningham: Oh, I think it is a commonly used word. It just means they are affiliated in some way with business, or some kind of involvement in the world of food. It's kind of an awkward word, it's sort of a clumsy word.

Riess: Partly it appeared that they were collectors of experiences, you know, the first to discover a new restaurant or chef. Almost in an obsessive way.

Cunningham: I don't know. She may mean something more of that nature, but I don't know, I've never heard her say that. Actually, she could have been called a “foodie” in Berkeley. I mean, that would be typical, and it wouldn't be meant critically.

Riess: Where did you first meet Alice Waters?

Cunningham: I met her at Chez Panisse a very short time after it opened. It's now, you know, thirty years old. I had a friend who lived in Lafayette, and she had by accident discovered it--it had barely been open--and she was so impressed with the food, she told me about it, so then I went. I'm not certain, but it had been open only a matter, I think, of maybe a couple of months—not long. Indeed, it had everything, and more than she had been enthusiastic about.

I came to know Alice early on, and there are a group of us who are called "Friends of the Restaurant." At that time—Alice is not good with money, never has been, doesn't pay attention, doesn't know how to handle it, and so they were almost going to have to close the restaurant down. Number one, she wanted to pay her help a great deal of money, but she didn't have any money. And it was really originally done because she belonged to a group of people who were rebelling at the university, politically. They had an underground letter, a political letter. She was looking also for a place—Come here. [chair scraping, cat gets on the table]

Because food--these people had no money, and she was worried about how they were going to eat. And so, I don't know what, juggling all of it, I've never known the details. But that's why the restaurant existed, primarily. That was the motivator.

[End Tape 7, Side A]

[Begin Tape 7, Side B]

Riess: The friends of the restaurant, what did they actually do?

Cunningham: Well, we brought more people in, we went more regularly ourselves. Everybody wanted it to exist, and we did what we could.

Riess: Did you help out in the kitchen?

Cunningham: No, I was never asked to do that. She had a lot of help. And the food was wonderful, even then, way back.

Riess: I knew Jean Opton, who was running the Kitchen Store in Berkeley.

Cunningham: She saved the day. She had that kitchen shop in Berkeley, and it was successful. She had the same attachment to Chez Panisse that we all had. So when she knew that they weren't going to survive, she hired a manager for her shop and went to Chez Panisse, and I think she was working on the finances there for a long, long time. It wasn't just weeks and months, it was longer. Yes, I really say, she saved the restaurant, you know. She really—she was wonderful.

- Riess: So the restaurant was idealistic at the beginning.
- Cunningham: Well, it was also a solution for food. I mean, this thing of the need of feeding the people that were doing the underground letter, this political letter.
- Riess: The stories of restaurants begun that way—didn't Judith Jones have a little restaurant in Paris for a while?
- Cunningham: It was in a home, in a private home.
- Riess: And didn't Edna Lewis do this too?
- Cunningham: Well, Edna Lewis was in a little café back in New York. I can't think of the name of that café [Café Nicholson], but she at that time made it famous—and it was very small, it was near the park. I used to know all of these things exactly, all of the details. But the collection of people who went to this little restaurant that was very inexpensive—and she is a wonderful cook, too—there were all these authors, famous authors, that came there, and at that time, I don't think they had much money. They came, and she made it famous for her food, but they made it famous by their presence, you know. And her story was somewhat similar.
- Riess: These are women who got into the restaurant business out of the goodness of their hearts.
- Cunningham: Yeah, right.
- Riess: Tell me how it is that a woman can decide to do that. I mean, restaurants are very high-risk enterprises. Anyone would tell you that.
- Cunningham: True. Yeah, 85 percent of restaurants in San Francisco close within two years, so it's a very tough business.
- Riess: Do you think all of those women have something in common?
- Cunningham: Well, the obvious thing that they do have in common is wonderful taste, because they can all make food taste—the reason it's successful is what the food tastes like. People aren't going to get there if they are serving tired meatloaf, you know. They're gifted. It's nothing you can learn. To have a critical palate is something you come with. My experience has been that you can't develop it. I mean, you can work with someone that has a good critical palate and they can guide you and correct your dishes, but that's not being a tip-top chef. You have to be good. And oddly, I do know some who aren't really very good, but they have gone a long way. Sometimes it's hiring people who do have what they don't have, you know. [cat walks over machine]

Riess: [laughter] We're going to have to tell the transcriber that a cat is walking over the machine. Do you have a critical palate?

