

Interview with Isaac Toups

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Interviewed by: Robyn Caire Cameras and Audio: Shaun Prats

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Abstract: Born in Rayne, Louisiana, Chef Isaac Toups has come quite a long way from his early beginnings deep in Cajun Country, now owning two of the most highly regarded restaurants in New Orleans: Toups Meatery and Toups South. Toups may be a long way from his hometown, but the flavors that he grew up with are constantly present in his food, as is his deep respect and love for them. A pioneer of “Modern Cajun” cuisine, Toups combines the Cajun flavors of his hometown with the techniques and finesse of a classically trained chef, with some unlikely new flavors and ideas that he picked up from friends along the way. A husband and father of two, Isaac Toups has built quite the resumé for himself, working under famed Chef Emeril Lagasse for 12 years as he rose in the ranks of the kitchen, competing on Season 13 of Top Chef, owning two of the top restaurants in the city, and writing a cookbook that has been chosen for the New York Times Best List, all while being a strong family man. Toups’ love for food and family is obvious in any conversation with him, as he reminisces on the days of cooking catfish couvillion with his grandmother, tells of a new venison dish that he has created for his restaurants, or simply tells about the meals that he cooks for family dinner every night at home.

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[00:00:19.11] **Robyn Caire**: So, when did you start getting interested in cooking, and why?

[00:00:24.25] **Isaac Toups**: I've been cooking all my life, I mean literally. People ask me this all the time "When did you first get into cooking?" My first very memories are from cooking, whether it's helping, you know, bring salt to my Daddy for the crawfish boil, being there for a fish fry, being sat on a counter while my mother makes gumbo right beside me. So, it has always been ingrained. I was always expected to do something, and even though my siblings and the rest of my family don't cook professionally, we all cook, so it was always an ingrained place in my household. To which the point, in fact, I thought that was the norm, i thought that everybody's mother and everybody's father cooked. Thats normal, right? Well, wrong as it turns out. I would go to friends houses and be like "Oh, whats your mom cook? Oh my mom doesn't cook", I'm like "That's a travesty." "Whats does your dad cook? Well he doesn't cook either." What do you eat?! Um...but professionally, I didn't get into cooking 'til honestly late in the cooking spectrum, as everybody else factors in. I didn't get cooking professionally 'til I was 21. I was job hopping after my brief college stint and then I worked in a printing press, I worked in a TV station, and went "Well, why don't I try my hand at cooking?" It was literally like that. Went to cook at Prejean's, a restaurant in Lafayette and I just fell in love with it, I just thought "Oh! This is it!" I knew right at that point, within a couple weeks I wanted to do this for the rest of my life. I found it. It was the "A-HA" moment.

[00:01:50.19] **Robyn Caire**: So, do you have any favorite memories, I know you mentioned that you would bring salt to your Dad when they were doing a crawfish boil so, any specific memory that stands out to you or that is your absolute favorite memory?

[00:02:01.28] **Isaac Toups**: Ive got a memory, and i'll just tell you the first one that comes to my brain, a memory of my Grandmother Toups making catfish couvillion. Now, outside my house where I grew up, born and raised, we have a one acre pond. She caught that fish. It was a giant fish, big ol' son of a gun. And she took it in and she cleaned it and showed me how. You know, I've seen it before, but Ma-Maw's always gonna tell you how to do something even when you know how to do it. Then she started to make the couvillion, she'd make the roux, and then the brick roux, and then put the fish in and cover it and, you know, we'd just do this buddy-buddy the whole time. Cooked, cleaned, caught everything. Then we ate it later that night and it was just like "Oh! this is delicious!" And my grandmother just throws this together, no measurements, no eyeing, you know, smoking a cigarette while she's catching the fish. I think she caught the fish on a Cheeto, thats not a lie, thats not a lie. I swear to God, she caught that fish on a Cheeto.

[00:02:58.14] **Robyn Caire**: So growing up in Rayne with such a heavy Cajun background, did you always want to be a chef or was it just the fact that your family was so into cooking that you just decided that "this is what I want to do"?

