

FHS Oral History Project – Alex Erdmann

Description:

Alex Erdmann was born on August 26th, 1969, in Thuringia, East Germany. Alex recollected his experience growing up in East Germany, from the Soviet influence to the difficulty of seeing family that lived across the Berlin Wall in West Germany. Alex joined the East German military to professionalize as a chef, which remained one of the few ways to practice culinary arts then. Interestingly, the end of Alex's military service coincided with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and he recounted a particular emotional memory about living through that event. Alex worked as a chef in several places across Europe before arriving in the United States in 1998. He deepened his professional career once he stayed in the US by building four culinary art schools nationwide, consulting for several food companies, and even leading a project to improve hospital food in Arkansas. Given such comprehensive professional experience, Alex compared the similarities and differences between the culinary arts landscape in Europe, New Jersey, Michigan, and Orlando. Alex moved to Orlando in 2018 to create the Walt Disney World Center for Culinary Arts and Hospitality for Valencia College's downtown campus, and he thoroughly discussed this experience and why it proves important for him and Orlando's tourist industry. Lastly, he shared his broader observations on living in Orlando as a German businessman, particularly how the city has changed culturally and from a culinary perspective and how the city might change in the next twenty years.

Transcription:

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: This is Sebastian Garcia interviewing Alex Erdmann on February 8th, 2025. Audubon Church for the Florida Historical Society Oral History Project. Before we begin, can you please state your name, your date of birth, and where you were born?

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ALEX ERDMANN: Alex Erdmann. My date of birth is August 26th, '69, and I'm born in Germany.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Germany. Excellent. So, to begin, just tell me about your experiences growing up in Germany during the 70s.

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ALEX ERDMANN: Well, since I've been born in '69...Here's the thing I'm born in Germany, in East Germany. So I'm originally from East Germany. So, I was born there in a small state, which is Thuringia. Thuringia is the smallest state in Germany, in East Germany. And it's if anybody wants to ask where it is, it's like in the middle of Germany, right in the center of it. Basically if you make a cross on Germany, that's it right in the middle of it. So we're at the heart of Germany, in Thuringia. But also if you know about, Martin Luther, he's from Thuringia. He was the one who nailed, you know, the, his thesis on the door. Gerda is from there, too. So that's, how I grew up in East Germany, in Thuringia.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Right. And what was life like in East Germany? Did you have any fam—was all your family in East Germany? Did you have some families in West Germany? What was that like?

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ALEX ERDMANN: Oh, actually, yeah. So, my family is—apart from East Germany—came from a farm. Yeah. And not far from where I was living. And my grandfather was from northern Germany. Half of my family was in western Germany, western part. And the other half was basically stuck in East Germany. After the wall came up. So that that was something that my parents went through. So that was really tough, considering that, you know, all of a sudden, half your family was not accessible anymore. But it helped me because we kind of weren't that brainwashed because we had the connection to the western Germany and, so there my aunt and my uncle sometimes came to visit also my mom had an opportunity to visit West Germany at that time. So that was good for us, for them. And my father still had his, father and mother in West Germany. So we had that kind of a connection there, too.

00;02;51 - 00;02;55

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: By the time you were born, the Berlin Wall was already erected, correct?

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ALEX ERDMANN: Oh, yes. Yeah, yeah, this came up in '61 and I was basically don't know any other way and in Thuringia its rural. So...you do have a border to western Germany there. And so if you go up, then you can see it. And, later on, I grew up in Berlin and so there you definitely could see the wall, you know. But yeah, I mean, there were some restrictions, and if you think about, how COVID was, that's similar. This is like, hey, you can't travel where you want to.

00;03;36 - 00;03;51

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And, but do your parents or your grandparents tell you stories of when the wall was erected or even way before, during the Berlin Airlift in '48, '49? Do you recall any stories from those events?

00;03;51 - 00;04;57

ALEX ERDMANN: Some. Yeah, a lot of stories were basically when the wall wasn't there, when it came up and all of a sudden restrictions came up, people couldn't move as they wanted to. And sometimes people got stuck. But in general, that wasn't much what I heard from my, my folks. I guess by that time when I grew up, I mean, it's been long already long. And they got used to it. But to have, you know, those restrictions, we know those people living on the other side and we know that I couldn't just, say, hey, let's visit my uncle over there that wasn't possible. I mean, the other thing is we could travel the other ways around, like in the Eastern Bloc. So if I wanted to go to Poland or Czechoslovakia, we just went, like normal kids, you know. So basically we did backpacking and went on the train and went down to Czechoslovakia and checked it out and had a good time down there, especially in Prague. So those things were possible. And then when, slowly the wall came down that was a good time to because you could see, democracy.

00;04;57 - 00;05;02

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah. And talk to me a little bit more about that moment when the wall fell in '89.

00;05;02 - 00;11;34

ALEX ERDMANN: Well, you have to think about growing up as a teenager, till '89 when the wall came down, you just do what you do, you know, you don't really see, there's a lot of oppression or is things going on, but you just hang in there. You do your thing, you've been in school, you know, good news is you don't have to pay for school or university and so on. There was some restrictions for me, of course. You could not just say, hey, I want to become a doctor. You know, if there's no doctor positions available, and if you don't have all the good grades, there's no way that you're going to be a doctor. So there was some restrictions there. And I always wanted to be a chef—no actually, I wanted to be a baker. But then I changed my mind and said, it's a little early for Baker to go up 3:00, 4:00 in the morning. So became—wanted to be a chef. But the chef positions weren't available. Sounds crazy, especially in Orlando, where, you know, we have about, you know, a deficit of a couple thousand. And so in order for me to become a chef, I had to come up with a way to get that position. And the only way I could get a position is if you, become an officer in the Army. So at that time, I was mandatory to go to military for 18 months. And I was like okay, if I go and become an officer, that would be a noncommissioned officer would be take instead of the 18 months I would go for three years. And so I signed up military. I was like, hey, got to position because as an officer, it's a similar here. What you see, in in the military, if you're military, or if you're a VA or if you're retired, and you apply for a job, you get, you know, a higher chance. And so I did that, I became a noncommissioned officer. Originally, I signed up for 25 years. I wanted to be a real officer. I said, hey, if you go in the military, you go to become an officer and maybe shoot for general. So I really want to do that. Then I realized it's not really what I want. It sucked, especially officer school was in a corner of Germany that was just terrible, I felt like I was in a prison. So, I didn't like that. Plus, I realized that I have a hard time, hard time to follow orders. Comes with the, you know, being 18 years old. So, I cut that down to three years. So instead of 25 years, I went down to three years—the military wasn't so happy about it, but it worked out. I still got my, position, my, my apprenticeship as a chef. So basically, when you declare you become an officer in school, you go into a certain track and then, you go to business school, get your, chef...certified chef, which is now called a certified European chef. And then you go, into the job, but also once you graduate from business school, which is similar what you have here, college then you go out in the military, you know, you do your service, and then afterwards, you're free. Yay! So that's what I did. So, after I graduated from, culinary school and business school, which is combination there and in Germany what we do is you have one week school and one week on the job. So it's a dual training, which is great. It's not done a lot here in America but coming back.