Cunningham: Yes, I do. I do.

Riess: And that wasn't developed.

Cunningham: No. But you know, keep in mind too, there's no defense for taste. There's none at all. I mean, you might hate something I cooked and might love something somebody else--you know, the same thing. The only test is the number of people in restaurants that come because they love the food. That's the thing, that's the real test. No, I don't think it's anything you can work on and get better with. I don't think that happens.

Riess: Yes, okay. I was thinking that the ambiance and the spirit of the woman in charge was the key, but really, it's the food.

Cunningham: Well, you know, there can be many reasons why people go to a particular restaurant, and courtesy, kindness, feeling welcome, all of those things can't help but draw people there. They want to be welcomed. And there are an awful lot of restaurants that don't do that, they make you feel like you're lucky. Lucky if you get seated and get fed. And that's no good. It has to have a lot of different positive things to make it really wonderful. It's hard to do a restaurant. Too many factors come into it.

Riess: Marion, I know that what has been keeping you occupied for the last year, maybe more, is your new book. How are you putting together your new book?

Cunningham: Well, the title of the book is *Lost Recipes*. These are recipes that are not familiar anymore, largely. I mean, I'm sure that some people will remember them or recognize them. Like Country Captain, and some of the curry dishes. We don't see curry commonly, you know, as it was. Oh I have--one of the soups is called "Emergency Soup."

You know, it's like clothes, style changes. And ingredients aren't what they used to be, and there have been tremendous changes in what we can buy in the market. So there are a lot of differences. So it isn't hard to get these recipes from the past. But the reason for writing the book is the message which is, and I know I've told you, it has to do with everyone eating on their own agenda—eating often heat-and-eat food, take-out—fewer people cook than ever, ever have. What we are losing is a sense of community, and experiencing a home, whether it is a family or a collection of people—whatever it is. When you eat individually when you want to eat, it's an isolating thing to do, and you don't learn about the people you share a home with, and that is a very, very important lesson. We are not born civilized, you have to become civilized.

Riess: To find these recipes you dig into old recipe books?

- Cunningham: Oh yeah. I have, I don't know, about 2,500 books. And I've got a lot of old ones. I've got even the original—it's a facsimile—of Amelia Simmons's *American Cookery*. She was the first author in this country.
- Riess: And didn't you find that lots of those old recipes were sort of awful?
- Cunningham: No, not really at all. No, I wouldn't say that a bit. It's always been somewhat the same. See, this is one thing, I think. If one needs confirmation on the fact that we should be eating together, you have to think--this is what I've thought--whoever designed us, why did they design us to be hungry three times a day? They could have made it once a month, they could have made it once a week, once a day, you know, anything could have been done. But it's three times a day, and I say, that is to draw us together and keep us together. I'm willing to argue this point with anyone. [laughter] I believe it completely.
- There are no villains. This is the evolution from the time the immigrants landed, just the evolution as it's developed. We have lost—I hate sounding so sanctimonious, but nonetheless, we have lost the values of life that give us the greatest rewards. And having fancy kitchens and homes that are enclosed in fencing and all that, all this isolation, that isn't the way to go. That isn't a good way to go.
- Riess: And you don't believe food has evolved to get better and better and better?
- Cunningham: No. It's always been so it can keep us alive. But--no.
- Riess: And in your own lifetime you don't feel that things have become more and more delicious?
- Cunningham: No. There were dishes that I loved as a child. My grandmother had come from Italy. She used to make artichokes that she had laid garlic crumbs of bread all throughout. No, listen, there are some things that aren't half as good as they used to be. And I'll tell you, the products that we get today in supermarkets are despicable. Absolutely despicable. It just is terrible. They pick everything before it's ripened so it can be shipped. Stone fruits do not ripen. They rot.
- They are asking \$1.33 for apricots down at Safeway--a pound. People don't have a lot of money, and if they haven't had experience, they don't know, and most of them don't. To not know what a ripe peach tastes like, or a ripe apple, or anything--I think it's a crime. It's taking care of a few people making tons of money. And it's allowing people with little very money to—it's just a scam and it makes me absolutely furious. I want to stand by those [bins of fruit] and tell these poor young people that are shopping, "Don't buy it!"
- Riess: Go out to Brentwood and pick it.
- Cunningham: That's right. Go out to Brentwood and pick it.

