

BEN BARKER
Magnolia Grill – Durham, NC

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Interviewer: Barbara Ensrud, SFA Member
Length: 1 hour
Project: SFA Founders

[Begin Ben Barker]

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Barbara Ensrud: This is Barbara Ensrud, doing an SFA Founders Oral History Project with Ben Barker of Magnolia Grill in Durham, North Carolina. So what is your date and place of birth?

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Ben Barker: I was born at Presbyterian Hospital in Charlotte, North Carolina, in—in December of 1953.

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BE: And can you tell us something about the food of your childhood? Who prepared it and what was it, and what sort of setting did you have those meals—was there any ceremony around it?

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BB: The—I think there is unquestionably what I grew up with from a familial eating standpoint affects who I am as—as a professional chef today—the way I think about the food, the way I think about the table, and the way that I assemble dishes, whether they're original in their inflection or not comes from that early—palate forming experience. My father's family was—they were—they were farmers and they—predominantly tobacco farmers but subsistence—it's a long word—they raised all their own food to eat on the farm. My grandparents moved into Burlington from Alamance County in the Depression because there were jobs at the mills to be had at that point and—and the farm was not a—as far as income how would they maintain the family farm. And my grandmother's sister and her husband continued to operate it as a tobacco

farm up until at least the—the late [nineteen] ‘70s, early ‘80s. And because it was a family farm, where multiple generations were residing and they had a tenant farmer association with a black family, who also helped them do what they did—would go and spend weeks on end in the summertime and—and then the family unit was much more pronounced and close at that point, so my parents would take us to Burlington every Sunday—my grandparents. The meal was not the reason we went, although it was often the—the focus of what we did; the social structure of being with family was involved around being at the table—never in a way that made it grandiose and regarded—that was what it was. So I got to experience with my grandmother and my aunt, two resoundingly skilled cooks, who cooked in a manner that was reflective of Piedmont and seasonal eating that said this is what’s here right now and this is what we’re eating. And they canned, preserved, and raised their own hogs and, you know, cured hams and—and kept dairy cows to make butter and have butter milk and it really was a—quite—quite a wonderful thing that—that—to get that exposure and—and by no means unique in that regard, but I know that it’s—it—it’s still to this day brings about a link that I feel to the soil and—and what I put on the plates here in our restaurant in Durham and how powerful that association can be.

My grandmother taught my mother how to cook because my mother’s mother was in retail. And she would spend the bulk of her days, you know, at work and then come home and whip something together. But it was never particularly complex or even interesting. My mother learned to cook from her husband’s mother and—and—and was an extremely—and is an extremely good cook, who I appreciate for her ability to preserve what she learned from her mother-in-law.

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BE: Were there some special dishes that your grandmother taught her or—?

BB: I think that it was less—it was less that but rather a—a feel for ingredients and simplicity for recognizing the inherent purity of—of what you’re working with and—and, you know, I think that the style of cooking was, you know, very straightforward and a realistic approach to using the best ingredients you could without giving any thought to this is what’s there, this is what we’re going to have and—and you know, my parents—my father was in school for, you know, the first ten years of my life, you know, in various pursuits of—of—of levels of—of doctorate and associate degrees; and even though he was practicing dentistry, they still had three young children right off the get-go and it was—economically was [inaudible phrase]. My mother did extremely well and I—the farm meals and my grandmother’s cooking are what still resounds with me more than anything, I think. But, you know, was it particularly singular? Well, you know, what do I love the most now as an adult, you know—I like greens and I like turnips and I like—as my grandfather called them Irish potatoes, and—which is I didn’t know until my twenties that he was saying Irish. I love butter beans, baby lima beans, corn, succotash-style dishes, field beans in any shape or form, magnificent sliced tomatoes, and long cooked whole beans with vinegar, onions, or cucumbers. My grandmother taught me how to fry chicken when I was a young man—a grown young man because I asked her to and wanted to know how to do it. And she went through the process with such a profound ritualistic approach to it that—that I knew that—that to a—and she was famous for that, and that’s what she would bring to reunions was fried chicken.

BE: And what was it like?

