

CHRIS NEWMAN
Rack Pack BBQ Team & Catering – Jonesboro, AR

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Date: May 27, 2011

Location: Valley View High School – Jonesboro AR

Interviewer: Rachel Reynolds Luster, SFA Intern

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

Length: 1 hour, 1 minute

Project: Southern BBQ Trail – Arkansas

[Begin Chris Newman Audio]

00:00:01

Rachel Reynolds Luster: This is Rachel Reynolds Luster and it is May 27, 2011 and I'm at Valley View High School and I'm talking with Chris Newman about Arkansas barbecue. I'm going to let you introduce yourself and say a little something about your connection to Arkansas barbecue?

00:00:18

Chris Newman: All right; my name is Chris Newman. I'm from Jonesboro, Arkansas. I am an owner/member of the Rack Pack Barbecue Team catering company. I was raised in the—in the Southern Missouri Ozarks, raised on a hog farm, and been around barbecue my whole life and moved to Jonesboro almost 16 years ago and met up with—with a couple of people that were into competition barbecue and built a team, built a couple of I'd say what we think are pretty nice competition rigs and catering rigs and we've been going at it ever since.

00:00:58

RRL: Wonderful. So we are at the school because you're helping out with a fund-raiser?

00:01:12

CN: We are; we are. We're—today we're doing a fund-raiser, a—a member of my daughter's pre-k class was recently diagnosed with a—with a life-threatening disease and we're trying to raise some money for his family to send them to a conference to learn how to deal with the

disease and so we sold Boston butts, \$25 a piece. We sold 100 and—almost 190 of them. We cooked about 110 of them overnight and we've got the—the remaining balance of that on the— on the grill for today and pickup is this afternoon, so—.

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RRL: Well that is a wonderful thing for you to do to give back to the community. It is that a frequent occurrence that you work fund-raisers?

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CN: It is; it is. I wouldn't say—I started to say the majority—a lot of what we do is—is what I guess you would consider pro-bono work a little bit. **[Laughs]** It's—it's just giving back. We already have the money invested into the equipment; you know buying the—buying the product to cook is—is the challenge a lot of times when you're doing charity events because the products costs so much money now but we're—we're always more than happy whether it's a—a situation like this where you're raising money for an individual family or whether it's for a student group, a church. We've done the full gamut of fund-raising stuff, so—.

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RRL: You're doing butts today.

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CN: Correct.

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RRL: What kinds of things do you usually—say for your catering business what do you—?

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CN: Right; we do on the catering side, we actually do catering and vending either/or. We—we have another trailer that’s set up more for the vending/catering side that has a full enclosed kitchen and enclosed smoker, hot water sink that is Health Department certified so that we can actually sell in the State and it’s a fully mobile unit.

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So yeah; the—as far as doing the catering and doing the vending, it’s—it’s anything and everything. We will do everything from pulled pork sandwiches, barbecue chicken, we do barbecue nachos, we do—we do a pork chop on a stick, which is—which is a pork loin that we cut into about an inch and a half boneless pork chops, put it on a skewer and sell it as a pork chop on a stick. That always goes over big at fairs, festivals—that type of thing.

00:03:44

Yeah; I mean the—the full range of stuff, we even have a barbecue sundae that we do in—in—we call it a barbecue sundae that has—you put it in a 12-ounce cup and it has a little barbecue meat, little baked beans, little potato salad, little coleslaw with some barbecue sauce on top. That’s always a big hit at the—at fairs and festivals.

00:04:05

RRL: Mobile meal.

00:04:05

CN: Absolutely, absolutely.

00:04:07

RRL: So I got to see you guys rubbing down the butts—

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CN: Correct.

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RRL: —with seasoning like a rub.

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CN: Yes; yes.

00:04:19

RRL: What are some of the ingredients in your—?

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CN: The—the rub that we typically use especially when we're doing—when we're doing big—it's a big difference between doing competition and doing mass cooks where you're cooking you know almost 200 Boston butts, when we do competition it's—it's one of them things where you know everybody has their own little secrets I guess they call them you know. *[Laughs]*

00:04:44

We—we have a competition rub that—that we—we've developed. We've had some friends that have helped us—helped us fine-tune it a little bit. And when we're doing—when we're doing events like this here today a lot of times we will take a commercially available rub

and we will spice it up a little bit. You know a lot of times that commercially available rub is intentionally made bland so that it applies to everybody.

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We'll—we'll add a little—we'll take an average—an average rub and we'll add a little cayenne pepper to it or we'll—or we'll you know a little brown sugar, a little cane sugar, any number of things that—. A lot of times it just depends on what's available to you.

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Now for competition that's one of those things where you know you try to—you try fine—hone your specific thing because you're catering to a specific taste in—in judges and—and that's always a challenge.

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RRL: And we don't—we don't want to give away your secret ingredients but let's—

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CN: Oh no; that's fine.

00:05:47

RRL: —maybe just talk about—you mentioned, which I thought was interesting, the process of getting people to help you develop the different flavors.

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CN: Sure; yeah absolutely.

00:05:56

RRL: Like what's that process like?

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CN: Man you know—

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RRL: Do y'all just get together and—?

00:06:02

CN: You know it's kind of funny because my—my partner in the business, Dwayne Daniel, he—we've been friends for as long—well as long as I've lived here, almost 16 years now and both kind of had a—a background in—in barbecue, a background in—in food in general. He was raised around the restaurant business, so he was exposed to a little bit more of that than I was so far as the developing—the process of developing a certain taste, a signature blend if you want to call it that.

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You know when you're—his family owned a little mom and pop, little mom and pop restaurant and you know everybody has their little thing that they try to do that—that identifies them that somebody says hey, you know Joe's Place has the best burger or the best chicken or whatever it happens to be.