- Riess: What would you say if they are standing by the organic foods and paying twice as much?
- Cunningham: Well, that's one thing that has kept organic food slowed down is that there are many that can't afford it. Couldn't afford it.
- Riess: Other than that, do you think that it's better?
- Cunningham: Well, I certainly understand Alice's goal, and admire it enormously, which is to preserve the soil, preserve the land. I think what we need to be preserving, frankly, is our humanity, our sense of our fellow man and our learning to be peaceful people, and not to be constantly wanting to be rich.
- Riess: You are in good company there. Have friends submitted recipes to you for the book? Is that one of the ways that you are getting your recipes?
- Cunningham: No, no.
- Riess: Why has this book been a hard one for you?
- Cunningham: Well, it's hard because the message--I don't want it to make people guilty. And any time you are preaching about anything with passion, the people that aren't abiding by this feel guilt. But very genuinely, it's just been the evolution, it's just been--we find ourselves here.
- All I want them to know is that they are losing a connection with their fellow man that could give them far more than money and all kinds of things. That it is important--it's important to have a peaceful community, it's important to try to contain peace in the country, it's important. I know we're always going to have wars, certainly as long as, I don't know, forever, probably. I wish it weren't like that.
- Riess: Perhaps people feel deficient in their social skills. Maybe they worry that they can't keep up their end of the dinner table conversation.
- Cunningham: I don't think it's that. I think that is something that nature has given us, that interacting is very natural. No, I think it's that people are chasing the wrong goals. I do think a lot of people are watching television. It's all about watching and being entertained—hopefully that's what they're after on TV. Or maybe listening to news. And people are eating alone—gulping. Did I show you these pictures I have?
- Riess: No.
- Cunningham: Well, it will tell you exactly how I feel. Wait a moment here. [shows interviewer a photograph of a man simply stuffing fast food into his mouth]

- Riess: Just one more question on that topic. What do you think about the constant writing about the nutritional value of food that everyone is exposed to in the newspapers now—more fat, less fat—how do people deal with that?
- Cunningham: Well, I think that the government does not pay attention to manufactured foods, foods that go through the hands of all kinds of companies that are making food. There is no reason that they couldn't see that the foods were healthy. And we are constantly being surprised at something we read that we learn, like this trans-fat story. I mean, if you read *Fast Food Nation*¹, you almost will quit eating. It is absolutely a stunning book, and it deserves to be on the best-seller list, which it has been for ages.
- Again, this whole thing. People don't care about people. Why wouldn't a manufacturer want to make healthy food for the country he lives in? They don't give a damn. And if they can get away with it—this whole attitude, and I don't want to exaggerate, because most people are honest and caring, but the people who seem to have the power are often very corrupt. What kind of a country are we in where we can't trust the food that we eat? They don't care. And they probably don't care because they weren't sitting at a table sharing food and coming to have a link with their fellow man. It would be harder to harm him if you knew him and liked him.
- Riess: You would think that here in California there would be as smart an attitude about food as anywhere in the world.
- Cunningham: Yeah, you would. But—I don't know, people are eating for the wrong reason. That's all.
- Riess: What's the importance of Copia [American Center for Wine, Food, and the Arts, Napa, California]? Is this an important educational center?
- Cunningham: Well, we'll see. It's awfully new, and I think they are fumbling, finding their way. I was on the program up there when it first opened, and I am going to be again on a program. I think they have to find and better understand what they are about.
- Riess: What are they about?
- Cunningham: I don't know.
- Riess: Calling it "The American Center for Wine, Food, and the Arts" puts wine first. Is it about selling more wine?
- Cunningham: Well, I think that number one--and I'm a great admirer of the Mondavis, they're really great. Margrit and Bob Mondavi are extraordinary people, and