[00:03:10.24] **Isaac Toups**: I knew I would be cooking for the rest of my life. I was the kid, you know, my best friend would call up "Hey, can you come over and play?" And i'm like "Yeah, right after i do the Beef Wellington." I was that kid. I was the dorky kid, going through my mother's cook book, going "Oh, I wanna cook that" And i would be the one at the store asking, at the Rayne grocery store, asking if they had fresh ginger like a moron 'cause they probably still don't have it today. But, no i knew I would always be cooking but "cheffing" for a living didn't really cross my brain.

[00:03:40.19] **Robyn Caire**: When did it cross your brain?

[00:03:42.11] **Isaac Toups**: As soon as I started cooking professionally. As soon as I realized you could do that. I didn't realize that was a thing. Of course, i'd seen Emeril Lagasse and Martin Yan and seen Justin Wilson. You see the TV aspect of it, but cooking professionally, i'd only seen whats on TV, so it never factored into my brain. My father's a dentist, my brother's a dentist, my sister's a dentist, my uncle's in pharmaceuticals, I have another uncle in the oil field work. I always thought id drift into one of those, so cooking was something none of my family had ever done professionally.

[00:04:15.15] **Robyn Caire**: What was it like working under Emeril?

[00:04:24.26] **Isaac Toups**: Emeril Lagasse is a great guy to work for. He really takes care of you, he will bring you under his wing. At first though, i'm the fry-cook. You know, he's got a hundred employees, several different restaurants—I forget how many at the time I started. So, "Hey, can you fry this or da-da-da?" "Yes chef!" is the answer to all that. He is very much a commander. He's got a TV presence, but he's also a very strict commander in the kitchen. Work hard, he'll treat you well. Work bad, you will die. Sorry, i'm quoting a Star Trek movie, but it does hold true. If you work well, you will be treated very well. You work bad, you just won't have a job there anymore and that's that. And starting as the fry-cook, he don't know you. Now, i'm the sauté cook, he remembers your name-Isaac. I'm a sous chef now, he knows my wife, knows her name and whatnot. Then i'm second in command of one of his restaurants, coming back, helping bring it back after Katrina. I'm now going over to his house and helping with private events. I pretended to be bodyguard for him a couple of times. Now, he wrote the foreword of my book. So, it's been a long journey. It's great, he's a great guy.

[00:05:35.06] **Robyn Caire**: Would you say he inspired a couple dishes, or inspired you to get more into cooking?

[00:05:40.17] **Isaac Toups**: Absolutely, Chef Emeril was a big inspiration, especially in the later years when we would actually get together and do some cooking. So that was cool to actually cook one on one with him. At first, I learned a bunch of lessons of how to treat people. How do you garnish respect for a person, when you don't need to have it? And I own my restaurants, my cooks don't need to respect me, they do respect me

because I respect them and something simple as that. Something as simple as: I've gotta go fuss at you. How would I like to be fussed at? Well, i don't wanna be fussed at. I would just like to be told not to do that again and that's it. So, that's still something I do to this day. "Hey, don't do this again, or i'm gonna rip your fuckin' head off the next time." Never ripped anybodies head off, you know, i've never had to do that.

[00:06:27.19] **Robyn Caire:** So now getting into Top Chef, when did you decide you wanted to go on Top Chef?

[00:06:32.08] **Isaac Toups:** I knew these questions were coming and it's okay. I didn't want to go to Top Chef, and i've said that out loud. 'Cause I always thought of TV as a little convoluted, but it's entertaining and people enjoy it. So, that's the whole aspect of doing tv, so i didn't wanna do competition TV. I was like "No, I just wanna be a chef. I don't wanna be a celebrity chef"—and that's come full force. But, I went to talk to my friend Justin Devillier, who was on several seasons before me. Justin Devillier, owner of La Petit Grocery and Balise, and he said "Man, you'll never have a problem filling up your restaurants again." I said "Well, there you go!" And I will do anything to promote my restaurants, absolutely anything. And going on to do some television? Well, no problem. I had to actually go watch some episodes 'cause I had only seen the first season and this was Season 13 by the end of it. So, i'm like "now i gotta go see what i'm getting myself into" So, the big vetting process, they bring down like a hundred chefs and whittle it down to seventeen, you get in and they just let you go completely nuts over two months.

