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Interview # 1: November 18, 2006

[Begin Audio File Ritchie 01 11-18-06.wav]

01-00:00:00  
Steinmetz:  
All right. This is Josh Steinmetz. I am here with Nick Ritchie. He is the rising star of NapaStyle. He works for Michael Chiarello as his right-hand man and head chef, and we’re going to try to get some history, and find out a bit more about NapaStyle today. So basically, as a chef, many of your influences are a result of experiences in your youth, your earliest memories of food and eating. Start with your family. Where did you grow up?

01-00:00:36  
Ritchie:  
I grew up here in Napa Valley in St. Helena, which is at the north end of the valley. So I grew up there. It was a small town. It still is a small town, but it was a much smaller town when I grew up. I was born in 1981 and spent the first eighteen years of my life there in St. Helena. I pretty much grew up there. I spent most of my time there. Both of my parents worked there in St. Helena, and that’s where I would say I spent all my time. I went to school in St Helena.

Steinmetz:  
And your parents are also from that area?

01-00:01:25  
Ritchie:  
Originally, no. My father is from South San Francisco.

Steinmetz:  
Okay, Bay Area

01-00:01:33  
Ritchie:  
Bay Area—And my mom moved around a lot, her father was an engineer, so every couple years they went somewhere else. So I believe my mom was born in Brooklyn but she lived in Brooklyn, she spent a lot of time in Hawaii, she lived in Hawaii for a few years. Then they finally moved out to Southern California and then she moved up to Marin where she went to school, and that’s where she met my dad, up there. My dad’s older brother, oldest brother, was actually a teacher at the school, and they some how met, they crossed paths.

Steinmetz:  
At St. Helena?

01-00:02:16  
Ritchie:  
No, in Marin.
Steinmetz:
Oh, okay, Marin. Now, I know your dad was the principal at St. Helena Catholic School. How long has he been doing that?

Ritchie:
He’s been the principal I think for three or four years.

Steinmetz:
Did he start as a teacher there?

Ritchie:
Yes, he started during my last year of school when I was in seventh or eighth grade. He was the aide to a first and second grade classroom—teacher’s aide—and he was the Phys Ed—the P.E. teacher and he did that for a couple years, and every year he did a little more, a little more. He became the Athletic Director, and at one point a Principal left, the Vice Principal slid up, and my dad took the Vice Principal, and I think it was about three years ago he took the Principal’s position.

Steinmetz:
Wow, that’s kind of—P.E. teacher/aide to Principal—

Ritchie:
Yes, well he was kind of jack-of-all trades at the school, you know. If the gutters were clogged he would climb up on the roof

Steinmetz:
So, he was well known in the community.

Ritchie:
Yes, he ran that market from 1979 to 1989. It was the small town local market.

Steinmetz:
Local — like perhaps local produce and what not?

Ritchie:
Yes, all local purveyors, and it was a place where you could come, and hang out, and chat. They had an old-fashioned butcher shop where they would have hanging sides of meat. There was sawdust on the floor, and they made their own sausage. It was just that it had a community feel. He ran deliveries. He had charge accounts. People could call him, and place an order. He used to take me when I was a little kid, that’s what we would do. I would help him bag up all the groceries, and then he’d say, oh, go over to the butcher’s and see what they’ve got for Mrs. So and So. I’d go grab the order, and we’d hop in my dad’s car, and we’d drive all around St.
Helena and deliver groceries to people, which—no one does, you know, no one does that anymore.

Steinmetz:
Right. So obviously, you were around food from pretty early. I mean at least as far as selling it, handling it, stocking it, and just having a lot of contact with food. Was there one specific person in your childhood, before Michael, that was a food mentor for you or—?

Ritchie:
I would just probably say just my dad and my experiences at the store. I remember I started this tradition at the store of the butcher Ernie, who was an Old Italian immigrant and he had a—[dog whines]

Steinmetz:
Oh, let me stop this.

Ritchie:
Sorry, I’m sorry.

[He is apologizing for dog whining. Interviewed stopped to deal with dog.]

Steinmetz:
All right, we were just talking kind of some background with your parents. Did you do any internships when you were in high school or culinary school?

Ritchie:
I did internships when I was at the CIA in New York. As far as here, when I was in high school, I started working at Tra Vigne when I was in eighth grade—the summer after eighth grade, so that was just a huge—you know experience, and it was like one big internship. I was paid—I worked, but I worked a lot of volunteer hours, just to learn and see what was going on. So it was a huge learning experience, the way I saw it. I was happy to be getting paid anything because they were paying me to learn.

Steinmetz:
Right.

Ritchie:
So no, I didn’t do internships at all I don’t think in high school. They kept me very busy at Tra Vigne, and if I wanted something extra, I could just go get it down there. If I wanted to see something, there was always an opportunity to come in and work for free and volunteer your time. If they were making olive oil out back—we used to make olive out at Tra Vigne out back with a press.
Steinmetz:
Wow.

01-00:01:34
Ritchie:
If they were making olive oil, I’d hang out. I would literally hang out until I had to go home. I was like fourteen and they’d be out there and I would be like, “Oh, it’s ten o’clock. My mom wants—I literally have to go home, guys.” I would get on my skateboard or my bike, and I’d ride back home or if we were if they were curing proscuitto or making sausage or making salami, or if they had big, big, big event—you know, a big huge—we used to do the Wine Spectator party every year at Tra Vigne. It’s like seven, eight hundred people, it’s huge. They still do it. It’s a magnum party. You have to be invited, number one. And you have to bring a magnum of wine to get in. It’s a huge magnum party at Tra Vigne. It’s a different theme every year at Tra Vigne, and Tra Vigne puts on all the food. So I used to help out at these. Any time there was anything going on and they knew I was very interested, I was eager, so they’d always ask me they’d say, “Hey Nickie, what are you doing, what are you doing on this day? You want to come, want to come help out?” I would show up. I’d work for free, and then I would leave when I had to leave. I learned so much there. It was like one big internship.