¹ *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*, by Eric Schlosser, Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

they have done a great deal for the community. You know, he's running a mega-business, and it's very logical that he would say "wine" before he would say "food." But I don't see anything wrong in that, they're both being mentioned. And he has worked very hard—he really is a very genuine believer in the fact that a glass of wine can be healthy.

Riess: Do they have a mission?

Cunningham: No. Well, the only mission is that they--I think that they wanted to give back something that was valuable to the community, and they felt that the museum would do it. Some of the people that they have, you have to question their taste, sort of, but I don't know--you know, there's no defense for taste. That's all I can say. [laughter]

Riess: Who was it who said that first?

Cunningham: Well, I heard it from James Beard. [laughter]

Riess: Tell me about your eightieth birthday party. Was that a surprise?

Cunningham: No, oh no. It wasn't a surprise. It was wonderful. It was really, really wonderful.

Riess: Who put it on?

Cunningham: Well, it was mutually done. Michael Bauer, Alice Waters. She had done a wonderful party also when I was seventy, up at Mondavi's, with, I don't know, hundreds of people there. It was really wonderful fun, and she's been incredibly good to me. Anyway, so she--she's close to Ruth--and Michael Bauer, and wait a moment, was there—?

He [the cat] has to go out again. Damn. [to cat] You have to wait a minute, sweetie.

Riess: Do you want to let him out?

Cunningham: Well, he's got his box. He can go in his box. He knows about his box. [to cat] Yes, he does.

Riess: He wants to be in somebody's lap.

Cunningham: Well, he's gotten so heavy.

Riess: So Michael Bauer, and—?

Cunningham: Michael Bauer and Ruth and Alice, and Flo Braker, I think, helped on it too. Oh they couldn't have been more wonderful, really, all of them, and it was a

great day. It could not have been better. It was really never to be forgotten. It was terrific. I was very lucky.

[End Tape 7, Side B]

[Begin Tape 8, Side A]

- Riess: How important locally and nationally are the *Chronicle* food writers?
- Cunningham: Well, that's a very hard one. I can't talk about nationally. I think Kim Severson is becoming more and more known. She's been hugely successfully writing. Here sweetie. [cat audibly purring]
- Riess: Michael Bauer has been food editor since 1986.
- Cunningham: I think he has been very, very successful. They've given him a huge amount of additional work to do; he's doing some of the other sections. He's really capable. He gets to work at 4:30 almost every morning. Now I'm going to meet him—I'm going to meet him early tonight at a restaurant [Cunningham and Bauer eat together regularly in San Francisco].
- Riess: A new one?
- Cunningham: Relatively speaking. It's in the [Café du?] Soleil, which I'm not familiar with.
- Riess: Is there anything you would say about that food section? It seems to have a strong representation of ethnic foods. Jacqueline Higuera—?
- Cunningham: Yeah, she's swell. She does Mexican food.
- Riess: Do you trust the recipes, that they have been fully vetted, that you can just do it?
- Cunningham: Yeah, I think they should be very workable. It would shock me if they weren't.
- Riess: How do they do that?
- Cunningham: Oh, they make them at home. Is that what you're saying?
- Riess: Yes.
- Cunningham: Well, they're not testing all those recipes, but they know that these people are reliable. They have learned that, you see, so it's not risk-taking because Flo Braker, every one of those people—I know them very well, and they are totally reliable. They take pride in their work, they understand that if it turns

out well people will buy their books. It's very purposeful for them to write the recipes so they're good and reliable.

Riess: Of course they could be misprinted.

Cunningham: Once in a while, but they're very careful about that. They really are.