But anyway, I did that, I went to the military. And good news is, since I was a noncommissioned officer, I also could request to become a chef in the military. So I didn't have to end up, you know, digging in tanks or, I don't know, shooting. I didn't like shooting. I don't like shooting at people. And so I figured if I have a weapon, I can use it to fix my field kitchens. And I did that. And since I was a really good chef, got it—after a year, I got a really good

position. I worked in artillery. That's what I did. And in the artillery I worked at in the military is, 500km, so that's the ones what you see now, they still exists where you have those large rockets on big trucks. The trucks are the size of a house. And so that's what we did. We had also the capability of adding atomic warheads to them. And 500km in the middle of Germany—yeah it could shoot both ways, usually don't shoot towards the Russian or into Poland but, you know, you shoot towards the West Germans. So that's what we have sitting there. The only bad thing for me was the division of the military was, top secret. That means I had to swear two oaths two and couldn't tell anybody what I'm doing, where I'm going, it was hidden in the woods. It was nice, but also a little bit [*inaudible*]. The division also had a bunker there, there was Secret Service around. They were listening—talk about radio—they were listening to, there was a listening spot. So they were listening to, everything that's around us going towards, you know, West Germany. So that was my military there. I cooked. So I was a chef, didn't shoot much. Shot a shooting gun on fire. That's all I did.

And then, the wall came down when I was at the end of my service, which was unique because, as an officer, you have to follow the command. And if the command says, hey, you have to turn around and shoot your own people because they're going to, you know, storm the wall. We supposed to do that. And, I talked to my fellow officers and said, hey, if we get that order...I'm not going to shoot at our own people. And...the good news is we never had to that. But essentially what we would have done is turn around and shoot at the officers.

00;11;34 - 00;11;48

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Wow. Yeah. And you mentioned, how you wanted to be a baker and then you switched to chef. What inspired you to take this path of the culinary arts?

00;11;48 - 00;14;14

ALEX ERDMANN: Well, it comes down to—my family's been in hospitality and culinary, being in pastry since I can think of, forever. It goes back a long way. My parents' parents, they owned a hotel, which is now in Czechoslovakia. They lost that when Germany lost the war, and they got kicked out because they were German, had a German heritage. They weren't Nazis, but it was just not desired anymore. So they kicked them out. They lost hotel. My uncle was a really great pastry chef, the one in West Germany. He used to send me cookbooks, big books, sometimes really old ones. It's amazing—his books, too. Yeah. So, my other uncle was cooking on ships in the Navy, when he was in the Navy. And I grew up on food and farm, you know, so it came natural. I cooked a lot. And then I had to also support myself and my, my, my father—and my mom was working because my dad got killed in a car accident and basically his motorbike against the truck and, truck won. And so I cooked a lot at home there. And so that came from there. And then...yeah, I like baking. But then I realized, especially when I did the apprenticeship, the baking in the morning, 3:00, 4:00 in the morning or if you're a night baker, you basically have a different kind of life. And so I figured that as a chef, it's easier, but also as a chef, you do baking and pastry. So it's a nice combination there, versus bakers or pastry chefs sometimes, are really narrow in their field. So that's why I did that. And it helped me a lot. And I'm still I mean; I was a pastry chef for a couple of years in Switzerland. So you can switch back and forth, you know, I did baking, I liked it a lot. It's kind of nature [*natural*] what we do in Germany: bread and beer. So yeah, that's how I came into that industry, and I liked it. And the fun part is, being an educator now, I'm still, doing culinary hospitality. I built culinary

hospitality schools on top of it bit and, I never did anything else. It's always, when I look at my tax returns, it says "chef." Never changed.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah, that must feel rewarding.

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ALEX ERDMANN: Yeah. I mean, a lot of folks who went to school with me, they didn't stay in the profession. Yeah. It's a tough profession, but it's also fun, especially if you're from East Germany, all of sudden, you can travel all over the world. And that's why I did. As soon as the wall came down, I went and saw the world, you know. And that was a great experience.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Why is the field tough? The profession tough?

00;14;39 - 00;15;52

ALEX ERDMANN: Well, you work when everybody else is not. It's that simple. So and if you look at Christmas, New Year's, Easter, whatever, that's when you work because that's when people eat. The good news with that is you can work where it is cool. So where other people take vacations, like here in Orlando—you know, ski resorts. So if I wanted to be in a ski resort, I just get a job there and did a session, a season in there. I liked, for instance, I liked Switzerland a lot. The Italian part of Switzerland is amazing, you know, Lake Como. So, I took a job there because I liked it, and I liked it so much that I took another, an extension. In Switzerland, when you take a job in Switzerland, you can only work there for 18 months max. So it's a visa, so I don't have to leave the state, the country and then come back. So that's what I did. I worked for two years. The beginning of each of my jobs I worked for free. I did to start Italian bakery just to learn how to do, Italian baking and pastry and of course, a lot of Italians there, a lot of Italian girls. So that's what you're doing. I learned Italian fast.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Right. And you mentioned that after the wall came down, you traveled the world. You bounced around different places across Eurasia really, from Austria, Switzerland, Israel and England throughout the 90s. What was that like going through all those places, working and living?