Steinmetz:
So you think you got most of your skills that you hold now from working in that field, in that particular restaurant? Was that what gave you the tools that you have today that’s made you what you are?

01-00:03:13
Ritchie:
Most definitely, yes. Yes—I can say that after working at Tra Vigne for—what was it? It was six years, or five years—five and half years before I went to culinary school—working in that environment with those people during that time period was the best experience. I couldn’t work—it makes everything else easy. After doing that there for that many years, I’m confident I can work anywhere.

Steinmetz:
Did Michael recommend— the —what was it?

01-00:03:56
Ritchie:
CIA

Steinmetz:
I wanted to say CIA but it sounds so formal. CIA, FBI.

01-00:03:58
Ritchie:
Yes, it’s the CIA.

Steinmetz:
And Michael, did he recommend that school to you, or—?
Ritchie:
Michael—there’s a good little story behind that. As I was at Tra Vigne every year, I would come up and up through the ranks a little bit, and every summer work fulltime, and then some. I worked a lot in the summer, and high school would start back up, and I would work after school for a little bit and work on weekends doing whatever, and they had what they called a cantinetta at Tra Vigne. It was like a little deli, and wine shop/wine bar, deli and retail located in the courtyard at Tra Vigne, but a separate building from the main restaurant. We would do lunch out there from like eleven to six, and that’s where I got hired. That’s where I started working—in the cantinetta. But we interacted with the main restaurant, kitchen, we’d use the same product. It was all the same business. It was just a little sandwich shop. Every year, I would do more and more. Every year I’d start doing more stuff in the main kitchen and they would ask me to come help and work banquets, and all I’d do was go in and stand there and put parsley on something, but it was—I felt like I was part of the team like I was working with these guys who were the best of the best. You know, they were at that time. They were the best of the best, and they were serious about what they did. They were kick-ass. It was a very hard-nosed—a very kick-ass environment. So yes, I would definitely say Tra Vigne is the base of all that I know and even more than food and technique and how to cut an onion and make a stock. They instilled a work ethic in me, and an understanding of why we do what we do in this industry that I don’t think I could have gotten anywhere else, and that kids these days getting out of culinary school do not get.

Steinmetz:
Right

Ritchie:
And maybe few select places where you can go and work for someone where they are going to instill that in you. But once again that’s all up to the kid. So these days, you can’t go to Tra Vigne and get what I got, and I’m lucky to have gotten my foot in the door, when I was twelve, and these guys molded me to you know—they trained me. They trained me to work good and it shows. Everywhere I’ve worked, every restaurant where I go, I excel. Every place I go, every restaurant I excel quickly because of what I did at Tra Vigne. For sure.

Steinmetz:
So right now, currently, are you only working for Michael or do you have side projects?

Ritchie:
No, I work full time for Michael, for NapaStyle.

Steinmetz:
Okay.

Ritchie:
My technical title is Culinary Manager. So I am the Culinary Manager of NapaStyle—or you could say, Michael’s sous chef. If we had a restaurant I would be his sous chef, but we don’t
have a restaurant and I do a lot of office work and other recipe development, so I’m a Culinary Manager.

**Steinmetz:**
How do you feel about Tuscan cuisine?

**Ritchie:**
I love Tuscan cuisine. When I was in Italy, I worked in Italy for about ten months, up north, not in Tuscany, way up north, like two hours from Austria. But towards the end when I got done with work, I worked ten months and I had a month to travel and the first thing I did was hop on a train and go down to Tuscany. And I went to Firenze, I went to Florence, I spent six days there and then I went a spent three days in Siena which is about a half an hour from Florence, kind of in the rolling hills of Tuscany. The food there is amazing and it is very simple. And a lot of the Italian restaurants you see in the States these days are based on Tuscan food. They perfected what they had. They are not extremely diverse. They are landlocked. They are in the middle of Italy, so they don’t have the best access to seafood and fish, but they do the best with what they have.

**Steinmetz:**
Tuscan food is user friendly then because that is probably why it has taken off so well in America because Americans are not necessarily the most skilled culinary artists and so that’s why—

**Ritchie:**
Exactly, exactly, it is kind of right there in the heart of Italy and it’s known especially for olive oil production. Tuscan olive oil is like the ideal olive oil. Yes, everywhere you go, you see all of these restaurants in the States that are “Italian restaurants” and a lot of them are based on Tuscan food. You see a lot of kind of faux Tuscan restaurants in the States. That and then you see all of the red sauce, like red sauce joints, spaghetti and meatballs.

**Steinmetz:**
That’s Tuscan as well?

**Ritchie:**
NO, that’s not. That’s kind of Southern Italian. That’s kind of—you get your mix when you go to say, I don’t know, what’s a good one—for example—it’s a chain—Il Fornaio, you know Il Fornaio? Is there one in San Francisco?

**Steinmetz:**
Yes, there is—

**Ritchie:**
There is. There’s one in Seattle where I lived. They’ve got one in every major city. That’s your classic Tuscan American restaurant.
Steinmetz:
Do you think traveling is a major influence for NapaStyle as far as the furniture, the pottery, the food, everything, the culinary accessories? Like on your part, on Michael’s part, how does the company find all of the items to put into the catalogue?