Riess: The two *Chronicle* cookbooks are very good.

Cunningham: Oh, yeah, they're wonderful.

Riess: How do you use your kitchen as a test kitchen? Do you?

Cunningham: Yes, I do. I only do one dish at a time. Once in a while that isn't true. If I have some long-cooking thing, I'll start that, and then I'll go to another one. But I never undertake doing a lot at once.

Riess: What I would like to do right now is use the video camera to tour your gallery of photographs. This is James Beard?

Cunningham: That's James Beard.

Riess: And these apples?

Cunningham: I love the apples. A woman over in Sausalito painted them. I spent a lot of money on that, I can't remember how much, but I loved it so, I'm just glad I did.

Riess: Now this dog portrait?

Cunningham: I bought that in London, that picture, because it reminded me of a dog I had. It wasn't Rover, it was the one earlier than Rover. And that was a cat that belonged to a friend of mine, Nancy Schroeder. That was her cat in her basin. But doesn't it look kind of comfortable?

Riess: And this diploma?

Cunningham: Oh, *Grand Dame of Les Dames d'Escoffier*? They're a very nice group of women.

Riess: Do you think that women in the profession particularly need to be recognized?

Cunningham: Well, I don't know. I think if they deserve it, it's a very good thing. If they contribute, they are entitled to it in the same way men are. There is no reason they should be excluded.

Riess: I just wondered if you felt they were under-appreciated.

- Cunningham: Well, that's hard to know. You could get a lot of women that would say they were.
- Riess: And this bit of framed quilting?
- Cunningham: Jeffrey Steingarten gave it to me. You know, he writes for *Vogue*—I don't know if you read it, but he has written some hilarious books, and he knows tons about food.²
- Riess: Another award, "Who's Who of Cooking in America." And what's this about iceberg lettuce?
- Cunningham: Oh, see, I love iceberg lettuce. Alice [Waters] and I have had a running standoff on this thing, because she doesn't, she thinks it's—the only feeble excuse she could give me was it isn't as nourishing as lettuces that are raised organically. And so I wrote a piece in the *Chronicle* about iceberg lettuce. It was kind of a funny piece, and the iceberg lettuce people—I don't know what they call themselves, Iceberg Lettuce Commission—they had read it and they called me and said would I go on tour and promote iceberg lettuce? I said, "I'm happy to do it. I love it, I buy it, I eat it all the time." And they paid me \$40,000 to do a tour that wasn't that long!
- Riess: Where did you appear in your tour?
- Cunningham: Oh, I went to Chicago, I gave a talk at all these places about iceberg lettuce. It was easy, and it was fun, and I believed it. I do believe it! I would have done it free, you know. So that was really terrific.
- Riess: Okay, from the top, we have a cake? This is the cover of *Gourmet*.
- Cunningham: That was the wedding cake, the groom's cake, but it has faded. You're not really seeing it the way it looked.
- Riess: You did the fancy flowers, too?
- Cunningham: Yes, but I don't like to.
- Riess: Beautiful. It looks delicious, still.
- Cunningham: Well, that's what counts, if it tastes good.
- Riess: Now, here's James Beard on the beach.

² *The Man Who Ate Everything: And Other Gastronomic Feats, Disputes, and Pleasurable Pursuits*, Jeffrey Steingarten, Random House, 1998

Cunningham: Yes, a man from Eugene, Oregon took that picture, and we were so impressed. We were amazed that he could do such a stunning job. Well, it turned out he had won the highest awards for photography, I mean, he was really a professional! When James saw it, he said “this is my last walk,” or something to that effect. It was very touching.

Riess: I’ve seen this one before. [Cunningham and Beard with a lunch on a grassy hilltop]

Cunningham: That was up in the hills of Carmel. Jeremiah Tower was cooking in a restaurant down there, and that was the food that he made that day.

Riess: [in hall of Cunningham’s house, and the light is not very good] I thought those were Portobello mushrooms at first.