[00:07:41.00] **Robyn Caire:** How was the Top Chef experience overall?

[00:07:44.12] **Isaac Toups:** It's so crazy that I have dreams about it to this day. I have repeating dreams. Some are from boarding school and others from Top Chef. I wouldn't say "traumatic," but it was definitely the weirdest and most—not ridiculous 'cause a lot of it was ridiculous and a lot of it as very serious—but it was just so...i'm trying to think of the word here, but like convoluted and awesome all at the same time, like reality television is. So, you go there and it's like, "Here's seventeen professional chefs, these are your peers. Okay, do this weird challenge under these weird circumstances that you'll never have to repeat again, and you're like "AHHHH!" That's pretty much all of Top Chef. Like, yes i'm a professional, but i'm up at this weird hour, doing this absolutely wacky challenge in twenty minutes, which you don't train for. You don't train for these things. This is not how you're brought up. You're brought up like "Ah, this dish didn't come out so well, so let's try again." And you try it again for 20 times until you get it right. Sometimes you get it right the first time. But on Top Chef, boy, if you didn't get it right the first time, they were gonna throw you under a bus!

[00:08:46.12] **Robyn Caire**: Did you have any favorite challenges?

[00:08:48.24] **Isaac Toups**: Yeah, the challenges that I won are my favorite challenges. But I will say—that sounds smart aleck and it is—but my favorite challenge was “Restaurant Wars” and I did win that one, but it was my favorite to begin with because like, “You have minimal amount of supplies to open up a restaurant tomorrow.” I’ve done that. I’ve done that, i’ve come back from Hurricane Katrina and helped reopen Emeril’s restaurants, and i opened my own restaurant under duress. “We’re running out of money, we have no money, we have to open tomorrow, AHH!” Hey, I just did this no problem. It’s one of those things, I keep cool under pressure, it’s hard to rattle my feathers. I’ve been through enough—children, hurricanes, all kinds of stuff—to where these are challenges. This is TV. The worst thing that can happen is that I could go come. So, while everybody else is scheissing in their pants, i’m actually like “It’s just TV guys, its just TV.” And I ended up doing pretty good because I kept a calm, cool head and did what I normally do in my restaurant, which is work it understaffed, on the fly.

[00:09:54.22] **Robyn Caire**: This question actually comes from my sister, ‘cause before I asked her, “Is there a question you want me to ask?,” because she is obsessed with Top Chef. She said on a scale of one-to-really hard, where did the Top Chef challenges lie to you? ‘Cause she said y’all would get a challenge, and in just seconds y’all would have everything thought out. Is that just because y’all were chefs for so long that y’all just know what ingredients to do, or were you just kind of winging it and hoping that it came out for the best?

[00:10:22.01] **Isaac Toups**: The scale of difficulty is from one-to-ten. Some of the challenges I just winged, “Oh, i’ll just do this” and it came out great, and other challenges I spent several hours on and went completely down. The episode “Banannaise” is a notorious one. That’s why you’ve got to watch yourself when you’re on TV. When you have a microphone and a camera on you 24/7 for several months, you forget it’s on and you say something like “stick a frozen banana up my ass,” which i did. But, in that episode I also created an absolutely horrible crab bisque in front of Chef Emeril and just way overthought it. I just tried to do something fancy, when I should’ve just done something normal, and it just bombed. And it was something that I could do drunk and blindfolded nowadays, but I let the nerves get to me, and I let my brain get to me, and I totally screwed it up. So, there were some challenges where i’d walk in and create a chicken ballotine in 20 minutes—stuffed with dates, cause it was a date challenge—in front of Chrissy Teigen and Padma Lakshmi and they both loved it and were giggling about it, and i’m like, “Aye, i just threw that together.” And then others, you’d have these challenges where like “Ugh, what did i do?,” and hindsights 20/20 . I could go back and go, “If you’d have just done this instead of that, it’d have been a lot better.” So, that’s what these dreams are.

[00:11:36.02] **Robyn Caire**: That would be my next question, even though you did not win, would you want to go back and change anything specifically? To be like, "Had I done this, I could have won"? Or, do you want to just accept the fact and be like, "Well, maybe it was not meant to be"?