Ritchie:
That I don’t have a huge part in right now. But I know they do travel extensively to locate all of these products. Michael goes I think once a year to Italy if not twice. He has a merchant and marketing buying team that scouts out products. I think it was about a month, month and a half ago, the VP of marketing or merchandising took twelve days with her assistant and they went to Paris. They went all over France They went to Italy. They may even have gone a bit into the Eastern Block—but yes, extensive travel. They go to the big gift shows in New York. They go to the big gift shows in New York. They go to gift show in LA. They go to big gift shows in San Francisco. They do big furniture, the big furniture shows down in the Carolinas. Yes, definitely travel and if Michael is around somewhere, and he sees something cool he makes note of it. If him and his wife and kid are out on a leisurely weekend in Bodega Bay and he comes across a antique shop and they have something that he loves, he’ll buy it or he’ll figure out where he can get more of something like that. He’ll talk to the guy at the shop. He just did—just last weekend he was spending some time in the Bay Area with his wife, and they were at some antique show in Alameda. It was a big antique fair kind of flea market, swap meet type thing. He ran into a guy who produces old antique farm equipment. He buys it, takes it apart, builds it back up, and Michael loved his stuff and said “Hey, I’ll call you and let you know.” The next day he said to me “Hey, drive down to Morgan Hill, see this guy, I’ll give you a blank check and go and bargain with him a little bit and pick me up one of these, one of these, and two of these.” So I go down and you find these kooky, kind of out there producers and they make very unique things. And that’s why they are very excited about the store [NapaStyle] as far as their product line goes because when you have this catalogue, mail order catalogue, you can’t sell, like say you find something. Say they are in the Czech Republic and they find a guy who has two antique chests and they really want those, they can’t sell that in the catalogue.

Steinmetz:
Cause there is only two—

Ritchie:
Yes, you can’t sell two. You lose money just advertising it. Now that he has the store he can buy things that there’s only one of in the world and sell it in the store and he is very excited about that. Like I said, I went down and saw this guy and bought two antique like rolling carts with big metal wagon wheels on them, which I had never seen anything like it. I bought an old miner’s cart with the railroad track. With the track, this guy had this old cart and it was from the Apricot fields, and these guys used to fill up the cart with Apricots and roll these carts. They are just like coal mining carts. And they would roll them on the track into the sulfur house where they would spray the apricots with sulfur before they would dry them. So it is an old piece of farm equipment and only one exists. He has got three feet of railroad tracks and you can push it back and forth, and it is a great centerpiece. And he loved it and so I bought it and now it is sitting in the store.
Steinmetz:
All right, I have to check out the store and see how it’s come in the last month or so.

1-00:15:55

Ritchie:
The store looks great. We just decorated the store for, last week, for holiday, Christmas tree. I went and salvaged a bunch of grape vines, fifteen-year-old vines that they had torn out in Oakville. One day Michael said “Hey, you got some time today, go find me some vines that just got plowed out I want whole vines for the store.” So I made some calls and started driving around and found a bunch that had been plowed, and I loaded up the back of my truck with five big grape vines and they picked the leaves off them and cut the roots off and hung them on the walls and they’re hanging Christmas ornaments and lights and—

Steinmetz:
That’s so cool!

1-00:16:37

Ritchie:
Yes, it looks really cool.

Steinmetz:
So it has a very Mediterranean look to it now with Christmas in the Mediterranean.

1-00:16:41

Ritchie:
Yes, it’s beautiful in there.

Steinmetz:
So NapaStyle isn’t necessarily European or Tuscan even. It could be anywhere. It could be wherever Michael is, and he sees something that’s cool. NapaStyle is Michael just thinking something might look good in the Napa setting or that it fits the Napa setting.

1-00:17:05

Ritchie:
Yes, it fits. If it fits in, and not just Italy and not just California. He picks stuff up all over the place. You know, we have vendors from Washington State. We have vendors from the Midwest. We have vendors from the Czech Republic, Southeast Asia, everywhere you know. He gets something from everywhere. Yes, it doesn’t have to be from a specific place. It’s just, does that piece does that fit into what we do?

Steinmetz:
First of all, is it international that he ships? Or is mostly United States?

1-00:17:50

Ritchie:
As far as his customers?

Steinmetz:
Yes.
Ritchie: United States. I don’t know because I don’t really deal so much with that.

Steinmetz: Do you have any idea if there is any specific region of the U.S. where people are more drawn? Is it a lot of California people, or is there a lot of east coasters who are trying to bring that Napa style that they came on holiday when they visited Napa back to the east coast.

Ritchie: Yes, it is.

Steinmetz: Yes?

Ritchie: I believe the Bay Area is big because Michael’s name here is big and they know him and are familiar with everything. So I think his clientele in the greater northern California is pretty good. But also the east coast—New York, New Jersey, Rhode Island people that were here to taste wine one weekend and they were like, Wow, I saw these beautiful properties and wineries and restaurants and I’d like to make my house look like that.” And with a phone call or a click of their mouse, they can they can get whatever.

Steinmetz: Right, so Napa has become a very national especially, I don’t know why I was thinking east coast but it just seems something in my head that the east coasters would come here and they’d want to take that back with them. They’d want to have their little piece of Napa back on the east coast ‘because it’s very different than anything you would find on the east coast.