Cunningham: No, no, they’re crepes, and it’s in Paris. There’s a little stand, and they are the best I have ever, ever eaten. I was there with Leah Marshall. She’s been living in Paris for years. She’s now managing George V--that wonderful hotel. Or doing something like that--assistant manager.

Riess: And here are Margrit and Robert Mondavi. What was this menu?

Cunningham: Margrit did the picture. She’s good at art.

Riess: [reading] “A luncheon on Guapo Hill in honor of Marion Cunningham, 1994.”

Cunningham: That’s a picture of James Beard and myself and Jim Nassikas who built and owned Stanford Court Hotel—that’s his son. That’s Patty Unterman. She owns Hayes Street Grill. And below them are Bill Wilkinson, and the man that lives with. He did Campton Place, and now he owns Greenleaf and runs it [in Ashland, Oregon].

And that is Alice with her daughter, Fanny. And right under that is Amy Pressman. She’s down in Pasadena, and she’s a wonderful baker. The two of us started The Baker’s Dozen. And do you know how many members we have now? Five hundred and three!

That’s Judith Jones’s husband, Evan. There’s Chuck and myself, years ago.

Riess: Are you in constant touch with him?

Cunningham: Yes, we have dinner very often.

Riess: And here you are with—?

Cunningham: What is his name? I haven’t seen him in years. He is in New York, and he taught languages at a university in New York, but what he loved was food,

and we became friends because he wrote a letter, a food letter, in the Village--that was the connection.

Here are Michael James and Billy Cross. We remained friends for years. And that's Michael James when he was very, very young. That's Billy, and that's when they had the great chefs of France up at Mondavi's. And I used to go up and work for them.

This is Rosie Manell. She died about three years ago. She was a support for Julia [Child]. She is a wonderful cook, and she met Julia in Europe and they worked together.

Riess: Now, from the top of this row?

Cunningham: Helen Gustafson to your left. That is Jerry Anne DiVecchio She was food editor of *Sunset Magazine* until just about a year and a half ago.

And that's Ruth Reichl. And then the other picture is Cecilia Chiang. That's my daughter, Katherine. And that's Alice and--wait a minute what was his name--he's been gone for years from Chez Panisse. He was difficult.

That's Judy Rodgers. She owns Zuni restaurant. Fritz Streif--he's been at Chez Panisse for years. The one above is Michael Bauer. And this is Bill Jamie, and this is Heikki [Ronnalotti] who lived—they were together. Then above is Abby Mandel, with her first husband. And that's Donna and Frank Katzl at the very top, and they have Café for all Seasons on West Portal. It's been very, very successful. That's me, with Maggie Gin. And this is Flo Braker. And I can't remember her name--she's down in Arizona now, running a restaurant. She's down in San Diego. This was a wonderful teacher, French teacher, and a lot of us took classes from her.

And that's down in Los Angeles. That's [Giuliano] Bugialli and myself. This was a man who ran the food service there, and then you know Jacques Pepin and his wife.

That's Alice at the party for the 30th anniversary of Chez Panisse, up at the university, on the land up there [west of the Campanile].

Riess: And here you are with Edna Lewis. That's a good picture.

Cunningham: Michael Bauer got a photographer that was up in St. Helena, and that's where that was taken, from a long distance.

This is--he was married to Joyce McGillis, Dr. McGillis. Joyce is here. And this is Bill Hughes. And this is Clark Wolf, and here he is again. And this is Bill Hughes and myself.

Riess: “November lunch for Richard Olney.”

Cunningham: Yes, he was wonderful.

Riess: This is another class with James?

Cunningham: Yes, I’m sure it was. Let’s see. There’s Jim Nassikas. Some of these people I really scarcely—they were in classes with James up in Oregon. There, obviously, is myself, and here’s Chuck. And this man was just a terrible cook. And Helen Nassikas, Jim’s wife. And this woman was married to him [the terrible cook].

This is with Edna and Scott Peacock down in one of the southern countries. They gave a little conference—it wasn’t very large—for three years running, and I went to all of them. They went all over the South.

That’s Rose Barenbaum.