[00:11:49.01] **Isaac Toups**: Here's my answer, I did win. I didn't win my season of Top Chef, I won fan favorite. People like me on TV, they wanna see more of me on TV. It got an absolute slew of customers into my restaurant. It got so many customers in my restaurant, I opened up a second restaurant. People like me on TV so much, they want to see more of me on TV. I got some more TV coming up—can't tell you yet. But, i've done Today Show, and i've done things for Vice, and now Action Bronson is my friend. Now, i've got a bunch of these other TV celebrities, that some of them are my pseudo-friends and some of them are my real friends. I'm friends with Andrew Zimmern. I know David Chang now. All because of some of Top Chef, and some of them because i'm a pretty damn good chef myself.

[00:12:36.07] **Robyn Caire**: How did you cope with being away from your family on Top Chef?

[00:12:39.03] **Isaac Toups**: That was tough. That was real tough. I had a newborn. Well, not a newborn, she was one and a half, two, something like that when I left—Ivy, my youngest one. And I was heartbroken to hear that she learned to crawl while I was away, and at the same time it was tough and difficult because it's like being in a dormitory when you're on Top Chef. I come back and i'm like, "Aw, i haven't seen my family in months, this is crazy!" But at the same time, i'm not deployed overseas, i'm not an oil field worker who does this several times a year. So, I put myself in check. Yeah, it was tough being away from my family and my baby learning to crawl while I was gone, but it's nothing compared to what a lot of other people do, so whatevs.

[00:13:20.28] **Robyn Caire**: How do you feel Top Chef influenced your career overall? I know you said you got a bunch more people in your restaurant that you opened up a second restaurant, but do you think it did anything else other than...?

[00:13:36.17] **Isaac Toups**: I know what you're getting at, so actually it did. It did open my eyes to some new flavors. I had some of my competitors on, and we are all good friends now, people think some of us are enemies, that's just not true. But they all had different aspects of things that they cooked and we got to taste some of them and like, "Oh, well wait how do you make that? What is that? What's kombu?" I didn't know what kombu was, cause it's seaweed and Cajuns don't cook with that shit, but now I have a better appreciation for it and I do use it. And my friend Koumei introduced me to a bunch of different spices, and i got with Karen and she taught me a bunch of different things, a way to cook with Asian food. So I came away with, "Well, why don't I step out and get some different ingredients and kinda step into my realm." So that kinda helped me spur a

lot of the newer dishes that i've created, and it also kinda reaffirmed what I always knew: if you stay calm and always do what you know how to do, then you'll be a lot better than try to do something real fast and screw it up. So that kinda cemented. So now when I go off-site or come to do things like this, maybe at first, when I was first starting to do this i'd be a little nervous, "Oh, i'm nervous, what are they gonna ask me?" Now, I don't give a fuck. Now i'm completely calm. What's the worst that can happen right now? Even when I go off-site and we've forgotten something, well what's the worst that can happen? You're not serving that. Well what are you gonna do? You're going to make the best you can do with it and not freak out, because freaking out will get you nowhere. A samurai is calm until the point of death. So getting upset about being beheaded is not gonna do anything except make you a little more frazzled. So be calm.

[00:15:20.11] **Robyn Caire:** That is good advice.

[00:15:22.10] **Isaac Toups:** It holds true to a lot of different aspects of life. Just stay calm.

[00:15:27.11] **Robyn Caire:** What is it like owning your own restaurant and being your own boss?

[00:15:30.16] **Isaac Toups:** It's absolutely terrifying owning a restaurant. It's satisfying being your own boss. Restaurants are notoriously hard businesses, and now I have two. I thought it'd be like having two restaurants, it feels more like three—that combated with kids. Restaurants are so fickle and they have to be good all the time. They have to make money, and you have to make customers happy, and you have to have all this. There's always gonna be a battle, but I love it. Being your own boss is the best. I make the joke that I can't be fired, and that's a great joke until you realize the antithesis of that joke is I can't quit either. I'll be like "Agh, i'd really love to just walk out of here," but i'm paying the bills. And being able to create your own things is the best, I have no one telling me that I can't put this on the menu. I do have people say "Well, I won't order that!" and i'm like, "Well, then you got me on that one!"