00;16;13 - 00;24;20

ALEX ERDMANN: Well, for me, I was very independent anyway because, you know, military was done. I was at the age where I didn't have anybody to worry about, like, you know, family or wife or whatever. So I used the opportunity to basically, get out and see the world. And, as a chef, that you can do that very well. Yeah. The only thing that I didn't do is in school, Wednesday mornings in school, we had English, and I chose not to do that because it was an elective. We had to do a Russian, unfortunately, I had to live with that. So, I can understand Russian, but I cannot speak it, but at least I can, you know, see the ammunition box and see what's in it—that was in the military. But with that said, not knowing English, I figured after worked around Germany on a little bit and at that time was at the time of [inaudible] casino where casino is when, you have very little on the plate and cost a lot. It looks like a piece of art.

So, I studied that, I like that I worked with that. I worked with chefs there. I worked in really fancy hotels. That's how I came up into the profession. I worked myself up in the profession. And the way I learned my job was you go to the different stations, and then you end up working in the best hotel. So I did that, and I stayed at that level. I never worked in hotels that have less than five stars, so always five star hotels. I like to work in hotels because they have a different budget versus working in the restaurants. So that's how I started my career, going into West Germany and then, from West Germany, going, staying in the hotels. I worked in the best hotel, in Berlin, in the Kempinski, at that time was number five in the world. Because that's the level I wanted to be. You never stop, you never go down, you always go up. And every time you apply for another position, you make sure you work yourself up and up in the field. And so that's where I ended up in Berlin, you know, working at the Kaminski there. And, rented myself out as, kind of a vendor chef, in other places, so you can see other places, but also make some, make some extra money and then, yup.

Got Headhunter reaching out and said, hey, do you want to work in Israel? I was like, yeah, yeah, cool. And at that time, you could still go to Israel. The U.N. was there peacekeeping. So things were quite, you know, on both sides, Lebanon and Egypt. I was on the Red Sea, which is other good things. So it's like *[inaudible]*—like a resort area. Everything is perfect. It's like paradise. Yeah. Best food available that comes right from the Golan Heights. And the only thing is, I had to cook kosher. But you learn how to cook kosher, so it's something you learn after a while that it's not good to make a cheeseburger. It's not kosher. You kind of get a little trouble and the hotel could lose the kosher path, which is bad. So I learned that I didn't do that. I had good rabbis to work with. I had a good time in Israel, and they have really good beer. Everything was provided, so I didn't have to worry, but they were a little bit *[inaudible]* because I came on a plane with knives, and the Mossad wanted to know what? Why? You know? So I had to explain to them that I'm a chef. That's why I'm a man with fancy clothes. So took me a while, but I got there, and...yeah, that that helped. Israel, you can speak German and English, so you kind of get around.

Yeah. And then, Yeah. I applied for some—there was an ad in a newspaper, a professional newspaper that I subscribed to, that looked for folks to work in America. That's like, hey, you know, we get sponsor, there's a visa, green card, whatever, applied to it, I thought it's fun. And I thought it's never going to happen, so I forgot about it. And then when I was working at the Ritz at the middle of the service in lunchtime in London at that time, I got that call, it's like, hey, we need you to start next week in America. They got the visa. So at that time I was working in England. The reason why I was working in England is I needed to learn English. So what I did is essentially, I lied on the application and said, I speak English, but I didn't. So I went over to England and learned English fast in the kitchen. It's fine, because, the kitchens I work in speak, French mostly because that's how that level of service is. So. And then, then I applied for and I got the job in London Gatwick, which was amazing hotel, which goes back to the 1600s. They had a big golf course. The British Airways, the pilots and the stewardesses used to stay there. So I started there. Great crew, worked on my own kitchen, worked with French chefs. They all came from three star hotels, three star Michelin. So we had, a great time there. That's amazing. And then. Yeah. I got the call from the Ritz. Ritz wanted me to come over. The Ritz in London, which is there Ritz. It's, So I started there, and said, I liked it, but the problem was, you don't get paid much. You know, it sucks. It's really, you know, the rents are high in London, so I lived

in a small apartment under the roof. If you're familiar with Ratatouille, how the guy lived in Paris, that was me in London. Same view that that was the cool part. I had a view of London in the morning that was just unbelievable. It's up in Kilkenny. That's the Irish part, at that time the blow up busses. The good news for me was I live in the Irish parts of the, so no busses blew up there, but almost got blown up. I was like five minutes ahead of a bus behind me and, Lancaster Square blew up. So I had a good time in London. Was bicycling around there because couldn't afford anything else. I could barely afford food. So Ramen noodles was what I was eating there when I was working at the Ritz. So starting working on my days off, it started to really get to me. And the Ritz changed. The ownership changed, and I was like, all right, I'm out of here.

And so I rented myself out to a rental agency, which was great, because then I got paid by the hour and in London I got paid very well. But also I saw all the good places. So I walked everywhere that it's just amazing. Lancaster. Hyde on Park Lane. And I made so much money and I had a good time till I got that call, you know, from America saying, hey, come over. And so that's how I landed in America and, started in New Jersey, at The Manor, The Manor New Jersey. The Manor New Jersey is a restaurant group that has different places. One is in New Jersey Manor, but they're known for the lobster buffet. So you paid \$40 at that time. I could eat as much lobster as they want. Yeah. So it's amazing. And there's a lot of people overeat there, and we had to call the ambulance, but, big people eat there as in, presidents. Anybody who was anybody was usually in that area. It's in West Orange. So it's an affluent area. And some of our restaurants overseen, New York and other places, they were like, an old English chateau. People used to do weddings there. So that's kind of how I came into America. That's how I met my wife in The Manor in West Orange, New Jersey.

00;24;21 - 00;24;21

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Nice.

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ALEX ERDMANN: And that was before 9/11.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: That was before 9/11. That was your first time ever being in the United States?

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ALEX ERDMANN: Yeah. I came over on a student visa, which is an exchange, an 18 month visa. And that's how they got us in there. We would live on property and work on poverty and get paid minimum wage, \$7 an hour.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And what was, what were your initial impressions about America, especially since you spent so much time in Europe, across Europe?