00:06:52

So where we got into the barbecue thing, through a lot of people that we met all over Northeast Arkansas, Tennessee, Northern Mississippi, even up in the Missouri Boot Hill, we met a lot of guys that—that helped us—we never really fancied ourselves to be spice makers

[Laughs]. So there was a little bit of a process there where we had to learn how to—how to fine-tune, even take an average generally available product and fine-tune it into something that—that is something that you can consider your own. And that’s a—it was a challenge but we—we learned along the way that it—that it was also—there was also a bit of—a bit of unexpected surprise I guess to it. You know as—as you went along, you know learning how—how different things affect the overall taste of the product, so—.

00:07:47

RRL: It sounds like a fun—a fun thing to try out.

00:07:50

CN: Yeah; for sure it is, yeah.

00:07:51

RRL: Okay; so you grew up in the Missouri Ozarks.

00:07:57

CN: I did. **[Background Noise]**

00:08:02

RRL: No, no; that’s good—barbecue ambiance.

00:08:06

CN: Absolutely.

00:08:06

RRL: Tell me a little bit about your family background and how that maybe influenced your—.

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CN: Okay; I can. Yeah, yeah; like I say, I was—I was raised from the time I was 13 in the Southern Missouri Ozarks. I was—I was born in the Ozarks, spent some time of my childhood in Northwest Iowa but the bulk of my childhood was spent in the Missouri Ozarks. That’s what I consider home. I’ve been raised on—I was raised on a hog farm. My parents still raise certified Berkshire hogs. We self-market the product. It’s basically a closed—a closed system if you want to call it that from—from the point of inception to the point of delivery of the product. We have full control of that product.

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I guess applying that to—to barbecue, it—well one, it gave me a lot of exposure to barbecue in general while I was growing up. There was—when you grow up on a hog farm you’re always exposed to barbecue I guess. So that’s been a lifelong thing for me. But a big part of what—what I guess I bring to it is that I understand where the product comes from and how the different ways of—of raising and slaughtering that product can affect the—the end-result that—that we end up serving to people whether it’s at a fund-raiser or at a fair or—or in competition even more specifically. So that gives you—it gives you a whole different perspective on it that a lot of people don’t have. Whenever you understand the entire full circle from—from the—the hoof on the ground to the sandwich on the—on the plate that’s a perspective that a lot of people don’t get, so—.

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RRL: And so for your say catering business or your competitions, what—where do you get your meat?

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CN: It—it really depends. For competition we single source our product almost exclusively from my parents. A lot of that—we're always up against the—I guess the battle of—we have a lot of people that will pay a premium price for the product and I never want to knock—I never want to knock somebody out of the market by stealing the product to—to take to competition or just cooking it for myself. So if there's somebody that's out there that's willing to pay for the product sometimes I—I settle for—I settle for the—for the second rung if you want to call it that. But if we're—if we're doing just a—especially like today we're doing this fund-raiser here, 200 butts, my family doesn't have the ability to—to supply that kind of product especially in that short of a timeframe, but the product—and the product that my mom and dad sell we can't sacrifice that product just for price mainly because we keep it all on whole shoulders. So when you're cooking Boston butts like this it doesn't really work out.

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We—we get whatever commercially available product we can get our hands on. We try to buy everything as local as we can. This—this product that we—we got here today was bought from a local home-owned grocery store. If it comes down to the same as anybody does, when you're cooking mass amounts of product if you have to go to Sam's or the Wal-Mart's of the world, sometimes you just have to. That's the—that's the unfortunate market reality, so—.

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RRL: So are you exclusively a hog man or do you do beef and—?

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CN: When I am in competition, in Memphis in May it's exclusively pork. We do some stuff in the Kansas City Barbecue Society circuit and in Kansas City you cook shoulder, pork shoulder, pork ribs, but you cook beef brisket and chicken. So yeah; we do everything.

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I mean if—yeah; I mean we—we have a—a—probably a 90/10 preference to—to pork but we cook—we cook a mean beef brisket, too. So we're [*Laughs*]—we're not—we don't turn anything down.

00:12:13

RRL: One of the really interesting kinds of cultural things that's come up doing these interviews is how many people have added chicken to the menu in the last few years because they see it as a healthier—which I wondered if you had an opinion about that.

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CN: Well I definitely—I definitely do. [*Laughs*] And—and I will tell you straight up that I—I like—I like good barbecue chicken. I like chicken just about any way you can cook it. I like chicken as much as the next person does.

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I understand why people in the commercial food business or even in a—a mom and pop place why they try to push chicken. It's economics. Chicken is cheap to buy and you can sell it for as much money as you can sell pork or beef—especially if you're—if you're selling a

barbecue sandwich and it costs \$6-bucks, I'm just throwing a figure out there, but it costs \$6-bucks. If you're selling chicken legs they cost \$5-bucks. You've probably got 65-cents in it you know and so the—the profit margin is so great because we raise an enormous amount of chickens in this country because somewhere along the way, going back to the—the basis of your question—somewhere along the way the powers that be through commercial advertising convinced a majority of the public that chicken was healthier than eating everything else. And that's why we eat more chicken than we do everything else.

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I obviously due to my background tend to refute that pretty emphatically because it's absolutely not true. The—using the—using the—the commercial advertising that the chicken producers used was brilliant. At the same time it also diminished their own product because they had to mass produce it in such great quantities that it diluted the value of their own product.