[00:16:23.08] **Robyn Caire:** I was actually looking at one of your interviews and it said that you mentioned something about flip flops, that you don't really care what people wear to your restaurant as long as they leave happy.

[00:16:32.19] **Isaac Toups:** That's absolutely true. We almost made t-shirts one time. In fact, I still wanna make the t-shirts; my wife rolls her eyes at me. That we should make t-shirts "Fois Gras in your Flip Flops." You can get high-end food at a normal price, and I don't care how you dress. It doesn't matter. I come from fine dining, I come from the white gloves and the five servers at your table, and the gueridon, where they cook food table-side, and the gaudy presentations and whatnot, and I hated that. I love the attention to detail of food. I love like "Oh, we're gonna take this dry aged steak and we're gonna

dry age it for three weeks. Okay cool, and then we're gonna carve it with a band saw, and then we're gonna cook it just perfectly, and then we're gonna lay a little bit of butter on top of that, and then we're gonna broil cheese on top of that, and lay that under truffle—and oh, man I love that. You wanna talk about the food? That gets me so excited, it makes my heart beat, it gets me fired up to go to work every day. But I realize you can have that good quality of food and not have all the pompous raucous. And so, that's what Toups Meatery and Toups South are. You can come get really good food in your shorts; no tank tops for men. That's my general manager's only rule: no tank tops for men. You can even wear your hat, you filthy beast. I know several restaurants in New Orleans where you've got to take your hat off. I'm like, "Ahh, leave the hat on...animal."

[00:17:48.18] **Robyn Caire:** You mentioned earlier that a couple on Top Chef actually introduced you to new stuff, so do they inspire certain dishes or do you use their insight to come up with and create your own dishes, but with a little bit of them in it, if that makes any sense?

[00:18:03.25] **Isaac Toups:** They introduced me more along the lines of new flavors and not necessarily new dishes. I'll bring back the kombu thing. He made a kombu jelly with it. Now, i'm not making kombu jelly, 'cause I don't roll that way. Not that type of person. But every time I want to accentuate a very delicate seafood flavor, ill add a little kombu to it and it'll brighten it up in a wonderful almost citrusy, almost earthy, seaweed way—that actually sounds disgusting now that I say it out loud—but it's really delicious. And Koumei introduced me to a different way to cook lamb with different spices that I had never heard of. So, I get on the internet and get me some of those flavors. And well, i'm not sure if i'm doing Afro-Caribbean food right now, but this is delicious and it's because of this new spice.

[00:18:55.23] **Robyn Caire:** Are there any challenges balancing two restaurants and family?

[00:19:00.04] **Isaac Toups:** Absolutely, people ask me, "What's harder children or restaurants?" And it's restaurants. Restaurants are much harder than children and I have two each. It is a hard balance. You pretty much have to sacrifice all your hobbies. I used to go to the gym a lot and I used to go hunting and fishing a lot. Now, if I can get on one hunt and one fish in the year, i'm good. The gym is now doing yoga on the floor with my kids. I picked up guitar because I can actually pick up a guitar, play for five minutes, and put it down. But, I work near perpetually. I take Sundays off and, every once in a while, a Tuesday. Tuesday is date night. I get pretty miffed if I don't get date night. Me and Manda, my wife, work with each other and it's a working relationship, and it is difficult but it is very rewarding. At the end of the day, it's ours and that's both rewarding and scary.

[00:19:52.03] **Robyn Caire:** In one of the other interviews that I saw, cause I watched a couple just to get an idea and to help me figure out some more different questions to ask, you said that your restaurant is kind of a “Modern Cajun”. What do you exactly mean by that?

