



## THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: Roman Wilcox

Interviewer: Meredith E. Abarca and Joshua I. Lopez

Project: El Paso Food Voices

Location: 2252 Tierra de Paz, El Paso, Texas 79938

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Transcriber / Summary: **Public Kitchens**

“Food is about responsibility and cooks are people of influence” are the final reflections that chef and restaurant owner Roman Wilcox addresses while speaking about his culinary path that officially began at age fifteen. Born and raised in El Paso, Texas, Roman recollects his interest in food from the time he was a very small child as he would spend time watching PBS cooking shows—thinking all young kids did that on Saturday mornings. His story addresses the influences his grandmother, father and mother’s cooking had in his life. These range from raising and slaughtering a hog, planting vegetables, to heavily relying on the convenience of fast food and dealing with the health consequence of this dependency, to eventually developing a mostly plant-based diet. His culinary path began at Riverside High School where he enrolled in an elective course from the culinary program run by chef Rick Webb, who later was central in developing the culinary program at El Paso Community College (EPCC).

Roman’s first cooking job was as a prep cook at Café Central in the mid ‘90s—at that time the only fine dining in El Paso. He spent a few years living in Arizona, where he met his wife. There he continued to work as a cook and eventually got involved in missionary work where he began to understand a spiritual component connected to growing, cooking and offering food. Once he returned to El Paso in 2005, his cooking career continued for a few years as an instructor at EPCC and Mountwood High School. These experiences, especially at the high school, were the most transformative in Roman’s culinary path. Beyond teaching cooking techniques, he felt the necessity to teach his high school students about food. This led him to dive into a critical exploration about food systems—industrial, organic, free range, from farm to table, and from tail to head. As he began learning about the “hidden” cultural,

social, environmental, and health cost of the modern food industry, his views about food shifted from the food itself to people. His interest was no longer about serving beautiful food on a plate, but in serving tasty, healthy and sustainable food to everyone. He applies this principle by never having a set printed menu while he worked as the master chef at Mustard Seed. Now, in his own restaurant, One Grab Community, he cooks according to what is seasonal—be these things he is growing in the community garden connected to the restaurant, at the framers' market or other local producers. One Grab Community is an all plant-based restaurant that incorporates the system paying it forward so that everyone can eat a good tasty and healthy meal, especially if that might be the main meal they eat. His sense of responsibility to his community, to the environment and to the future drives his desire for cooking, what he calls his spiritual calling: serving the best food he can to others.

Length of interview 1:18:30

Length of Transcript