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Now they still sell a bunch of it, but at the same time the—a result that they never could have dreamed of was that it also diluted the pork product, because in that timeframe in the late '70s and through the '80s people—I mean people's consumption of chicken skyrocketed while their consumption of beef flat-lined or went down and their consumption of pork flat-lined and went down. And the pork industry for—for good basis reasons in the heat of the moment made a decision that they were going to try to chase chicken by making pork be more like chicken and that's exactly what they did through—through feed and—and through genetic engineering. They created a product that they called the *other white meat*. The only problem is—is that pork isn't a white meat. When you open these Boston butts that we were cooking there, there's—the only white part on those is the fat. And that's exactly how it's supposed to be. But pork is a red meat, the same as—I mean the same as and in some ways if you're—especially if you're dealing with

Berkshire pork like what my mom and dad raise is an even redder meat than most commercially available beef is. And—and that—that campaign to—to engrain in the American public to the average consumer that pork was a white meat did not in the end looking back 25 years later, did not gain us any market share whatsoever. It just changed people's perception. And now we're going back and now we've completely flip-flopped our idea and now we want people to—to be into learning about where their product comes from and why the individual product is better than—or—or not than—than other products that you're comparing it to, so—.

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RRL: So I don't think we mentioned the name of your parents' business, but—.

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CN: Yeah; I'm sorry. Yeah, Newman Farms, Heritage Berkshire Pork; you can find us on the internet at Newman Farm dot com. Got to get a plug in.

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RRL: Facebook page?

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CN: Absolutely; we have—we have a Facebook page. We even have a Twitter presence now, so we're—we're socially—socially networkable adept I guess you would say. Is that—I'm not even sure if that's even a—even an actual term but I just coined it, so I'm going to get money off of that. *[Laughs]*

00:16:44

RRL: Well you mentioned earlier how your background growing up on the farm gave you this understanding of how the—how the product is raised and also how it is processed can affect the flavor. Could you describe that for me?

00:17:03

CN: Sure; yeah. Yeah; you know one of the—one of the biggest things we were talking about a second ago, you know about how the commercial industry changed the public's perception of what the pork product should be. And I'm speaking specifically about pork here.

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Along the way we changed people's perception to think of pork as the same as chicken when it isn't at all and so now as the—if you want to call it—the movement is coming around on the other side of that now people are realizing that you know we—we took a perfectly good product and tried to make it more like chicken which diminished its—its overall value. It for sure diminished its—its price value as well as its nutritional value.

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You know in—in what I was raised around in raising—raising hogs outdoors, 100-percent certified humane, 100-percent antibiotic free, there is I guess you—you—I know and I guess I value educating people about there is a difference. If you have—if you have a Newman Farm Boston butt or a whole pork shoulder and you have the exact same product that you buy from the butcher shop, from a—you know from Sam's Club, from anywhere, just commercially available and you lay them out there, there is an obvious difference, a daylight and dark difference in—in the product.

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Now a lot of that comes from the—the breed of the hog. The Berkshire has a—has a deep red color to it. It has a lot of inner-muscular fat so it's a very identifiable product. It's a lot like kobe beef is or wagyu beef. It's—it's—side-by-side they look a lot alike; that makes a difference because that inner-muscular fat in the end—in the end result whether it's—whether it's a pork chop, porterhouse chops, whether it's ribs, whether it's whole shoulder, whether it's osso bucco, it doesn't really matter what it is from that hog, the flavor is—that inner-muscular fat and that—that just genetic trait carries over a lot of flavor that—that commercially available what we call in the industry a PSE product, a Pale, Soft, and Extractive product that is just—that's vacuum sealed and—and sealed with a—with nitrogen in the package and has—has an absorbent barrier behind it to soak up the water that they inject into the product. There's a daylight and dark, night and day difference between our—our product—. Or, I mean and there are other people that do it in addition to us, but there's a big difference between that product and what most people identify as what they eat as pork.

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RRL: And do you—you are so knowledgeable about this and I'm wondering if you have an educational—

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CN: That's a voice of experience more than anything, so—. [*Laughs*]

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RRL: I wondered if it was—I know your brother went to school for agricultural.

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CN: He does—he did, he did; yeah my brother—

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RRL: He has a PhD.

00:20:14

CN: —yeah my brother has a PhD. He’s a Professor at North Dakota State University.

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RRL: And your dad worked in both commercial—?

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CN: Yeah; my—yeah my dad has a—has a long—a long history, very identifiable history with the pork industry. My dad started raising hogs in 1968 and has never quit it yet and I don’t expect that he’s ever going to. **[Laughs]** That’s—that’s probably where we’re going to bury him I guess. So yeah; my—my background I guess if I sound knowledgeable about it, it’s all—it’s all experience. It’s all real world, actually being out there in the—literally in the field from—from the time I was old enough to get around and walk. My—my dad ran a—ran a commercial confinement operation in Northwest Iowa. We did that for 11 years and that was in—in my early childhood.

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I’ve—I’ve spent—I’ve spent time in every aspect of—of the pork industry from confinement buildings to outdoor production, the—the slaughter facilities all the way to the—to

the end-product where when it's delivered to the grocery stores or to like what—what we do now with—with my parents. We do a lot of high-end restaurants. Restaurants is a huge market for us where we actually interact with the chefs and with the purveyors of the product to—to literally educate them about why the product is better. And that's—that's the sole basis of how we built our business in that. And I say we, I don't want to take more credit for it than—than my parents are due, but there—there is a—there is a connection there where when you—when you have that background, I mean there's hardly anything anybody could tell me about raising hogs that I don't already know. I doubt anybody could tell me very much that I don't already know.

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So there's a genuineness to it that—that most people, they can identify with and that's what helps sell it. You're not a—you're not a traveling salesman. You're not the—you're not the middleman. You know whenever my dad or—or I come in and—and you know you're—you're advertising the product, we're actually the people that—that have been out there you know. We're the guys that drive the posts and feed the hogs and haul them off and—and everything.

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RRL: You're still out there.