Riess: What’s *White Trash Cooking*?³

Cunningham: That guy was really fun. He had a little party, and I went to the party—this was so many years ago.

That’s John Hudspeth, who I met in James Beard’s first class. He opened Bridge Creek, which was on the corner right down the street from Chez Panisse. Alice got him the place and he ran it, and it was wildly successful. I worked with him, and set up a lot about the kitchen and the menus. But he didn’t pay the IRS, so they closed him down.

And that’s Jeffrey Steingarten, who did the quilt picture. He writes for *Vogue*.

Those two young women came from Seattle and they were in James’s classes. I can’t remember their name, but they were fun, they were very nice, and I visited them a few times. And this is Howard Bulka and he just opened a wonderful restaurant in Menlo Park called Marché.

And this was a contest. This is Jim Dodge, who was a great baker, and another great baker, and Julia, and I don’t think I knew the others.

Riess: Contests--that is a pretty big theme in cooking, don’t you think?

Cunningham: Oh, I don’t think so, there really isn’t a lot going on on that, particularly. This is Jeffrey Steingarten again, and this is Judith Jones again. She was wonderful.

³ *White Trash Cooking*, Ernest Matthew Mickler, Ten Speed Press, 1986.

She was up near Chicago, and she was a wonderful cook, ran a cooking school up there.

Riess: “I dreamed that butter and eggs and sugar came back and we all made cookies.” A menu for Jim Nassikas, with wonderful calligraphy.

Riess: “Linda’s dinner for James?”

Cunningham: Linda’s dinner for James. I really don’t remember. There’s Maggie Waldron, and M.F.K. Fischer at M.F.K Fischer’s home. She was a really wonderful writer.

This is Judith and her husband. This is Gerald Hirigoyen—he owns Pastis and another French restaurant, Fringale.

Here’s James Beard and a friend. And here’s Fannie Farmer. And I guess everybody you know there in that picture. This is with Danny Kaye. He loved food, and he was a very good cook.

And this is probably the best chef in the world, Albert Kumin. I sent Katherine, my daughter, to work with him for six weeks, and oh boy, did she learn a lot.

Riess: It says “a great baker.”

Cunningham: That’s what he was, yes, Swiss. And here’s Edna Lewis and Judith, and we went down to the South and celebrated her birthday, and Edna made that outfit. It’s gorgeous. She’s wonderful at everything she does. And she’s wonderful looking.

There was Michael when he first came—Michael Bauer, and I don’t know who all we had there.

And then that’s Richard Olney and my daughter in Paris. And this is James Ormsby, who’s now a chef at Plump Jack. We’ve been friends for a lot of years, and I was on a panel, I don’t remember.

Riess: Joe Baum.

Cunningham: Oh yeah, Joe Baum. He was a very interesting man.

Riess: And here you are, “Making cookies for a sister’s memorial.”

Cunningham: Well that’s the Shaker assignment for *Saveur*. And this is from The Baker’s Dozen, and everybody followed the same identical recipe for angel food cake. And this is Chris Kimball, who does *Cooks Illustrated* magazine. I spend

time—I'm going again this summer up to their farm. I've known him for about twenty years, and he's a great friend.

Riess: Will you cook with him, when you are there?

Cunningham: Probably. I was up there two years ago. This is Bill Hughes. He owned a kitchen shop in Berkeley for a long time that had all kinds of kitchen tools and things. It was on College Avenue, right across from Dreyers ice cream.

Well, I think we did it.

Riess: Thank you so much.

[End of Interview]

Suzanne Bassett Riess grew up in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. She received her BA in English from Goucher College in 1957. For several summers she was a feature writer for the Bethlehem Globe-Times of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. She did her graduate work in English literature at the University of London, and in art history at the University of California, Berkeley. From 1960 to 2004, Riess worked as an interviewer at the Regional Oral History Office, working in the fields of art, architecture, photography, social and cultural history, anthropology, writing, journalism, horticulture, physics, and University history. Her other interests have included many years of being a natural science docent at the Oakland Museum, that museum's Council on Architecture, free-lance photography, writing, gardening, and travel.