[00:20:04.03] **Isaac Toups:** Um, that's kind of a funny term because A, I don't like labelling my food, I don't like labelling it because I like to step out of it at all times. And, at a whim, i'm "No, I wanna make this dish." That's not Cajun. I don't care. So, “Modern Cajun” is the best definition of what my food is. So, yes i'm Cajun. Pure blood, born and raised there. Didn't move to New Orleans until I was 20. So, deep in the mix, born and braised Cajun. Then, started to learn fine dining under Chef Emeril Lagasse. Then, after 18, er 12 years, I opened up my own restaurant, and now I can do whatever I want, in New Orleans, where i can get basically anything culinarily. It's a hub. I can get anything I want. I've got all these fine dining techniques and i've got this Cajun background, but what does that guy do? That guy makes “Modern Cajun” cuisine. But, Cajun cuisine has kind of always been evolving. So, the true Acadians, being exiled from Nova Scotia to South Louisiana, yeah they brought their French backgrounds. They picked some stuff up in nova scotia. They got here like, "Oh, look at what the Native Americans are doing. Well, i'm gonna borrow some of that. And oh, look at the Creoles, i'd like some of that." And you know, we've got our Mexican influences. So, Cajun cooking is, and always will be, immigrant cooking. Everything but the Native Americans, you've got to remember, were immigrants. So it's important to remember that. Even nowadays we get a lot of Vietnamese influences. Well, that's blending into Cajun food too, and I use some of those techniques. That my contemporaries are in New Orleans and in Cajun country. I have aged soy sauce from Korea, made by a private family. Is that Cajun? No. Lamb necks? That's not very Cajun, serving just lamb neck braised by itself, but it's good. So where does that border cross? I don't care where the line is like, "This is Cajun, and that's Cajun." I don't care about that line. I'm always ignoring it. I am always cooking. I mean, I put my children through school with cracklins and boudin. That's not a lie or exaggeration. We really sell that much cracklin and boudin. So yes, i'm Cajun, but no I don't like labels.

[00:22:11.11] **Robyn Caire:** When you go home are you still the main chef or do you share the responsibility with your wife?

[00:22:15.16] **Isaac Toups:** No, I cook a lot. I still cook a lot. Even though sometimes it's, you know, i'm plagued with the every-parent thing, I have picky children. So last night, yes I fried some pork chops in garam masala, brown butter, and soy sauce 'cause it looks like a normal pork chop for the kids. But they also got steamed white rice on the side. I also made creamed spinach last night with caramelized onions, fried garlic, and triple cream cheese. Now, they didn't notice 'cause it looked like normal creamed spinach. So you have to play this game with children. But every once in a while, we have some people over and then I can just throw caution to the wind and cook whatever the

hell I want. And I only invite people over who will eat that. Every once in a while, i'll invite someone to eat and they'll be like, "Oh, I don't eat that." You don't get invited to my house if you do that in my house. One time, great real story, had a friend of a friend over at a crawfish boil, and he was one of these fancy guys, just turned his nose up at everything. Comes up to the table like, "I don't really eat bottom feeders." And i'm just like, I couldn't help it, i'm like, "I don't normally have them over for dinner, but here you are." Yeah, he's a local doctor, fuck him.

[00:23:28.22] **Robyn Caire:** Do you sometimes cook the dishes at your restaurant at home or do you just cook them at your restaurant?

[00:23:35.10] **Isaac Toups:** Oh, I definitely cook some of the dishes at home all the time. Everybody loves my dirty rice, so that was just on the Thanksgiving menu, and it'll be on the Christmas Day menu. Some of the ones, braised lamb neck, that doesn't really make it to the house a whole lot. The pork chops make it to the house a lot. Steak makes it to the house a lot. So it's kinda, "What will my family eat?" My wife does the gluten free diet, so not everything. The biscuits with crab fat butter aren't making it to the house.

[00:24:05.07] **Robyn Caire:** Does your family inspire any dishes?

[00:24:07.25] **Isaac Toups:** One second, this isn't live is it? Good, you can edit out all the "fucks." Sorry, repeat the question.

[00:24:17.20] **Robyn Caire:** Does your family inspire any dishes?

[00:24:20.03] **Isaac Toups:** Yes, actually my wife is my greatest muse. I don't write anything down, so she tends to remember all my dishes of the past and like "Oh, why don't you do something like that?" And then i'll take that idea and like, "Oh wait, but I just got these curry leaves and we can make a curry oxtail ragout." So my wife is my greatest muse. She's also my number one critic, and if she doesn't like something, I get told. I can be working on something for a week, have her taste it and like, "Nah, it needs work." And i've got to go kick something, and then calm myself down 'cause I realize she's just being honest with me and that's what you need.