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ALEX ERDMANN: Yeah. Well, I've seen Europe, and I've worked all over Europe, especially in Switzerland. I traveled around in Europe a lot, just to just see the place and taste it, you

know, going to, Basque area of Spain or going to the French Riviera, or going to Portugal and try to or eat, donkey sausage with blood in it, including the heart and the liver. So those are kind of experience you have to have. And, yeah, coming over to America was a little bit different, especially when I came over, they had that, you know, huge Northeastern [storm] coming through, it snowed like crazy. I didn't have the right shoes. I was cold. Of course I didn't have a car. You know, because not possible and, so it was a little bit tough, but everything was bigger, nicer. And then you had the lobster buffet. The restaurant was below the level I ever worked at, but I managed. There were some other Germans there, so we hung out together. Made the best out of it. I had a good time and tried to not going too crazy. And get acclimated to acclimate to America and it wasn't that complicated for me because I've been in other places in the world, you know, and if that that, was not much of a culture shock. It's just things are bigger. Stores are bigger, you know, Walmart and those kind of things. So. But. I didn't need anything. I had everything, you know? So my experience was more like food, you know, people and of course, America, English, English especially. So we went down to South Shore, we went up to the Culinary Institute of America, CIA. So that kind of things. Looked around. My friends bought some fancy cars like, twenty year old Cadillac. So cars we always wanted to have, you know, big, you know we sat all in front, I had an old Volvo, so we had a good time. And as—people helped us. So, for instance, the butcher was from Poland. The operations manager was from Germany. So you kind of get acclimated very fast, actually. So you didn't have much of an issue to feel like, “oh, all by myself.” So that that helped a lot, especially in Jersey. There's a lot of Germans still, you know.

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SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. And how different is the culinary scene and culture from Europe and the United States?

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ALEX ERDMANN: The United States is a mix of different cultures, especially culinary wise, and so it depends where you are and where you go. You have those pockets—if you go Milwaukee you have Germans, you know, if you go in Chicago, there's pockets of, there's Germans, there's Polish, there's, Russian, there's Jewish, New York, similar. So, that's what I see. You see a mix of things, but I also see a mix of very traditional cuisine, which is something that I trained in. So it's a traditional French and double P, what we served in that restaurant where I worked. And so it depends, really, what you're working at and where you're working at, is what you're cooking—plus, I was part of the German American club there, Geneva Association. So we mingled with other people from the same culture or other cultures. And so that's the kind of mix you get. And then New Jersey's very still European. If you look at food wise versus if you compare that now here to Orlando, you see now pockets, you know, here in Orlando where it's very, culture specific Peruvian, Cuban, you know, those kind of foods, which is great. Orlando changed quite a bit since I came here. So, I'm happy because the food scene is much better now, and hope I helped with it building, you know, a big culinary school downtown.

00;29;09 - 00;29;30

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And I have—we're going to talk about that in just a moment—but did that an initial experience in New Jersey influence your decision later on to move the United

States permanently? Or did you know, coming into Jersey, I wanted to stay here and I'm not coming back?

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ALEX ERDMANN: No, actually. My plan was I put in my time, pack up and I leave. I mean, I came, like the soldier would arrive with a big sea sack full of stuff, but not much. But then, at the in New Jersey, I got hurt in the operation—I tried to stop a cart of plates from going down the ramp, so the plates don't break. I saved the plates, I broke my hand. So that kicked me out for a while. Couldn't do much if it's your right hand. So, I met my wife there. She worked in the same place. She worked down in a pastry shop, I was upstairs. And so, with my hand broken. And so we kind of—I got two surgeries. She helped me with the physical therapy and all that stuff, and, when it was time for me to basically have to leave the country, we made a decision and said, yeah, we're going to stay. So, I hired an immigration lawyer. And so we put the process in to become a legal resident. Yeah. So it's not cheap, cost us \$10,000 to do the whole process. And then I was almost done with this other thing. We just get married so I could have saved the money. So I got married. And during that time, 9/11 happened, my immigration papers, the whole process got really extended because what happened is my paperwork was in one of the towers, one of the buildings that's close to the towers. So basically it got lost. So then we had to submit. We re-submit everything. The lawyers office was also in one of those towers that was close to it. And basically came down afterwards, so that that changed things a little bit for us. But, officially, since we were married, it was easier. And then once I got my paper together, now I'm still have a green card. Actually, and I'm working on my citizenship right now, but this can take two years because they're so delayed. So I put the application in, technically my calling card has expired, but since I applied for citizenship, it doesn't matter. So you have two years and then falls into place. But that's what I'm working on right now. But that's it's been quite a journey to become a citizen. But then. Yeah, that's how I got stuck in America. You can see here...in the ring.

00;32;01 - 00;32;20

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah, absolutely. So, since the early 2000s, you have taken a more entrepreneurial approach to your craft, serving in different businesses and even academic capacities. Can you explain why you took this approach?

00;32;20 - 00;36;12

ALEX ERDMANN: Yeah. At a certain point in your career, you may reach the top where you kind of, okay now what's going to be next. So I reached that—did all, seen all culinary wise hospitality. So I said, okay, I need to go and get a degree in order to move up. Yeah. So basically, you hit a ceiling. And so I went back to Switzerland and got my master's in International Hospitality Management. And of course, in my opinion, if you want to get a degree in hospitality, you go back to Switzerland—that's where hospitality came from, it's that simple. So I went to a school, university called Cezar Rit, which, of course, as you know, the guy who basically invented modern hospitality. So got my degree there. And while I was doing that in an accelerated program which as a full time student is hard, especially if you come back, after being ten years in industry, I found out I had a lot of discussions with my instructors and professors telling them, “no, that's not how it is in the industry.” It's maybe in your book, but in the industry it's like that. So I did that. I graduated there, with a degree from Manchester. I'm in

a metropolitan university, which is in England. So, and then, while I was on it, I said, okay. And my, my friend from Berlin was bothering me too, and he said, you need to get your Master Chefs. And so I went back to Berlin and got my Master Chefs done. So that means I'm a German Certified Master Chef, and at that time was basically backed by the oldest master chefs association in Germany, going back to the 1800s. So. And on top of that, I was the youngest at that time, the youngest master chef. And that gave me, they gave me a hard time. All the old master chefs believe that I shouldn't be a master chef, so I had to prove myself quite a bit there in order to make sure that I can do what they wanted me to do. So because for them, it's like, oh, you have to be in the industry forever, you know, but I had master chefs who pledged and vouched for me, and I managed, I got it done, and I became the youngest master chef. And then I think six months later, an even younger one made it through. But I see myself as breaking that barrier and that wall that was there from all those old master chefs. And I'm still seeing it sometimes, some of the folks, they just don't like me. But that's fine because I just wait until they die. The old master chefs need to literally die in order to change the system. And I think we did that already with there. And it was good to be in that association in Berlin, especially because the change came out of that. And now you can see this, better folks out there who, also run kitchens different. Yeah. So it's not like what you see sometimes and, you know, the effort and, you see those network Food Network series where folks get hurt in the kitchen or get yelled at, those are things I went through. But that's something, I did not practice anymore. So it doesn't work, doesn't help, and it's not a good idea. And so that changed, and I'm glad it's changed. And I'm glad there's better working conditions in the industry and there's a better, camaraderie. And also, they value, you know, versus before they did not. And so that that's a good thing. I'm glad.