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CN: Yeah; yeah, oh yeah.

00:22:43

RRL: When I see—I guess just for the record, I don't know. This might end up on the cutting room floor but whenever I go out to Newman Farms if you or your sister or any of the family—often you're in boots and you're out—

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CN: Yeah.

00:23:02

RRL: —working right with your dad and—.

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CN: Well that's—yeah, you never get away from that. *[Laughs]* Yeah; if you—if you go there you're—you're right back in the thing that you left the last time that you were there that's for sure, yeah.

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RRL: So do you have like—I don't even—it's such a family operation anyway, but I wondered if you have an official capacity with Newman Farms?

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CN: I do not have a—I do not have an official capacity I guess so far as—I am involved in the—I guess I'm involved in the overall operation. I live a little over an hour from the farm, so I'm not there on a day-to-day basis. I'm not the person that's out there carrying the feed buckets anymore. *[Laughs]* I grew up out of that.

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I guess if I have any capacity at all now it's mainly in what the rest of the world would consider outside sales I guess if you want to call it that. It's getting out in—in the field, meeting with the—the chefs, and I mean this is all the way up to—I mean very recognizable you know nationally known—

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RRL: Do it; name drop them.

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CN: —well I hate—I hate to name drop because that sounds a little bit conceited but the—the Mario Batali(s) of the world.

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RRL: Do you want me to do it?

00:24:24

CN: Yeah; I mean I could let you do it I guess. [*Laughs*] You know the—I mean the people in the class of the Mario Batali(s), the—the Lidia Bastianich(s), you know the people that really—the David Chang(s), the Nate Appleman(s) of the world that really drive the—I don't like—I don't like this term but I'm going to use it anyway—that drive the foodie movement. I don't like that term at all but it—it is the only thing that I have that can describe what it is to—that drive the—if it hadn't been for people like them for the people like Mario and Lidia, what we do at Newman Farms would have never been possible because a small time producer, a literally mom

and pop—my mom and pop would have never been able to break into Del Posto in New York, which is the flagship restaurant for Mario Batali in New York, one of the most exclusive restaurants in New York. There’s absolutely no way had it not been for a minor in-road that we knew a guy, who knew a guy, who knew a guy kind of thing that got us in there. And then once we were there and they realized what we had then you’re a rock star.

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So I guess if there’s—if there’s any official capacity for me it is being the—being one of the people that goes out and meets with these people. We do a lot of follow-up visits; we—we go—we go out to the East Coast at least once a year if—if time and work permits. I have not ever been to the West Coast. My—my parents have several times. We—we just went to Chicago, me and dad did two months ago to a [Krishnan 555] event. You know it’s—it’s about getting out and actually having interaction with the—with the chefs and with the—with the purveyors and with the individual consumers, in a lot of cases, where you’re just like hey, you know we appreciate you using the product.

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It—it’s—it’s a different deal where you’re not actually having to sell the product. When the product sells itself you just have to follow-up.

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RRL: Hard—hard work but somebody has got to do it.

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CN: Exactly yeah; it's—it's pretty tough you know when you go into Del Posto you know and it's a, you know \$600 a plate place, you know. It's—it's tough; it's tough but somebody has got to be the public face, so—.

00:26:49

RRL: So do you consider that your occupation or the catering business your occupation or do you have another—?

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CN: Yeah; well I have—I have a lot of occupations I guess when you get down to it. Yeah; well my—my day job, the thing that helps pay the bills is I'm in the trucking business. I own a small trucking business that I contract with a major national carrier. I have—I have 13—well 11 full-time employees, two part-time employees that—that I manage on a daily basis and then the barbecue, the competition, the catering, the Newman Farms, the—the cross country traveling that—that comes on top of everything else, on top of the fact that I have a five year-old daughter that I have to help raise, so that's—so it's—yeah it's a—it's a challenge. And you know and I like to get away every once in a while and go back to the Ozarks and hang out on a riverboat and scuba dive. **[Laughs]** I have a lot—I have a lot of hobbies that turn into jobs is what I've run into.

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RRL: I sympathize with you on that. Let's see; what do you think—so okay I have some more questions about the barbecue but—but building on this discussion that we just had, one of the

recent critiques of the *local food movement* is that it emphasizes gourmet(ism) over other reasons to—

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CN: Over practicality sometimes.

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RRL: Over practicality and things like cultural sustainability and—but I wondered you know certainly as you said that gourmet(ism) made inroads for small—small-time operations that are doing things the right way.

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CN: Sure; sure.

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RRL: I wondered what you'd thought about—or how this system now that it has—I keep using the word—it's such a weird word but zeitgiest—.

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CN: It is but yeah I understand, yeah.

00:29:04

RRL: If you say local food now, today, probably because of this gourmet(ism) almost everyone knows what you're talking about. So now there's the opportunity to kind of move the ball in a different direction that educates people in a different way.

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CN: Yeah; and that—and that's part of the reason I used that term earlier the—the foodie movement or the local food movement like you said. I have a problem with using the term mainly because you're right; the—the inroad into—and the huge education tool that comes from the gourmet(ism) as you said—I don't know of a better word than that, I mean it—the—the gourmet(ism) led into educating people about it, because whenever your Martha Stewart or your Mario Batali or any number of 25 other—other—well more than that—2,500 probably personalities, celebrities if you want to call them that—that latched onto that in TV shows, in TV specials and online you know that—that have—that spawned food blogs and all this stuff you know on the—on the internet and social networking and stuff and it was all because this person is famous. They like it, so I might like it. And that's all—and that's—that was the gateway that led into that.