Ritchie: Oh yes, his show is widely viewed on the east coast as well. His food network show is very popular on the east coast.

Steinmetz: How long ago did the website/catalogue come out? Did they come out together? Was it first the website? I know you said he had a little store but it was too small to handle the booming of the company over the last few years.

Ritchie: Yes, I think what originally happened was the company started, and I believe, and this isn’t verified information because I wasn’t here when it all happened. But I believe he started a little office, and with a little retail space in Saint Helena he started doing his catalogue first. And I’m not sure about the website but I know—
Steinmetz:
What year about where about was this?

Ritchie:

Steinmetz:
Okay.

Ritchie:
He started there with his offices and everything in St. Helena—very small crew. Then I think about two years ago or so they moved to their bigger facility in Napa.

Steinmetz:
Are there other companies in the Napa/Sonoma area that are trying to do this similar thing that you can think of off hand?

Ritchie:
No, no. No one—not on this scale. I mean there are a lot of local producers of specialty food products and olive oils. A lot of olive oil comes from Napa. A lot of olive oil production and some speciality food, but I don’t know of anyone that’s doing it out of this area on a scale like this.

Steinmetz:
Okay, if you had two big two countries or perhaps states in the U.S., where do you think most of the furniture, pottery plates come from?

Ritchie:
Um—

Steinmetz:
From what you’ve seen.

Ritchie:
As far as all the products in general?

Steinmetz:
Yes.

Ritchie:
I would say probably Italy and California.

Steinmetz:
Italy and California? Okay.
Ritchie:
Because he does have a lot of local producers and a big thing of his is this reclaimed and reused product. He gets a lot of base material from California and has a lot of furniture built from it. You know, old wine barrels, old barns. If someone’s getting ready to sell a property and tear down a hundred year old barn, he buys all the wood. He buys all the wood, and scraps it and then builds a bunch of kitchen islands or work tables or something out of it. He cleans them up and sells them.

Steinmetz:
And these are things that would be in the catalogue, he’ll be able to make enough?

Ritchie:
These are in the catalogue. And like I said, our catalogue is nationwide, but we’re not as widely distributed as Crate and Barrel, or Williams and Sonoma, or—

Steinmetz:
Yet!

Ritchie:
Yet! We hope to be.

Steinmetz:
Right, then Michael will have no time at all. It’s obvious from looking at the catalogue that these things aren’t for everyone. Obviously, people who shop at Wal-Mart are probably not going to be looking through NapaStyle catalogue because people who shop at Wal-Mart don’t have the money to. So do you think you’re geared towards a more affluent clientele, or is it feasible for middle class families to be shopping at NapaStyle or is it more upscale?

Ritchie:
Not like shopping for everything that’s in their house, you know. I think a middle class family like I take my family as a good in the middle, you know. My mom’s an event coordinator for a catering company and my dad, you know, is principal of the school. And they’ve worked, you know. They’ve been working their whole lives, so we’re that middle of the road and, I have a sister we’re that middle of the road American family. A middle class, working family could get a couple of things that would add great, feel to your house, or your office. But I don’t think you can stock and buy everything for your house out of NapaStyle. They’re high quality stuff, but it comes it definitely comes with a price.

Steinmetz:
Okay. How do you think NapaStyle is creating a demand for what it has to offer?

Ritchie:
Give me that question again.
Steinmetz:
How are you guys at NapaStyle creating a demand for—what’s telling people that they need to have this? We talked about how people come here from the East Coast, and they want to have a little piece of Napa in their East Come home.

1-00:24:45
Ritchie:
Yes.

Steinmetz:
How else does Michael convince people that they need these things?

1-00:24:57
Ritchie:
You know, I might come back to that one.

Steinmetz:
Okay. No problem. Do you find yourself having a particular niche inside NapaStyle?

1-00:25:09
Ritchie:
Yes, definitely.

Steinmetz:
Is it your food, coming up with new ideas for your food items?

1-00:25:14
Ritchie:
Yes, yes.

Steinmetz:
Yes, okay.

1-00:25:15
Ritchie:
It’s my food and my experience with and relationship with Michael. I’m able just because he got my foot in the door. I worked with him for so long. He helped me to go to culinary school there. We skipped that story.

Steinmetz:
No, we were talking about it. But I don’t remember you were talking about how well, actually it got into your experience with Tra Vigne. But, yes, actually you could go ahead now and tell now, how did you end up—?