00;36;12 - 00;36;23

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And around 2003, you settled in Orlando, Florida, and have permanently lived here since. What about Orlando attracted you to settle here?

00;36;24 - 00;44;38

ALEX ERDMANN: I did not settle in Orlando that early. I came to Orlando later in 2018. I came to Orlando building this culinary school downtown. In 2003, I came to Chicago, after, being all over the place in America, with my wife, being an *[inaudible]* chef, research and development. She had positions, in, and I went with her. And so we worked, sometimes together. Sometimes I'm a different place than she. And so she did Anchor Foods. If you look at the jalapeno peppers, that's her product. If you look at KFC, when we worked for KFC as she worked for KFC, if you remember, when we did sandwiches, chicken sandwiches, that's her idea. That's her. So we worked for Yum Brands. I've worked as a consultant for different food companies in America, flavor companies.

I got a call from, a friend of mine who said, hey, I need somebody to help me build a culinary school in Chicago. And Washburne Culinary Institute was there already, which is the oldest culinary school in the country. It goes back to 1946 with the GI Bill. And so I was then called in as a consultant in the beginning to consolidate Washburne into one program. They were all over the place for the city of Chicago, what they were on different campuses. And so I came in that consolidated that into one and then moved it in with the *[inaudible]* into the Cultural Center, onto the *[inaudible]* there into a culinary school. And while we are building the downtown,

Washburne Culinary at 63rd and Halsted, which is, was it a new project to develop the area. And, at that time, it was a terrible neighborhood. There was a [inaudible]. And so we tear down four city blocks and built the Kennedy King College, the new Kennedy King College. And that's part of the city of Chicago. And also part of our college was the French Pastry School, which is amazing. Sebastian Cannon was there. And so, I had the French pastry school, I had Culinary Institute there, the Washburne, we built that. And, huge kitchen, put in an African restaurant to cater not only to the community, but also to look at flavors from Africa, which was just so ahead of the time. It's now, it's finally trickling into the country. So and that was Washburne, for me, that was school one and two, basically. And, for Washburn, I got a call, my boss actually said, hey, I have a job for you. Like, you want to get rid of me? At that time it was union. Local one. That's what Washburn was, all union, including myself. So, and I've worked with unions before in Berlin. So I, said, I do this, and it's like, do you want to build a school in Michigan, a culinary school. So I accepted a job to build a culinary school in Michigan—it was Muskegon, Michigan. And that was unique because there you had the piece of land. And all I had to do is basically build that school. So I had the opportunity there as a chef to build a school with my design for—so a chef building their school for future chefs. And so I did that, was a unique opportunity and amazing because I—really that's my school. That's what I came up with. That's the design. I designed everything in that school, from the toilet bowls all the way up to the rooftop. The only thing I didn't get was to put my name in gold letters on that building, but I love it, so it's Culinary Institute of Michigan, CIM. But I built that school, and that's unique. It's unique concept. The school is built on the [inaudible] principal. Yeah. How nature is built. So there's, it's a building that has no back. It's front and front. So whenever you approach it, you feel like it's the front of the building. So you can check it out. But that that's how I did, went around, I got fired, actually, because when I finished that school, I signed a contract. And then two weeks later, the vice president fired me after the president left the college. That made the news, Google, top news for a while for being fired. First time in my life I got fired. I was warned about it, and I didn't really went to it. But then it happened. It appeared like the vice president hated me. And then she got the power because the president left. I was the first one out. And it was kind of a shock was like, dang, what happen? But it's still my school. You know, you can't take that from me. That's the good news. And I built my school at 18 months, within budget. But I must have discovered something, I think that, or maybe she just hated me, but it's what happens. Michigan is a right to work state, which means you can get fired at any time, at any day, for any reason or no reason at all. Yeah. The good news is the vice president got—retired afterwards because you cannot just people fire people without even the board knowing about it.

But anyway, moved around the country, did some, consulting, did a lot of consulting, and, worked jobs that I'd never done before, but I wanted to do, like working for Disney Cruise or working for Royal Caribbean which is a celebrity cruise line. So I had celebrity had 11 trips and built one and at Disney, I had two little ships, and we built two big ones. So that's something I would always want to do. Was great, a lot of fun. And I worked in Arkansas in a hospital because I wanted to change hospital food. So that was the University of Medical Science worked there just to improve hospital food because I believe I can do that. And I did. And I helped with the governor of Arkansas with the initiative there. The governor wanted to take out the fryers of the hospital. And this is down south, you know, so you cannot do that. That's like changing culture. So we said, okay, we're not going to take the fryers out, we're just going to

put better fryers in, so the food that we fry has less fat content. So therefore I could get a chicken lean about 98% lean. So we did that. That helped me also to have better food for the patients. I've managed to get a steak on the menu in the hospital. Even, the doctor were in arms because, like, oh, my God, the heart patient is going to die, but it's not the case because I went to the American Heart Association, said here at the steak was serving is actually 98% lean. That means therefore it's certified so you can serve it. And so we had steak in the hospital, did room service there. So I improved the food. And that's the thing in a hospital you want to make sure that you don't have to worry about food. You have to worry about so much else especially if you just got diagnosed with cancer or you know, you have to change your diet, maybe have diabetes or you're maybe dying. Yeah. So that's the last thing you want to think of. And so you want to have good food and, you know, especially seeing in the hospital, we had, you know, floors with cancer patients on there and some floors, they had all kids.