[00:24:52.04] **Robyn Caire:** So you say your wife is your muse, how did y'all meet?

[00:24:56.12] **Isaac Toups:** During my brief tour of college at USL—and that's dating me, it's now UL—we met through my best friend, still my best friend. They were in an art class together and he was like, "Hey, come over, smoke a joint." And she comes over and smokes a joint, and she's just eyeing me up, just eyeing me up and down. And i've got a girlfriend at the time, but you know, i'm 20 so i'm like, "Hey, whatever." But, long story short, break up with my girlfriend, she swoops in like a hawk and puts it on me and we've

been together ever since. I think after a couple months of that, it was just like, "Hey, do you wanna go out to eat?" And then we were dating like that.

[00:25:37.28] **Robyn Caire:** When you go out to other restaurants do you kind of critique other chefs or do you just say I would have added this instead of this?

[00:25:45.26] **Isaac Toups:** I won't, not at the restaurant. I think that's extremely rude, and a lot of times you've got to drop your pretenses. Sometimes, like if i'm just going to a normal restaurant, I know i'm not going in there to analyze it. I know what i'm getting myself into. And then there's other times when i'm like, "I'm gonna go pay a thousand dollars a person for this menu." You better believe i'm gonna be analyzing this to the teeth. 'Cause this is like "I'm paying this much?," and yes i'm here to have a good experience. And that's where it's kinda, "Am I here to have a good time, or to critique the food?" I'm gonna lean more to the "have a good time," than being too much of a critique. I remember being like, "That salmon maybe was a little overcooked." End that. And if I have a real bad meal, I just wont go back. I'm not the type of guy to write a bad yelp review, or to talk trash on the internet about that. If I got bad service and bad food, i'm gonna tip 25 percent or more, and i'm just not coming back and that's it. If I have a good time, I will be at your restaurant once a week. Like Marjies Grill. I'm at Marjies Grill fucking once a week, 'cause he does absolutely amazing food in a very subtle atmosphere. Marcus did not pay me for this.

[00:26:57.21] **Robyn Caire:** Have you had any bad customers who just are causing a problem, just saying they are sending the food back , saying that it doesn't taste right or is every customer just kind of like oh no this is delicious?

[00:27:10.08] **Isaac Toups:** There's always a dick. There's always a prick customer. I don't care how good your service is, I don't care how good your food is, there's always gonna be some asshole customer. Then, there's always something you screwed up yourself. So yes, sometimes you overcook the pork chops, sometimes food gets sent out cold, as much as you try to make it perfect all the time. A waiter is gonna hit a customer in the head with a meat board platter, it has happened. And then, you've got to make it right. Sometimes customers are like, "Oh, accidents happen. It's okay, I still had a great time." And there's the person who'll get a perfect meal and are gonna complain about it no matter what. In fact, they were gonna complain about it before they even came in. You throw those customers out. Get out, I don't want you back. You throw too much of a scene, I never want to see you here again. On the opposite side of the coin, did we mess something up? Then let me pay for the meal and please come back again and let me show you that we actually know what we're doing. And then you've got the guy I just had to physically throw out of the restaurant.

[00:28:13.16] **Robyn Caire:** I feel like there is a story behind that.