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Now I think you're right; I think that it is—and I hope that it is because most people—I mean I've had the good fortune being in the—in the background that—that I have that I've got to eat at some places that I never would have been able to go to. And—and that most people would never be able to go to, one because they probably couldn't get in; they wouldn't be dressed correctly and they probably couldn't afford it even if they could. You know I mean some ridiculously expensive places.

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Now that's good fortune for me. It also gives you a certain perspective too whenever you come from the Missouri Ozarks and then you're sitting in these places and you think this is not how normal people eat. This is not how normal—this is how one-percent of one-percent of people eat, you know. And—and it's—and it's great because it helps—it helps feed the machine for my mom and dad; at the same time we do a—a considerably—for the scale that we are, a considerably large mail order business that goes strictly straight to consumers.

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RRL: And it's available locally?

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CN: In—in—right and it's available locally, right. Yeah; I mean we—we have a market there at the farm. We do a lot of local market stuff in the—in the Memphis, Tennessee area. We—we do a lot of stuff to individuals, way more than we've ever done and this is something that's blossomed in the last two years. And it—it almost means more whenever you deal with those individuals—even if it's an individual restaurant. We have—we have a little less than 100 restaurants in the Memphis, Tennessee area that we—that we service on a—on a regular basis. And a lot of these are guys that are completely sold on we know the guy that raises the product whether that's the pork or the beef or the tomatoes or the okra or the lettuce or—.

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RRL: And they know how they raise it.

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CN: Eggs, right, exactly and they know how it was raised. And that's where I think we're transitioning away from—we're never going to get completely away from it, because people are just attracted to celebrities. You turn on *American Idol*; it doesn't take a genius to figure that out. But we've parlayed that in the food side into turning it into something where hey, yeah; it—it can be fancy. It can be the—the 10-rib French loin rack, you know that's sprinkled with basil and you know and has the—you know seven-spice, you know garlic mashed potatoes and all this you know with it.

00:33:08

But it can also just be hey, do you like pork chops because man, we make a really mean pork chop? You know and you can just cook a baked potato with it. You know I mean it doesn't have to be the fancy, fancy thing that you see on TV that Martha Stewart is whipping up in her fake kitchen. It is hey, this is actually a product that you can take. You know how many people have ever actually eaten—well one, have actually ever eaten osso buco, but have ever actually eaten really good osso buco? Right; you have. I know you have.

00:33:40

RRL: I was sitting here thinking that your mom—

00:33:42

CN: Yeah; exactly my mom—my mom makes a really, really mean osso bucco.

00:33:47

RRL: And it's so simple. It's so simple.

00:33:48

CN: And it's so simple and that's the thing, you know and most people—most people are scared off by the fact I've never had it; I wouldn't know how to do it, I can't do it. That's—that's the train of thinking.

00:34:00

Along the way you—you move into this thing where you're like hey, yeah; I mean it—yeah you've never had it but you know what? It's really not that complicated. Take a good product and treat it right and it'll be awesome. You know it doesn't—it doesn't take—it doesn't take a culinary degree to cook good food. It's that people have been engrained with this thing that hey you know this—this faster is better and you know it's easier to go and pick up Wendy's or—or any type of fast-food then it is to go home and cook a meal. And in some cases you know you got a family and it's—and it's busy and you've—you've got 17 things going on, sometimes it is true. Sometimes it is easier, but not always because it doesn't—. I can't tell you how many times in a week or in a month that—that you know I work a job, my wife works a job, we have a five year-old, you know. You come home at 5:30 at night and you lay out a package of pork chops or—you know or a—or a—a tenderloin or something and you know let it thaw out and you're eating by 7:15. It doesn't take that long. It's—it's engrained into some people and it—just because it's—it's assumed, because most people just don't take the time to cook. You know they assume that it takes too long even though they've never actually tried.

00:35:31

RRL: Especially things that might cost more, they think are purposed for—.

00:35:36

CN: Yeah; absolutely and that is—and that is a big part of it, too you know it's economics, because to be fair, and—and I tell this to almost everyone I meet, you know I understand that everybody can't eat an \$8 a pound pork chop every night of the week. They just can't. But I hope that they're not scared to try it every once in a while because I'd much rather them eat two Newman Farm pork chops a month than I would them eat 10 normal ones from the grocery store.

00:36:05

RRL: So here's what I've been thinking and I want to run this by you, but—and the term came from an interview I saw on *Nightline* with John T. Edge. He directs the Southern Foodways Alliance and I hope to get to talk to him about it, too. And he was interviewing and—and talking with a family in North Carolina about their barbecue. And he said you know this is honest food. And to me rather than local food, the term honest food applies so much more to what you and your family do and has so many more implications for our food system and culture and all of those things.

00:36:49

CN: True; yeah.

00:36:52

RRL: How do you think as someone who is heavily involved in both the raising of the animal and the market end of things, how do you think we should encourage other food producers to think and act the way that—?

00:37:11

CN: Yeah; I mean that's—that's a—that's a hard battle to fight and it's one that if you talk to my dad that—that he would tell you that he fights every day and has to a certain extent has his whole life.

00:37:32

I mean I like the term honest food; I like it better than I like local food because local can be a lot of different things, you know. [*Laughs*] I mean we—we like I said, like I was saying earlier, you know we do a lot of business in Memphis, Tennessee which is three hours plus away from where the farm is.

00:37:51

Now they still consider it to be local but that's a relative thing. There's a lot of distance between Memphis, Tennessee and Myrtle, Missouri in a lot of different ways. [*Laughs*] There's a—there's a huge cultural gap there, but—but there is—but there is a thing where you know I think the honest food thing is probably a better moniker than—than about anything that you can come up with. I like it better than I like the—the foodie movement and everything else because it—I know—I mean I can probably fill a school bus full of the number of producers that I know that are single source producers, whether it's pork, it's beef, it's chickens, it's eggs, it's vegetables, the full gamut of the thing that are seriously—and this is a—a—this is about as generic a term as it comes but are—but are true salt of the earth people is what I call them or how I was raised to call people like that—that they know the product that they're raising. They're raising it the right way in the best way that they possibly can.