00:44:38 - 00:44:52

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: To clarify, I thought you were here since 2003 because as I was looking at your very, extensive CV on LinkedIn, you said that in 2003, you launched chefsforchefs.com.

00:44:52 - 00:44:55

ALEX ERDMANN: Yeah, that's my consulting company.

00:44:55 - 00:44:57

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And it was it said it was based in Orlando.

00:44:57 - 00:49:00

ALEX ERDMANN: So it's based in Orlando. Yeah. It's basic basically where I am. So chefsforchefs. Yeah. I used to do that. I still do consulting, sometimes with really cool projects, like when I worked for Cooksey, which I thought was cool. It's a camera that records what you cook but also gives you a temperature rating. So you can see that on the camera, what temperature dependance and so on. And so you need to check that out. It's cool. Yeah. So but I came to Orlando in 2018. I've worked in Miami over the cruise lines, came up and down, and I was like, I don't live in Miami. It's just too humid, too hot. And, Orlando was better, and, Miami had a better food at that time. It was like, dang it. But then when I got, when I worked in Arkansas in the hospital and I got the to call and, I saw that position opening up here for Valencia College, building a culinary school. And I was like, that's I really need to do that would be my fourth school. But also, this is a school building in the center of tourism in the universe. So you need to build a school there. That's what I needed to do. And this is it, like a capstone for me. But also, there's no better spot to build a culinary hospitality school. So that's what I did. I came on that project; they had the plans already there for ten years. That's how it works in colleges. And I was like, alright, I have to fit into that building, which is L-shaped. So we managed. I had to change a lot. But that change to the better and also made the school look not like an institution. So people feel comfortable, but also students don't feel like they're in an institution, like white walls and so on. So we changed that. And of course, building that thing in 2018, 2019, it's just before the pandemic. The pandemic shut us down for about, half a semester. We turned around and we worked through the pandemic face to face. We just put a mask on and used more hand sanitizers, essentially. And it worked out great. School is up and

running. It's been almost six years now, and, and enrollment is high. Right now I have 2,250 seats filled in my program this semester. So, the students are part time students and full time employees in Orlando, most of them. So it's rewarding. It's great school and, you know, culinary was on Valencia already in West campus and was just stuck because they didn't have much space. And when we moved down downtown with the new facility, I tripled it in size. So and so that that helped. And I think it's great for the market here, have a lot of connections. And this is the best place to have something like that, because you have the connections to the industry. And also you have the backing of a large college, Valencia is the seven largest college in the country. So we have 70,000 students, the same like UCF [*sic*]. So that what I like at Valencia is that I was able to build that school. Yeah, I had to fit into the building, which is fine. And if I ask for something, I usually get it. So equipment wise we have what the industry has, but also we have some stuff that, that's really out there really new, very, very fancy, very cool. And I get equipment donated from major companies because that's how the level we are now and of course I have Walt Disney putting their name on our school. Yeah. Walt Disney World Center of Culinary Arts and Hospitality. So that's a big deal, Disney connection is amazing. And of course now with Universal, we have that great connection there, the chef is German. So it's win-win. I love it. I love it here in Orlando. And I like how Orlando changed.

00;49;00 - 00;49;01

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: In what ways?

00;49;01 - 00;50;49

ALEX ERDMANN: Well, what I've seen is before Orlando was known for having every single QSR, which is a quick service restaurant. Every single, fast food outlet you can think to have here in Orlando. Yeah. And a lot of those did the prototype, some of them. Good example is a KFC doing the flavor concept right now. And especially similar in the area where I live, which is kind of unusual. And what I like in Orlando is that you have such a multicultural pot here where, you find those cool pockets, you know, they can eat, you know, traditional cuisine from, Puerto Rico, from Costa Rica, from Peruvian cuisine, from Cuba. And it's the authentic food. It's not Americanized, you know, and I see that finally, also other people saying that, yeah, I don't want to cook towards the American palate; I want to cook towards my palate on the way I grew up when I was a kid. So I see that not only in Orlando, but I also see a lot of change in Orlando. We got the Michelin stars now and, you can see how things change in hotels where they really have amazing restaurants, you know, so here you can go to a hotel restaurant, and it is actually good. Yeah. And so that's unique. And it's a highly concentrated area of a lot of cultures. And that's how industry is. That's hospitality is how it's culinary is, you know, if you look at that—that's how my ships were, I had 134 cultures on my ships. So that's what I like because everybody can assimilate. You don't feel like you're not belonging because everybody is, not from Orlando. Most of the people are not from Orlando, you know. And so that's kind of cool. Yeah, I like that.

00;50;49 - 00;50;50

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely.

00;50;50 - 00;50;51

ALEX ERDMANN: And the weather.

00;50;51 - 00;50;52

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah. Of course.

00;50;52 - 00;51;24

ALEX ERDMANN: I mean, I, I do miss sometimes the snow, especially on Christmas because it's still weird. You know, it's like Christmas and it's 80 degrees. But I do not really miss shoveling snow in Chicago. And it'll open up your garage door and nothing changes because it's all white. So don't miss that. And the leaves also. But yeah, that's the difference. The weather is great here. And you know, this is where people retire. So it's kind of cool to be here already.

00;51;24 - 00;51;34

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah. Exactly. Tell me a little bit more about your experience as a German businessman in Orlando and its impact on the area.