1-00:25:50
Ritchie:
Well, I worked there and there was a point where I think was probably a junior. I was probably sixteen to seventeen. And I said, I want to do this. This is something I want to do—this is fun. Everyone eats. I could go anywhere in the world, and everyone eats, and they want to eat good
food. There’s restaurants everywhere. I like this, you know. Everyone I worked with, I was like, “Well, I get along with all the, you know, cooks.” It seemed like a great place to be. I told my folks because they were thinking, you know, four year college some where blah blah blah because I was a good student in high school, but I didn’t like it. I liked learning with my hands. I liked being hands on. So I said “Hey, I want to do this.” So we started looking at culinary schools, and said “Geez, they are every expensive.” So I told Michael at seventeen. I think I said, “I want to do this. I need some advice. Should I go to school? Should I just get out of high school and keep working here? You know, what’s the best way for me to learn? I said, “I know CIA is the best school,” and that’s where Michael went. He graduated from the culinary institute as well. And I said, “You went there and there’s the CCA in San Francisco it’s really close blah blah blah.” He said “No, if you’re going to school, which you should, you need to go to the CIA in New York.” He told me at that point that “We’ve molded you the last couple of years, you know. You’re a better cook than half these twenty five year old guys who you know come all the way across the country to work here.” And he says, “You got to keep that up, but you can’t learn everything here in the restaurant. You got to go to school and learn the basics—you got to learn everything. And then you’ll be so well rounded.” And then I said “Okay, that’s great, but you know chef, this…” I always call him chef. I said Hey chef, you know, this school cost like forty two grand, you know. And then it’s in New York, and I’ll have to fly back and forth. And he, at that point, he was on the Board of Directors for the CIA in Saint Helena, there’s a CIA in Saint Helena, a culinary institute in Greystone. It’s all continuing education; they don’t do the full program. They’re just starting to. Anyways it had just opened up in the mid 90s, And he was on the Board of Directors, and he was very good. He knew everyone well over there. So, every year, which was unknown to me, every year Greystone offered a ten thousand dollar scholarship to a graduate of Saint Helena High School—every year since they’ve been opened. So for three years or four years, no one had taken it. No one had wanted to go to school. So, I found out about this, and said “Hey chef, I want to, can you write me, I want to work hard to get this scholarship, you know, could you write me some letters and blah blah blah.” I was in his office, and I remember that day. He said “You really want to do this? You really want to work in this?” I said, “Yes, yes. I do do.” He’s like, “Hold on,” and he got on the phone. This was in 1997 or 1998. He got on the phone, says “Hey, whatever so-and-so.” He calls the president of the CIA in Saint Helena, and they’re talking about me a little bit, and he gets off the phone, and he says “You stay with me until the end of school, and you keep working as hard as you’ve been working, and you know, don’t fuck up, don’t get arrested, don’t go a do a bunch of fucking drugs, and blow this.” He said that scholarship is basically yours. He says “You know, you still have to go through the process of writing your essays.” He said basically, you know—

Steinmetz:
Did you get just the ten grand or did you get back pay for the people who didn’t claim it for the last couple of years?

1:00:30:25
Ritchie:
So what I did was I got, that’s what I said, I was like “Hey, all this just sitting there!” I guess after if no one uses it, they put it towards something else. They just don’t stack it up. But, what I did do was, and they said, I was like “Okay, well there’s ten there’s still thirty grand, you know.” So they said “Well, if no one in Saint Helena High applies for this next year, you can write a letter and bag it two years in a row.”
Steinmetz: Awesome.

Ritchie: Which I did. And I got it again. And then I got a number of other small culinary industry scholarships. I got one from the NRA, not the—

Steinmetz: Okay, not the Charleston Heston—? Okay.

Ritchie: Oh, no. The National Restaurant Association for I think two or three thousand dollars. And I think I renewed that one, and I think I got a couple from my high school local scholarships which they give upon graduation. I got a couple, and I had been working since I was twelve for them and living with my parents. And not spending much money, and I got out of high school, and I had like seriously I had like twelve grand in a checking account you know. So I didn’t know what to do with it. So you know, I ended up and I just gave, I remember I kept three grand in there, so I could have a little base when I went out to school. I signed the rest over to my dad, and he matched me, you know whatever it was eight grand or something. School was pretty much paid for after that.

Steinmetz: Wow. That’s an awesome story.

Ritchie: Yes, it was great. I kind of got into school the old school way, you know.

Steinmetz: Well, and you’re not toiling over paying that back right now. You’re moving on with your life.

Ritchie: I’m moving on, yes. I like to get things done. I don’t like to put things off like that.

Steinmetz: Right.

Ritchie: I didn’t want to because I know when you come out, you come out of school. And you pay that much to go to school, and then you get out of school with the degree. You don’t get paid that much money, you know. If you want to cook serious fine dining, good, good food, if you want to cook real good, solid food at a good place, coming out of school, you don’t get paid shit.

Steinmetz: Right.
Ritchie: I think I took my first job out of school, and I think I got paid seven hundred eight hundred dollars—seven hundred dollars every two weeks, you know. Whatever that—

Steinmetz: For full time?

Ritchie: For working for about eleven hours a day.

Steinmetz: Yes, so more than full time. So you were working about fifty five hours a week, or something.

Ritchie: Working about sixty hour weeks.

Steinmetz: Rough…

Ritchie: Yes. So anyway we got kind of side tracked there.

Steinmetz: We were just talking about how you ended up at school, and how Michael helped you out that way. And then how you basically were able to pay for it without taking out any loans. Yes, I think we wrapped up that story pretty well.

Ritchie: Yes, it was great. I was able to do that, and I grew up in St. Helena, a small town in rural California. And then all of a sudden I move out of the house and I’m in New York.

Steinmetz: Crazy.

Ritchie: Yes, it was crazy and the Culinary Institute is not in Manhattan. It’s north of the city. It’s up by Poughkeepsie, Hyde Park. I don’t know if you’re familiar with that area it’s—

Steinmetz: I know Hyde Park, yes.
Ritchie: Yes, it’s up along the Hudson.

Steinmetz: Okay.

Ritchie: So it’s about an hour and a half.

Steinmetz: So you weren’t trapped into this insane new world. You could go into the city if you wanted to, but you were out far enough that you were able to—

Ritchie: I was out far enough.

Steinmetz: Assimilate a little bit better than stepping into the concrete jungle when you got off the plane.

Ritchie: Yes, which would have been nuts. I might have just packed up and went back home if that were the case.