00:39:03

I don't know a single person and I was just having this conversation with somebody the other day and we were talking about farming you know and it—it literally—it can almost be a badge that you wear around you know like it's—like it's some honorific of some kind. You

know it really is about the most honorable thing that you can do—to raise food for other people to eat because you have to have food. It's you know—nobody makes fire, you know. Fire is just there. You know we learned how to make it and now it's there, you know. Air is there; shelter—okay, somebody has to build the shelter but you know nobody is putting the construction guy up on a pedestal of some kind.

00:39:40

But you have to have food. You have to. And you know the—the farmers of—and I'm going to single out the United States but the world in general, but you know the average American farmer, I have known thousands of them in my lifetime, and I've never met one of them that would—would even ever say in public or—or ever even believed that they intentionally went about their day and their job as it is with farming to where they intentionally were cutting corners trying to circumvent the system in some way.

00:40:21

Anybody who commits their life to raising animals, raising crops, producing the—the food and fiber that—that makes the world go round, anybody who commits their life to that, that's a—that's not a job; that's a calling. I mean it's—it's a—I was raised around it. I've been raised around it my whole life. I've never met anybody who intentionally did it bad. Now I've known people who did it bad, but it wasn't intentional. It was more—it was more a product of circumstance than it was you know intention. It's just sometimes you know things don't always work out the way you think they're going to. But it—it is about the most honorable thing that you can do which goes back to the honest food thing.

00:41:05

I think now people are—people watch a movie like *Food, Inc.* and not everybody has seen it. I have. And I tell people that ask me about it that yes; you should watch it for sure. And

this goes—and this is feeding into your question here. I’m a long talker. I’m coming back around. Yes; you should watch it. You should also watch it with a dose of common sense and a grain of salt because it is a movie that was made from a perspective, the same as anybody has. My perspective may be different than your perspective, may be different than three people down the street’s perspective. But it does highlight in—in a small way and I mean not as much as I think that it probably should have and I—I would love to make—make a—a—I don’t want to say a rebuttal; I would like to make a companion movie to it that singled out more of the people that do it for the absolute right reasons.

00:42:09

Yes; there are factory farms. It’s a—it’s a fact of life. We are not going to get rid of that aspect of the food industry whether it’s vegetables, whether it’s milk, whether it’s eggs, whether it’s meat. We are not going to get rid of that. That’s—that’s a cold hard fact. That’s not to say that they can’t do their practices better to where people have more confidence in them, because people’s confidence in—. It’s funny; people have no problem buying the end-product in the—in the grocery store shelf. But if you do a—a consumer confidence survey they think that factory farms are bad. But they have no problem buying the product that they make; they just think factory farms are bad. That’s not entirely true.

00:42:55

I was raised around the basis of factory farms and that’s not true at all. The—the—the idea that people are intentionally you know mistreating animals in a way to try to you know hoard up a stockpile of cash in some way is just not true. People do things—yeah; there are—there are mistakes made to be sure. There are mistakes made in—in what we do sometimes. But it’s not a—it’s not a picture of the whole. People do it for the right reasons and that’s why I think that the movement is coming around to where it’s not about—yes; it is still about local because

people want to identify with a regionally grown product and I think that's great. That's the huge farmers' market boon and it—especially in this part of the world. And I think that's great, but I think probably the honesty part of it is—is more a selling point than the local is because I think that—that instills more confidence in—in the average—in the average person's psyche. It gives them more confidence in it if they actually understand the process that you use to raise the product and the care that you take in order to produce it. That's a long-winded answer.

00:44:15

RRL: But that's good. That's good. It was very, very interesting.

00:44:21

CN: That's a long-winded answer.

00:44:23

RRL: And I have—let's see; oh, I had another one that wasn't—. [*Laughs*] But we'll go back to barbecue. So I haven't seen any sauce.

00:44:36

CN: Yeah; we don't have any sauce out here.

00:44:39

RRL: Do you use sauce?

00:44:40

CN: We—we do. We do. Yeah; we don't have any—we're not—we're not actually serving the end-product. We're—we're packaging it up for people to carry off today. Yeah; we do. We have a sauce that it's—it goes back to—it's a little bit like the—I would love to—to expound my proficiency in sauce-making and spice-making, but I also believe in giving credit where credit is due.

00:45:10

We—we make a sauce for competition and for the catering business that we—well we didn't really steal it. The guy gave it to us. *[Laughs]* We—we—we have known a—a guy that's been in the barbecue business competition and retail catering for oh man probably more than 40 years and we got to know him real well. And he helped a lot with sauce and kind of passed some things down—down to us.

00:45:42

I was raised—my dad is a big vinegar-based sauce guy. And in this part of the world now—I was raised in the—in the North and then—and then also raised in the Ozarks and now I live in what is technically considered to be the South. It is—there's a regional flavor to that—that doesn't always transpose I guess you would say. So living here and being so close to Memphis and the—the Delta barbecue if you want to call it that you know you want a little sweet and tangy sauce. You want a little kick in there but not too much that it—that it overpowers the sweet and tangy side. So we've—we've developed—we've developed this sauce with—with a friend of ours and it's—it's good. I wish I had some here that you could try. Unfortunately I don't, but—but it's like anything; it's just like the spice and just like the technique of cooking the barbecue. It's always a—it's always an evolution. It's always changing all the time. You're always having to re-adapt to a changing—a changing taste palate with the people that you're—that you're selling to or in competition that are judging you, so—.