00;51;35 - 00;54;44

ALEX ERDMANN: Well, the good news is, I've been in business since I came to America, basically, and I learned a lot, especially consulting for so many companies. And, seeing how you do business in Orlando, it's easy because you make connections. And if you network, which is very well done here in America or in Orlando, so you can do business. And people know you if you out there, if you're on the internet, people approach you, constantly and say, hey, I want that, I want that. And so that's, that's how you do it. You do business there, you can help, but also say, if you cannot do it, what they're asking you maybe you can refer somebody. So you connect people. And I do that a lot lately where I am connecting people with other people because I know that's what they need and that's what they're looking for and you make the connections. But also if there's any but it needs help, especially, food and nutrition wise, I love it. I mean, I'm on the, on the board of the Salvation Army. So for me, that's huge. You know, that's, not only a business connection, but it's also where you give back, big time, you know, and as I did, in my life, you want to go with the with the big things, you know? So that's where you want to be. And that's why I thought that that was great to be part of the Salvation Army. You know, we do this Thanksgiving dinner there and feed eight thousand people in one day, so it's a good connection, you know, and, connecting with the politicians, connecting with the commissioners, with the mayors, the city, the organizations around us, the churches around us, connecting with the hospitals right now. I'm working with Stacy Archer doing the videos where we promote cooking on a budget to folks who are living on a budget. And so working with Norman. And her company is called "On Cooking." So it's, the wanting to be exposed to, that kind of culture and that kind of connections here in Orlando especially, but also in Central Florida. And my next thing I'm doing right now is, the Florida Organic Growers. I want to get them to Orlando so we can connect with local farmers and promote local food. And maybe it can even source local. That's what I did in Arkansas. And get also with the students involved in their food comes from. Yeah. And in summer, we kind of merge our plant science department with my school, and then we would be able to, kind of close the circle of planting the food, processing the food, serving the food, and, coming back, you know, composting and going from there again. So that's what I'm doing right now.

00;54;45 - 00;55;22

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And I know it's probably like picking a favorite kid, but you've had such an acclaimed career. You've worked in different capacities from, you know, business side to the academics to community service, as you just mentioned. Which experience has been your favorite in whatever way you want to interpret that word, whether it's more most rewarding, most humbling, you know, and this is a question that, you know, as you're telling me about your career and your life, I'm getting inspired because you've done so many big things. So I was just curious to know.

00:55:22 - 00:58:38

ALEX ERDMANN: Yeah, well, for me, the coolest thing I ever did was building that culinary school and the way I've wanted it to build and having to option from Baker College that I could do that. So if I said, hey, I want that stove. And I did. So I went and got that done. Pollutes stove in my restaurant down in that kitchen. And because I thought, that's the best stove out there in the country, in the world. And he's one of the best chefs. And so I figured I want that. And so we pushed it, and we got it and, same with it the design that I did an open concept design which means the classrooms don't really have walls. So it's like pizza shape because I wanted to students to see what other students do in the next semester and the next semester. So you may start here on that corner, but you see it already the other two semesters ahead what they're doing, and I did that. Nobody does that. I know my design was copied afterwards, and which is great, I love it, and I'm sharing those things. You know, I'm sharing plants right now. I'm consulting in the Bahamas, so that's a big deal for me. That's huge. But also, this capstone, what I'm doing now, building this culinary school here, not only building it, but also, since it's established now and we're back to where we wanted to be after the pandemic. Next step is to become a global culinary hospitality school. So. And so that's my next step. That's what I'm working towards. It's one thing to build a school and then walk away from. It's another thing to actually grow it and make it an institution. And so we at that point, we are one of the best culinary schools in the country. Hospitality Culinary. And, we are, having the right connections. It took me a while, but we are we supposed to be a destination. Everything in Orlando is a destination, you know, Universal, Disney. So my school supposed to be a destination, which I reach now. We are. We are a destination. So we talked to VisitOrlando, VisitFlorida, VisitUSA. So we are on the map. And now it's like, okay, the world needs to know we are there and need to come to us. We have already high enrollment of international students, but I like to see more but also like to see more collaboration with entities outside of the country. So we collaborate with right now with Denmark, the Netherlands, Italy. I'm working on something in Colorado right now. Yeah. So that's the next spot to become a global institution. And get more folks into Orlando and see us not only as a place to learn, but also as a destination. So we have fun at the same time. And of course, if we can work wherever, I mean, here I can find job—any student in my program definitely has like at least ten to twelve job offers if you want to take it.

00:58:38 - 00:58:58

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Besides personal ambition, you know, getting to the next level, getting to the next level, why is it important for you to connect with so many different communities, whether it's the business community, whether it's patients at a hospital, whether it's students now, through food, why is that important for you?

00:58:58 - 01:00:08

ALEX ERDMANN: Well, it's hospitality. That's what it comes down to. So culinary, baking, pastry, it's part of hospitality and connecting with people and making them feel welcomed. That's what it's all about. That's our industry. And this is what Orlando is all about. You know, this is what Florida is all about. So that's how I see it. I see myself promoting that, living that. And I want other folks to understand that that's really important. I mean, that's, just got an email [from] the Mexican consulate wants to have a tour next week on Tuesday—I have to squeeze that in, but I want to do it because it's cool. Yeah. Also, every time I give a tour to a parent with their child who wants to see the program, the child, the future student enrolls afterwards. So I have a 100% success rate so far. So for me, that's cool. Yeah. It's not pressuring anybody. No, I'm just showing how it is. This is how it looks like. But it's important to promote hospitality so people see it. And if you very hospitable, it's a big deal.

01;00;09 - 01;00;11

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah, absolutely.

01;00;11;21 - 01;00;12

ALEX ERDMANN: It's culture.

01;00;12 - 01;00;32

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Exactly. And in what ways do you think Orlando—whether Orlando, generally speaking, but Orlando also from a culinary perspective—in what ways do you think the city will change in the next, let's say, twenty years?

01;00;32; - 01;04;44

ALEX ERDMANN: It's changing already. So you will see definitely more international cuisine come in. You will see more specialized cuisines come in. Right now it's a tough environment—business environment—for a mom and pop operation to survive. [*Inaudible*] restaurant is a little bit difficult, but I think it's going to get better within the next three years. Hospitality still catching up from the pandemic. We are not there yet, but we're getting there. So you will see more visitors coming, especially international visitors coming, making this their destination, feeling comfortable in Orlando. The city itself is working towards that to have more folks coming downtown, by changing the downtown to make it more accessible. Look at the project under I-4 and in front of the Kia Center with the Magic building there. The infill that we have now with, our greater village, where I'm located, and how you kind of change the traffic flow of the downtown so you can that's going to help. Universal is going to change the whole area. I mean, you're looking at, you know, they need 15,000 people by May. Yeah. So it's like, woo! So you're going to change that, there's a lot of building going on around Disney right now. Legoland is changing. There's infill around those places where now we're catering towards the employees. It's like, oh yeah, it's great to have all those people work for us, but where are you going to live? Maybe build some housing. So Disney is doing that, which is great. And Universal is working on something like that too. A lot of more hotels coming up. There's a lot of hotels coming up, they're building them right now. And so that's going to change Orlando. Traffic's going to change. We have thousand people moving in every week. We're not going to change for a while. I bet.