Steinmetz: Even I’m from fifteen minutes south of Manhattan. But it was a completely different world than Jersey. It was up in the mountains, the trees. It was always when I was young. Every time I went into the city it was so overwhelming. I have a couple questions about personal choice. Do you have a favorite or one or two favorite items that are in the available from NapaStyle food items?

Ritchie: As far as food products go?

Steinmetz: Yes.

Ritchie: I’ll tell you what. I think that if anyone this is something I even encourage even my parents, they don’t like to spend a whole lot of extra money on something if they don’t have to. But I would tell everyone if they could change, and I know Michael would probably tell you the same thing. If you could change one thing in your kitchen, it is your salt. The—and we have a whole line of salts—specialty salts from all around the world from different types of different geologically and
different in country. My probably two favorite ingredients out of the catalog are the ones that they are the basics and I use them every single day. And that’s our NapaStyle gray salt.

**Steinmetz:**
I saw that written on the Tupperware in the kitchen with the parmesan it was in.

1-00:36:29

**Ritchie:**
Yes, it’s a gray sea salt. It’s harvested in let’s see if I have any here. Yes this is our gray salt. It looks almost kind of gray, if you look at it from here.

**Steinmetz:**
Almost looks like blue cheese crumbles.

1-00:37:12

**Ritchie:**
Yes, and its large grain salt. It’s harvested on the coast of Brittany—close to France.

**Steinmetz:**
France, okay.

1-00:37:20

**Ritchie:**
That’s where most of your top quality gray salt and *fleur du sel* come from.

**Steinmetz:**
So, basically is this something you could get at Williams and Sonoma as well.

1-00:37:37

**Ritchie:**
Yes, this day, what do they say and Michael would say it all the time. “Salt is like the new, salt’s the new olive oil, you know.”

**Steinmetz:**
Or garlic or—

1-00:37:49

**Ritchie:**
Yes, there was kind of a craze couple of years ago with olive oil and with flavored oils, infused oils. Now’s it salt and salt blends, and smoked salt, and pink salt—Peruvian pink salt, and Jurassic salt. It’s mined out of prehistoric digs, and black salt, Sicilian salt. Salt is huge right now. All these different kinds. Himalayan salts, big blocks of salt, you see salt everywhere.

**Steinmetz:**
So maybe we’re going to see some salt stores popping up because I know they have an olive, in the new Westfield San Francisco center there’s an olive oil store.

1-00:38:37

**Ritchie:**
Yes.

Steinmetz: I’m just like “Wow.”

Ritchie: I wouldn’t be surprised in a couple years if we see a salt store, maybe. Even in Seattle, I lived in Seattle for a bit. And there was a store called World Spice, and all they sold was spices. They had a whole section of salt. But as far as my two things out of that out of our book, I would say this gray salt and our filtered NapaStyle extra virgin olive oil.

Steinmetz: Okay, so—

Ritchie: And see when you taste it, it doesn’t have that chemical flavor like iodized salt.

Steinmetz: Iodized salt.

Ritchie: You know, iodized salt little box

Steinmetz: Right.

Ritchie: With the girl and the umbrella.

Steinmetz: Right.

Ritchie: That is probably what the majority of people use. It’s just so that they pumped so much that they stripped all its natural goodness. This is right, this doesn’t get produced. This is harvested. Right, you know, out of evaporated water they take it they probably run it through something just to get any dirt or rock out of it. And it comes, that’s one been hanging out it’s, this one when it comes feel there it’s wet.

Steinmetz: It’s a little. You could feel the ocean on it.
It’s straight from the sea. And it tastes like the ocean, and this is a base salt. I use this like I would use just salt, sprinkling salt. This is my everyday salt. It just makes it makes everything that much better, and it’s good for you, you know. Salt’s good for you. You need salt.

**Steinmetz:**
Right.

1-00:40:21

**Ritchie:**
But iodine salt, you know—

**Steinmetz:**
That’s wasting that’s the defeat of purpose.

1-00:40:26

**Ritchie:**
Yes, it is. And everyone got freaked out so they started putting iodine in salt back I don’t know when. Everyone was getting freaked out of—what was it—goiter, right?

**Steinmetz:**
Right.

1-00:40:37

**Ritchie:**
Goiter. People were freaking out, “Get enough iodine or you’re going to get goiter.” So they figured everyone in the country eats salt so we’ll put iodine in salt and no one will get sick, you know?

**Steinmetz:**
That’s actually kind of an interesting lesson in history.

1-00:40:52

**Ritchie:**
Yes. And that was, I don’t know how many years ago. When I was growing up working in the kitchen, I said “Why do you need iodine in salt? What does it do?” And that’s it. It’s just kind of in there. To—

**Steinmetz:**
We don’t need it. It’s just the government.

1-00:41:07

**Ritchie:**
Yes. And that salt is stripped down to where it’s basically a chemical. It becomes basically sodium chloride. Yes, it turns to nothing. If you taste this, alongside kosher salt, which is—kosher salt is better, definitely better than iodine salt, but if you taste iodine salt first and then taste kosher salt and then you taste *that* you’re going to be like, “Wow, I’ll spend the extra couple bucks.”
Steinmetz:
Right. So I can kind of imagine it could be that expensive because well, it’s just it is salt. So I’m going to definitely go out there and get some gray salt.

1-00:41:53

Ritchie:
You should. And as I would of course, encourage you to buy it from Napa Style.

Steinmetz:
Well I want immediate gratification so hopefully they have it at the store, yes?

1-00:42:05

Ritchie:
Oh yes. And at the store, we sell more in units, not in dollars. But I think we sell more salt than anything at the store.