00:47:04

RRL: So and you mentioned the regional differences between tastes in barbecue. To you, what does it mean—Arkansas barbecue what—how would you describe it?

00:47:15

CN: Yeah; you know that's kind of funny because we—we tell this story all the time whenever we're—whenever we're talking to people because this—this is the part of the world where we're right on the—we're right in the Delta and we're in the heart of the Delta here in—in Jonesboro. And I was raised in the Ozarks so there's a—there is a—a split there where that's another part of the world up there. And we—we laugh about it all the time.

00:47:39

Pork steaks is a—is a huge thing in this part of the world. You go to just about any barbecue joint and they've got a pork steak, which is nothing more than a Boston butt that they've sliced up into you know two-inch slices and—and then you know cook it. And you go—you—even where I'm from you talk about a pork steak and they—nobody knows what you're talking about. You know and—and especially my brother went to—went to school at the University of Missouri and now is at North Dakota State University in Fargo and you get—you get north of—you get anywhere in the northern two-thirds of Missouri or Illinois or Indiana and—and you start heading north and they have no idea what you're talking about whenever you say pork steak.

00:48:29

You go to—you go to Des Moines, Iowa and talk about a pork steak and they think you're out of your mind. And so I guess you know you talk about Arkansas barbecue, I don't

know if it's Arkansas specific as much as it's Delta specific. You know in this part of the world it's about pork steaks and pulled pork sandwiches, you know. Not—I mean there is—I mean almost all barbecue places here cook a beef brisket but I always [*Laughs*]—I always joke that's only for the people that immigrated here from Texas, so—. Now I like beef brisket but that's—it's always a good joke and always elicits a pretty good laugh from people, but that's for the immigrants we say, so—.

00:49:07

You know I mean I do not think of beef brisket as being an Arkansas—a traditional Arkansas barbecue item. You know it's a little bit different when you're in the Delta because it's not lifestyle producing country. I think that's part of where you know when you're—when you live in—in Missouri or Iowa or anywhere in the Northern Midwest where they actually raise the livestock, they don't—you know they don't—they would never think of making a pork steak out of a Boston butt because they don't even cook a Boston butt for that matter. They take the butt and turn it into a roast. You know they cook a roast, you know—you know I mean that's how they do it there, you know.

00:49:44

And so it's—it's a whole different—it's a whole different—it's a whole different taste. So I mean I guess my—my thing for Arkansas barbecue is just—is just it's pulled pork sandwiches, it's—it's pork steaks and—we like it sweet and tangy and—and you know we—we let it roll. And ribs, I didn't even—I didn't even mention ribs. When you're this close to—to the—to the home of the—Home of the Blues you know you can't go anywhere without—you know we're 70 miles from Memphis in May here so you can't go without talking about ribs for sure. You know if it's not ribs and—and pork steak and pulled pork sandwiches it's not really barbecue in this part of the world.

00:50:28

RRL: And you mentioned Memphis in May and that's one of the competitions that—that you do.

00:50:35

CN: Uh-hm; it is.

00:50:37

RRL: Could you just describe to me the barbecue contests, competitions—?

00:50:43

CN: Yeah; well we have cooked in the Memphis in May circuit as a whole. They run a barbecue circuit where they run regional contests. We've been doing that for—well this is coming up our seventh year. We also cook in the Kansas City Barbecue Society circuit. Memphis in May is a whole different thing by itself because Memphis in May you're not just judged on the product; you're judged as an overall score. You're judged on taste, tenderness, appearance, and then an overall score.

00:51:22

Now that doesn't necessarily mean that the guy with the fanciest rig or the most expensive setup is the one that always wins because it's not true at all; it's—cooking and competition you have to temper the—temper isn't the greatest word, but you have to create a product whether it's a Memphis in May contest, you cook ribs, you cook whole shoulder, or you cook whole hog. You have to—it's not like driving in NASCAR where you know—where the

objective is just to outrun the other guy. You have to learn—you're being judged by a set of people; you have to learn their—what they like and then you have to make your product. You may like what you cook but they may not, so we did it for a long time where we just said hey, we're going to cook what we cook and if they don't like it, well you know we did the best we could.

00:52:21

Well the problem is [*Laughs*] is that you tend not to do that great in the overall contest when you do that. I guess you get points for trying but that doesn't—that doesn't get you any trophies for sure. So you have to—you have to refine your methods. You have to refine your spice and your sauce and you have to learn it's—it's a cycle like everything else is. You know right now we're—we're in the heat of—well we always call it a two-year cycle where it's sweet right now. They want everything sweet; you know a lot of brown sugar, a lot of honey going into the barbecue secrets right now.

00:52:54

Now in two years or less than it'll—it'll go away from that and it'll—and it'll be more about the spice, you know they want a little—they want a little tang, a little kick to it you know. And so you have to chase that a little bit and in competition it's—it's hard—it's hard to do that. It's even harder in the Kansas City because in Memphis in May you actually present your product to three onsite judges. So you actually get the interaction of being able to talk to the judge and tell them why you did this or why you did that and why you used this wood or this product and this sauce and this spice and convince them. Part of it is just convincing them why yours better than the other guys' that they're going to judge.

00:53:36

Kansas City totally different; it's completely blind, so you don't have that interaction. You cook your product, you put it in a box, you turn it in, and you better hope that yours is better than everyone else's. So competition is—it's a hard—it's a hard beast to chase because it is—it's so subjective. It is—you're chasing that—that other person's taste palate and that's—that's a hard thing to—that's a hard thing to chase.

00:54:09

RRL: And does that translate into your catering business? Like do you end up incorporating what you're doing in the competitions?

00:54:17

CN: Yeah; it does, yeah, I mean but you know you can't cook a—a—a competition specific product every time when you're catering or when you're—especially when you're cooking Boston butts. It's hard to cook a competition Boston butt when you're cooking 200 of them at a time.