So the—food wise it's just going to get better and better for Orlando. And now what we need to work on is where does the food come from? Can we do more local? Does it have to travel so far? And also, if we do specialized cuisine, like traditional Indian, how do I get the products from India here? Those kind of supply chain issues have to be solved but probably will. And you will see culture scene is changing. The art scene is changing. Yeah. I finally got my fifth floor set up so we can do art galleries, and we did it already. And that's the thing, you know, it's a culinary school, culinary arts. But we do art also. So working together with the different departments from the college, like the film folks and, you know, the arts folks. So that. I think the art scene in America here is good, but in Orlando is really good, especially with, the Steinway—Steinmetz Hall. So when I see that the quality of culture, the quality of food, quality of hospitality going up, that puts us on the map. And I mean, who's the competition? Miami is the competition. So, but we are getting close there. And then, of course, there's Brightline going right into Miami. So you can go down there with the train, come back and still stay here and it's maybe more affordable. So. And yeah, there's a lot of local farms where you maybe can even talk to them and say if they can grow something that you specifically want them to grow, like certain kind of pork, certain kind of beef, certain kind of plant. So that that's what I see is going to change in the future. There will be definitely more people moving here. Things kind of spread out more, but, it's going to bring more, different cultures in and different countries. So you may see more unique restaurants that cater towards that. Yeah, not so much towards the tourism or tourists, more towards locals, which is kind of cool.

01;04;45 - 01;04;57

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: In what ways has your German heritage influence? What's your perspective on life generally, but also living here in the United States, Orlando specifically?

01;04;57 - 01;09;40

ALEX ERDMANN: Well, growing up as an East German—not really growing up, just till I was 18 or so, puts you in a situation where other people maybe not been before because you kind of been looked at as a second-class citizen, you know, East Germany versus West Germany. So shedding that with the German unification, helped, you know, worked. But I'm still come up from a different culture. And so, in East Germany, it was more like a collectivist culture similar to what you maybe see in China or Russia versus in West Germany, it's more like an individualist culture there. And so you think a little bit different. In America—yeah I mean—doesn't get any more individualist, you know, but you see things change. And if I can do that, if I can, project my culture on other folks and say, hey, look, this is what my experience was. This is how it works. And maybe even tell people like, okay, we are approaching things that I saw in East Germany, and I didn't like it. So you may want to think about that when you talk to your politician next time, because it doesn't work out. You know, I'm sorry communism doesn't work. And I've been there, so I can say that. Yeah, but also, a revolution, where you become violent, try to change things violently doesn't work either. Yeah, and I've been there too, because I didn't shoot. Yeah, so we did not shoot. Nobody died. And Germany went—East Germany unified with West Germany. Nobody got hurt. We just did it. Yeah, which is great. Good news. Also, people talking about a democracy. We had it in East Germany. We had democracy. That means we had a round table. It's called the round table where people came together, normal people, not politicians, and talked about how the country is going to look like, how is it going to work? That's a democracy. Yeah. And it worked for a while until we got

integrated in Western Germany. Now it's not that much anymore. And of course now we have more politicians and then the EU on top of it. But so, what my culture shows, in my opinion, is, my culture is not only German but also is being in the hospitality industry and that reflects and works for me because I like to see myself being very flexible, especially being traveling all over the world, you know—where do I really belong? I am still a German or I'm an American? Yeah. So my kids are both. Yeah, my kids are German and American, so they are German Americans. They're not a German, said German Americans. And that's great. You know, for them it's much easier because in the future they can work anywhere. They can work in Europe; they can work in America. They don't need visas or anything. They have passport, they can show it, and they can work. So it's the opposite what I had, you know, I had to work through it, and I had to do a lot in order to get that way. So things are better for my kids, and I like to see that getting even better. And it's good to live in America because it's, it's a great country, literally, you know, and projects out that anybody can make it here. Yeah. I mean, I have a big house, a big car. So that's great, you know. In Germany that would have been much harder, I see it with my brother, how long it took him, you know, but there's options. So here there's no excuse, you know, it's like, oh, I cannot go to college, that's not true. Anybody can go to college. You know, even Valencia College—two thirds of my students don't pay anything, it's free. So there's definitely more options here in America. But also, being a German American, now you have more options worldwide. But also, I figured I can relate to other people who feel like they're not American because they're not. And so I can say, yeah, I understand what how it feels like. And I know, and I can help. So that's a big deal. Especially I see it on international students it's like, hey, how can I make their life easier? It helps because now downtown, for instance, we have housing upstairs for students so that it's so much easier than for somebody who comes over from Brazil and all of a sudden has to find a place to live. And they have no idea, not even about the culture here. Yeah.

01:09:40 - 01:09:56

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Right. And lastly, if someone is listening to this recording, let's say fifty or hundred years from now, what would you want them to know about your culture and the state of Florida?

01:09:56 - 01:11:50

ALEX ERDMANN: I think if you listen to us by that time, hopefully we don't have those culture issues anymore. So everyone is a big culture. Maybe the world looks like a big America, you know, which will be great. And you can see some tendencies there already. And I think if you listen to folks are like, oh yeah, the good old times. They are maybe not that good in the old times, but you'll only remember the good stuff. Same here for me. You know, it's a lot of bad stuff going on, but also there's a lot of good stuff. You have to see the good stuff and live at it and push that. And I think if you look at Florida now, Orlando now, I think it's going to be just even better in the future because we are doing so much ahead of any other state already, you know, cultural wise, tourism wise. Look at our semiconductor areas here where we try to be ahead of what's the future look like? You know, look at those helipads—soon we're going to have those air taxis going on, who has it!? And then, of course, a rocket goes off every other day with Space X and Blue Origins. That says a lot about Florida, in my opinion. And then, see how, we know try to conserve what we have and still accommodate folks who come to our state that, I think it would be great. I like to look at it that that in fifty years it can be just amazing

here and probably don't have to worry about phones and things, writing stuff, because AI is probably going to take care of all of that.

01;11;50 - 01;11;53

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Alex, thank you so much for this interview. I really appreciate it.

01;11;53 - 01;11;54

ALEX ERDMANN: Definitely. Yeah, I love it.