Steinmetz:
Pound for pound salt, salt is the number one seller.

1-00:42:18

Ritchie:
Yes. Salt is the number one seller as far as—

Steinmetz:
And Michael probably convinces people through his shows and cookbooks that the salt is really more important than people would know.

1-00:42:27

Ritchie:
Oh yes. It is. He uses it on his show, he uses only gray salt. And he makes a point of it on his show. And it’s not to sell his product, it’s to educate the world because you can get gray salt at Trader Joe’s.

Steinmetz:
Oh really.

1-00:42:48

Ritchie:
Oh yes. You can get gray [salt] at Whole Foods. You could probably get gray salt at Safeway. The French call it Sel Gris, very often since it comes from Brittany it’s packaged as Sel Gris. But yes, you can get it almost anywhere nowadays.

Steinmetz:
Did you pick up any languages while you were traveling, or did you ever study when you were here in high school?
Ritchie:
Yes, I did. Well, of course in high school, you have to take two years of language. My options were Spanish or French. So at that point I worked in restaurants, and just like the bay area and the rest of California, Napa is very thick with Latino, mainly Mexican, migrant workers. And the Napa valley is a—you know—if you’re going to work in the food industry, you’re going to work with a lot of Latinos, Spanish speaking. I started to pick up on that when I started when I was twelve. I started and I was like, “Wow this is going to be a lot easier if I speak this guy’s language” because those guys are the core of every kitchen. It doesn’t matter. French Laundry, Gary Danko, Fifth Floor—it doesn’t matter. The core, those restaurants would not be able to survive without our brothers from across the border.

Steinmetz:
We’ve seen that in a movie, *Day Without a Mexican*.

Ritchie:
You know I’ve never seen it.

Steinmetz:
Oh, it’s a great film. But—

Ritchie:
But it’s true.

Steinmetz:
California fell apart, and I could see it very well happening.

Ritchie:
So, when I got in, I said “Well, I’m not going to take French,” you know? Because it didn’t make sense to me. I was like “Eh, I don’t want to speak French anyways. So I’ll learn to speak Spanish.” So I would go to my daily forty five minutes of Spanish class, and I would learn and then I would go to work and I would speak it and would use it. And I would see how they used it. It all started to make sense. It was like an immersion. I was immersed in the language at work, and then I learned it correctly, how to read it and how to write it, at school

Steinmetz:
Right.

Ritchie:
How the grammar, everything. Then the guys taught me slang and dialect The guys in the restaurant—they taught me slang. They taught me dialect. The taught me how to converse as if I was a Mexican in California, not as if I was a student that learned Spanish out of the book. So I learned both ends. I learned correct book Spanish. I learned slang Spanish. It just kept going and
I was a sophomore, and I did my two years of Spanish and I was like “Hey, this is kind of one of the best classes I can get out of high school.” So I took it again. I took three years of it. And I had the option to go do an advanced Spanish class in my senior year, but I opted out. I did three years at school, and I still speak Spanish to this day very, very well.

Steinmetz:
Awesome.

1-00:46:27
Ritchie:
Where I lived back here, there’s a house straight back, and there’s a triplex, three apartments, over here and all one—two—three—four, four Mexican families. And I speak daily with them, Spanish.

Steinmetz:
Awesome.

1-00:46:47
Ritchie:
Yes, it’s great.

Steinmetz:
That’s my major, and I have worked in the restaurants which I concur with you; that is the best way, without moving to Mexico, is working in a restaurant if you’re taking Spanish parallel with that. So that’s helpful, and then if you ever wanted to learn Italian, boom, you could probably be pretty efficient, or proficient, rather, within a year, I would think.

1-00:47:14
Ritchie:
That’s a good segue to when I went to Italy. I got like, a month’s notice that I had this job. This guy, a friend of mine, an old acquaintance, a chef, from Tra Vigne, I was actually here right when I had graduated from culinary school, and I came back home to figure out what the hell I was going to do. I got a job in Healdsburg at a restaurant, working for Charlie Palmer—a huge east coast restaurateur—it was his first west coast venture. So I was actually part of the opening crew of that restaurant in downtown Healdsburg. And was there for about, I don’t know, six, seven months. And I got a phone call one day from my Sicilian friend, Mariano who Michael knows very well, he’s part of the Tra Vigne family, he’ll still be family for ever. And he knew I wanted to get out of the country and do an internship, go travel and cook somewhere for a year, anywhere. I tried to Bangkok, and it was very difficult, I tried to go to Sydney, Australia, and it was very difficult, I tried to go to London, It was very difficult, and he knew that I was slowly but surely trying to get out—so he calls me up one day, in, I don’t know, around, Christmas time, maybe the first of the year, and says [in Italian accent] “{Nicko?} I have a job for you in Italy with my friend Angelo. You must be there by the—”You know, some day in February, it’s like five weeks away, “You must be there by February 19 or you lose the job.” So I called him right back and I said “Okay I’m going. You call your friend Angelo and tell him, I’m going.”

Steinmetz:
Awesome.
And I didn’t know anything. I didn’t know how long the job was for. How long I was going to be there for. If I was going to get paid. What I was doing—I knew nothing.

Steinmetz:
Right where you were going to live—

Ritchie:
No, nothing. Well, I knew that they would put me up, but I didn’t know where, what, how.

Steinmetz:
It could be a barn.