[00:28:16.06] **Isaac Toups:** Oh! So, this guy looked a little rough around the edges. That's okay, that's Toups Meetary. Orders a bowl of dirty rice, gets up, and walks out. Now, the rice hadn't hit, and so i'm like, "Okay, he left." Like, did he leave and go to the bathroom? No, he walked out and he's down the block. So, i'm like, "Okay, cancel the dirty rice." No big deal. It's a 6 dollar bowl of rice. It costs me a couple dollars to make, whatever. Several minutes later, he comes back in, in the expediter window. I don't know if you've ever been to the Meetary, but theres this little pass where we put out the plates from the kitchen, and he starts banging on it, "Hey, where's my fuckin' rice?!" And being all belligerent about it. So my general manager comes around, Larry, and says, "Sir, please calm down, we thought you left, we'll fire your rice," being very professional about it. "No, I want it now!" And I realize at this point that he's intoxicated somehow. Not sure what, doesn't matter. He starts getting lippy and starts cursing, so I said, "Now sir, you have to get out," still being professional. More cursing, now louder, "Come throw me out!" This dude's a foot taller than me. I'm 6'1. No, well he's probably about 6'9, still he's a big ol' boy, and he's inebriated. So, now i'm like, "Aw christ, i'm gonna have to fight a dude?" So sure enough, he starts to bow up, and I just start walking toward him like, "Here it comes, haven't been in a fight since 8th grade, here we go!" And he's just backing up, so he comes out the door and I close the door on him and he tries to slam his head into the window, and I, with good reflexes, just pull it back so he just kinda leans in and falls through. So the crowd starts laughing at him, then he gets real pissed off. And so i've gotta walk him down, step by step, as he's walking backwards, cussing me, telling me, "I've got you on my map now!" No wait, he didn't say that. He says, "I got you on my GPS now!" Im like, "You mean, you've got me on your radar now," and that pissed him off even more. And I go back in and I start apologizing, 'cause I had to walk him down nearly half a block, and finally he keeps walking. I come back in and get a round of applause. I'm like, "Oh, i'm sorry!" And they're like "No, you shoulda hit him!" I'm like, "Really?" These are my customers. The customers are like, "Yeah, you should've hit the bastard!" And i'm like, "Alright guys! Shit. Thunderdome up in here."

[00:30:35.06] **Robyn Caire:** Do you have any favorite dishes that you like to make or what is your favorite dish on your menu?

[00:30:40.28] **Isaac Toups:** Ooh, favorite dish on the menu...i'm gonna go with the newest one that I like. I like the venison dish, and I did get that from Top Chef. The venison dish was a challenge on Top Chef that was a Viking challenge. So, what did the vikings cook? No fucking clue. So, we went to research it and Vikings cooked a whole bunch of meat, but what they were very proud about was; if someone came over to your village, and you were trying to impress them, then you would hunt and kill venison and elk to show your prowess. So, I took elk and I just barely seared it in coriander, cumin, and brown mustard. And just seared that and served it rare over grouter, which is a gross term for caramelized onion barley, which is delicious. And served that with horseradish creme fraiche and a seasonal jam, which we pour hot brown butter over the top of. So the brown butter melts over the jam onto the venison, underneath the caramelized onions,

with the horseradish sour cream, and it's one of the better things that I ever created, on the fly! So, it went on the menu and people love it and I love it. I still eat it to this day.

[00:31:54.08] **Robyn Caire:** Is there anything you do when you are not cooking? Any hobbies?

[00:31:57.02] **Isaac Toups:** I throw tomahawks, I juggle, play guitar, I wrestle my babies. I like to go to the gym. I don't get to it as much, but black is slimming.

[00:32:11.04] **Robyn Caire:** Are there any plans for the future? Any future restaurants down the road or are you just going to stick with two?

[00:32:16.08] **Isaac Toups:** Hold your horses on new restaurants! My second restaurant is only 2 years old and that's still in, like, the rough patches of restaurants. The second year is always the hardest. So, hold on! Probably some more restaurants in the future. Right now my book is out, so we're focusing on pushing the book out, and I have a bunch of TV stuff coming up so we're focusing on that. I don't want to "die on the line," like I like to say. I don't want to die cooking, I wanna retire one day, and then die somewhere else. So restaurants? Hold on. I've had enough of that stress. So I'm trying to make my money with other venues, and I'm really actually enjoying writing books and I'm enjoying being on TV. So, hopefully we can put that avenue out and make more money, and retire at 65 and die at 66! I've got goals.

[00:33:00.29] **Robyn Caire:** Always good to have goals.

[00:33:02.04] **Isaac Toups:** Good to have a goal.

[00:33:05.11] **Robyn Caire:** I think that is it.

[00:33:06.09] **Isaac Toups:** Okay, anything else? Any other questions?

[00:33:09.13] **Robyn Caire:** Nope. Thank you so much!

[00:33:10.03] **Isaac Toups:** Oh, you got it!