00:54:32

But yeah; I mean part of the—part of the techniques that you use, yeah I mean it—it does. It translates into it for sure.

00:54:39

RRL: I noticed you were—for this and again you're doing 200 Boston butts, but you're using charcoal in here and you mentioned in the competitions using different kinds of wood.

00:54:52

CN: Yeah; yeah.

00:54:53

RRL: If you were say catering a smaller event like a wedding or—?

00:55:00

CN: Yeah; well and we—we have used wood on this. We—we—I mean charcoal is your main heat source but we use a—we use a center cut hickory when we're cooking butts like this. We're cooking ribs, you try not to use very much hickory because it—it so over-powers the meat because you just have—you have a very—a very thin profile there that—that is easily penetrable, so you want to be careful about the—the kind of wood that you use and the kind of smoke that you're putting in there. So typically we'll use an apple or a cherry for ribs.

00:55:35

When you're cooking a shoulder, whole hog, Boston butts like this I don't want to say exclusively hickory but the majority of it is hickory. We'll—we'll sneak some—some cherry and if we can find apple, which is hard to find in this part of the world, we'll—we'll get some apple in there. We're pretty—we're pretty selective with that apple wood though, so—.

00:55:55

RRL: Uh-huh; and haven't I see you cook a hog in a china box?

00:55:59

CN: Yeah; I have.

00:56:01

RRL: Didn't you do that hog at the farm when you had the pig pickin'?

00:56:05

CN: Yeah; we've cooked several at the farm in the china box, yeah. And that's—

00:56:09

RRL: Do you use that at all for your catering or—?

00:56:11

CN: We do not. The—the main—the main reason why is—is—is volume. It's hard to cook a large amount of—of stuff in the china box. It's great for smaller stuff. I mean if you're just cooking—if you're cooking two or three shoulders for something, you know it's Memorial Day Weekend here—now. You know if you're cooking two or three shoulders or you're cooking a couple of chickens and some shoulders or stuff like that, the china box is amazing for doing that. I mean and you can cook a whole hog in there, but if you're cooking for 100 people you know it's hard—it's hard to do in the china box. But they are—they are great. They are great cooking devices though. We—we love them.

00:56:50

RRL: Uh-hm; and one more barbecue question, for the catering, do you like offer the people the option of going with the heritage pork or—?

00:57:05

CN: We do; we do. I mean obviously there is a—there is a price differential there. You know yeah; and the volume thing, yeah, you can't do it when it's a—a big scale event just because of the availability of the product is—is hard to get even if you're—even if you're one of the sons of the—of the people that make it, it's still hard to get. You're—you're in line with everyone else it turns out.

00:57:28

RRL: And you better not want any bacon.

00:57:29

CN: Exactly, exactly; yeah. [*Laughs*] Yeah; you better not—you better—for sure better not want any bacon, yeah. Not going to get that—bacon or osso bucco you're not going to get that for sure.

00:57:37

But it—yeah; I mean we—we will give them the option especially if it's a—if it's a small scale event. We—we—we have some contacts and we do a lot of stuff at—I say a lot of stuff, we do a fair amount of stuff with Arkansas State University here in Jonesboro. It's—we—we always give them the option you know because there is a price differential there. If they're—you know if it's somebody and they're trying to—to show off if you want to call it that a little bit you know and they want to—they want to invest in a little bit higher quality product, I mean we're always happy to facilitate that. And if it comes down to price you know then we'll—we'll cook whatever we can get, so—.

00:58:21

RRL: Okay; well for the record could you tell me your birth date?

00:58:23

CN: I can, December 10, 1976.

00:58:26

RRL: Okay; I forgot to ask that early on. Is there—?

00:58:32

CN: I almost—did you notice that? I hesitated like I had to think about what my own birth date was.

00:58:35

RRL: It happens. It's probably been—you're—you're older than me, so it's been a long time since I've been carded.

00:58:41

CN: I heard that. [*Laughs*]

00:58:43

RRL: So anyway I appreciate—. Is there anything else that you would like to say about what you do with the catering business or the competitions or—?

00:58:52

CN: I—I can't—

00:58:53

RRL: Arkansas barbecue in general?

00:58:55

CN: You know I guess I would—I would just say that you know we—we enjoy it a lot. I mean I hope that we're—and we try to be where we go to a lot of contests that are—that are out of state and there aren't—especially when we're doing competition there aren't a—compared to Mississippi or—or Tennessee or even Missouri for that matter there aren't a huge—I'm not sure what the word is I'm trying to find—there's not a huge number of people that do competitions from Arkansas.

00:59:34

There are a handful of people that I know that live in the Jonesboro regional area that actively compete in competition. Now we have—we have a hometown barbecue contest here every fall and you get a lot of people that come out to that but that's—that's a lot of people where you know they may just have you know one little small grill. It may be a Weber grill that—and that's what they—and that's what they go with. And to be honest I've been beat by a guy with a Weber grill, so I never ever—. And I used to be the guy with the Weber grill so I never ever talk bad about them.

01:00:05

But it—yeah; I mean we—we try to be good ambassadors I guess if you want to call it that. We—we try to—we try to put a good face on it and—and not only be good stewards of the product but also of the process at the same time. And it's all about going out and having fun and—and insuring that the people that you're—that you're around have a good time. And second

to that there's really nothing else that—nothing else that goes along with it. You know it's just about going out there and—and having a good time with it and insuring that everybody else has—you know eats a good meal and has fun with it.

01:00:42

RRL: Thanks Chris; I appreciate your time.

01:00:43

CN: Hey, thank you; thank you.

[End Chris Newman Audio]