Ritchie:
Exactly. Exactly. “{So now} they have a place for you to sleep and—blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.” So I talked very briefly with this guy Angelo, who ran the restaurant, he spoke very broken English. And I was rushing around. I had to quit my job over there. I said “Hey, I’ve got an opportunity to live in Italy, I’ve got to go.” I was living with a girl, who I met in culinary school, who moved out here with me, she was from Connecticut. And I said “Hey, babe, I’m fucking twenty years old—this is my dream, right here.”

Steinmetz:
Right.

Ritchie:
So I went. I didn’t have passport, at that point I’d never been anywhere where I needed a passport, so I had to get an express passport. And I’m like, “Well, I don’t know any of this language or anything.” I asked my friend here, I said “Do your friends speak any English?” and he said “Eh, Angelo speak a little, little bit of English. Nobody else speaks English.” This was a very small town where I worked, a town like St. Helena, which is like nine thousand.

Steinmetz:
What was the name of the town again?

Ritchie:
Salo.

Steinmetz:
Okay.

Ritchie:
Salo. [spelling it out] S A L O. And like you can’t take a train. You’ve got to take a train, to a bus, to another bus to even get there. Nine-thousand people I think live there. So it wasn’t like I
was in Milan or Venice or Rome. No one spoke English. And it was a little town everyone knew everyone. So you know, I had like a couple weeks to try and learn some Italian so I got some books on CD and I think listened to the first couple minutes of one on my plane ride over and said “Screw this” you know, “I’ll learn it if I learn it over there” and, that was it. And I got there and spoke nothing—I got there and got off the plane and all I knew how to say was {“Dov’è”} “where is…” and I had a couple words {“Dov’è se il tran?”} Where is the train? “Dove se—?” You know, where’s the bathroom, where’s— And that was it. And that was crazy you know? I landed in this crazy place. I had no idea where I was going, how I was going to get there. And then I got there, late at night. You know, they let me sleep I woke up and the next day I was in the kitchen I tried to talk with the guys in a little bit of English. They didn’t even know the most basic of English. And they looked at me and they said “Eh…Is…my? Em… inglese non?” and that was it, that was all they could speak in English. So I was like, “Wow, I’ve got to learn this language and I’ve got to learn it quick.” And I did. I picked it up in a matter of months and by the time I left they were like, “Wow, you speak Italian.” You know, basically.

Steinmetz:
Awesome, you’re lucky.

1-00:52:38
Ritchie:
Yes, and I learned it all by ear and mouth. It’s hard for me to read and write Italian because I learned it all up here, and I learned some dialect, because everywhere in Italy, people speak dialect. So I picked up their dialect. Some of the words that I use, a Tuscan person wouldn’t understand because I learned their dialect.

Steinmetz:
Right, so you speak restaurant Italian as like restaurant Spanish?

1-00:53:06
Ritchie:
Yes, much like my Spanish I leaned here with this California dialect that these guys bring. They call it Chicano Spanish, which is half raised in California Spanish. And yes, I speak a lake dialect, they call it, “dialecto de lago” or “Bresciano” Brescia was the city closest to us. It was about half an hour away. So yes, our dialect was a cross of Brescian and Lake Dialect. And it was very, very different. Up there in the north they’re close to France, closer to Germany, close to Austria, so their dialect is very influenced by those languages. So yes, it was very different. But it was fun and I learned well and after about three weeks they saw that I really wanted to learn, I asked questions, I was learning the language. And the first three weeks were very hard, they didn’t like me. They thought I was some cocky, hotdog and ketchup eating American kid who thought he could come and cook Italian food and knew everything, you know. That’s what they thought. And as soon as I showed effort to learn the language and do everything as they did and as they instructed me to do then they finally took me in totally like family.

Steinmetz:
Right, and that’s the Italian way.
Ritchie:  
Yes, and I was there—I got there in the middle of February. And my birthday is March 22, I turned twenty-one there in Italy, they baked me a cake, bought me some books—you know I’d only been there for a month, a month and a couple days, and they were already—and it was like family. And I slept above the restaurant. It was a family owned place they all lived on the property it was a big, big family thing. So I learned Italian.

Steinmetz:  
So you’re trilingual at this point?

Ritchie:  
I am, but I’ve been back for four years and haven’t spoken much Italian. But I, you know, if you flew me over there and kicked me out of a bus somewhere in Italy I’d pick it up pretty quick.

Steinmetz:  
Within a week. Yes, it’s similar to me. Even now, being out of the restaurant industry since Berkeley started this semester my Spanish has gone down hill and I’m taking Chicano studies and Mexican history this semester but it’s in English. So next semester I have Mexican immigration and actual advanced Spanish so it will be in my life every day once again. And it’s just amazing how quickly things like that leave.

Ritchie:  
No, it’s a good way, I’ve realized, to keep up on your Spanish is like, when you make like, a phone call to 411 and they ask you if you want English or Spanish, hit Spanish. You know?

Steinmetz:  
Right at the bank, the ATM.

Ritchie:  
At the bank, that kind of stuff. My friend is a friend of mine who I grew up with here is in the process of taking some driving school classes and he chose to take them in Spanish.

Steinmetz:  
Wow, that’s awesome. Oh, like an online course, or is he actually going to class?

Ritchie:  
No, he’s going to a class. I think actually he got a DUI, its some sort of DUI class thing. But he takes it in Spanish. So he’s like, “Well If I’m going to sit here for an hour I might as well learn something.”

Steinmetz:  
Yes, reinforce your language.
1-00:56:50
Ritchie:
I’m going to use the restroom before we go next—

Steinmetz:
I think that’s it.

1-00:56:54
Ritchie:
Cool.

[End of Interview]