BB: You know, what she did with it was not particularly singular stylistically; I mean she—she would you know—and she and her sister had both obviously learned from their stepmother because they did it the same way. One of those pointed memories of you know—being really young was watching my aunt go out and grab a chicken out of the yard and walk over to the—the clothesline, the metal clothesline and she had made a loop in it and popped his head in there and then let the clothesline go, and it popped his head off and the chicken dropped to the ground and ran around for about eight feet, and then he fell over. But they would wash it, rub it with cut lemon, and that surprised me, only because I just don't imagine that they had a lot of lemons early on in their times. It strikes me as—as a fruit that was unusual to their experience for the most part. They did the buttermilk-soak thing and three to four hours—never longer and they flour-dredged—. My grandmother always put just a pinch of paprika in there along with, you know, salt and pepper; and she would take some dried oregano and rub it between her hands and fry it in a mixture of, you know, lard or Crisco—usually Crisco because it was a magnificent invention and—and peanut oil—never used bacon fat or anything like that in there. And she cooked it for basically about 12 to 15 minutes uncovered, would turn it and cover it for another 10 minutes and then take the cover off again and cook it for another 10 minutes. And it always had a really substantial yet delicate crust. But it was balanced and let the chicken shine through—well you know everybody thinks that their grandmother's chicken is good; hers was particularly good, and I think that most times I can recapture it. I feel like her when I'm standing there in front of the skillet, and that's a good thing.

You know, they would always put out—usually be some preserves and had the finest pastry hand. She was—wonderful chess pies and cobblers and most—great biscuits. You know,

she would bake for every meal. And my recollection of sitting there at the breakfast table and had a huge old white cast sink in the kitchen, and I would sit across from that sink, and she'd be over there on the side of the sink and rolling out biscuits on the countertop. And we'd take soft fresh creamy butter and mix with a little sorghum molasses and put it on that warm biscuit. I was a fat child because I could eat 10 or 12 biscuits at a sitting. Fig preserves.

You know, I think the thing that changed the way they looked at stuff was—was the—and not necessarily in a bad way but really changed the way they handled food was the advent of—of solid refrigeration and a—and the deep freezer because once they got the deep freezer, then they tended to preserve a lot less and can a lot less and instead would pack it into those marvelous, you know, square Tupperware containers with my grandmother's filigreed handwriting date and contents on top.

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BE: When did—when did you first cultivate an interest in food and what—what would you say or who was the catalyst?

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BB: You know, my father was really the person who stimulated that more than anything. Like I think some professional individuals, he's—he was an educator—Assistant Dean at the Dental School at the University of North Carolina and ultimately the Dean there but—but he was very food interested. He and my mom both were and they were interested in travel. I think that he recognized that exposure to other cultures and—and different parts of the world were enlightening and broadening—your experiences made you a more complete human being. So they took us occasionally on trips with them. They traveled a lot on their own but he was really

the—and remains a diligent cook, someone who will tackle a complex recipe with aplomb. He’s a little tough to be in the kitchen with when he’s doing it because he’s—he’s sort of crabby about it all the time when he’s doing it. You’ve got to get out of his way and—and things have to perform exactly as the recipe indicates for him to feel like, you know, he’s achieved the success; but he really stimulated that interest. He was cooking in the ’60s and early ‘70s and, you know, from *Gourmet* and things of that—tackling more complex—while my mother, the more accomplished cook probably would, you know, deliver the more straightforward things. But my father was really the person who stimulated our interest in exposure in food and sometimes reluctantly, you know, because he would do things that we thought gross as children. And—
but—

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BE: Did he travel like to cities or—?

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BB: It was other cities; he would go to the West Coast.

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BE: Did you travel abroad?

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BB: We didn’t do too much international. We didn’t have the financial resources—and they indulged themselves but not necessarily us. But, you know, I think my most marked memory was going—they took us to San Francisco when I was 14 and said that we got to go to Chinatown when it was still very ethnic. And not to say that it isn't now but it’s less so than it—than it was

then. There was a—there was a Latino community in San Francisco that was still not cooking for—for the broad palate and—and they took us to a place called Ernie’s. It was the classic—he wanted us to see that he took us to Tadich Grill; he wanted us to see that. He thought it was important to see what these renowned institutions were about as restaurants. And so they made lasting and marked memory for me about what represents a restaurant that carries a mantle beyond, you know, just providing sustenance, you know, that—that continuity and, you know, being multi-generational to a family as an entity was an important thing to be. It was okay to be that and it was a good thing—a good experience.

He was the one who said, you know, “As I floundered about in various academic pursuits that—why didn’t I—.” I had gotten this advice from an instructor at Michigan State, but he financed the opportunity for me to go and just look at the culinary—to see what my dad did. He said, you know, “You’ve worked in the restaurant industry ever since you’ve been—were 13.” Because I did, you know. It’s something that I’ve been involved with—that’s where you could get jobs in Chapel Hill—restaurant jobs were always available. And he said, “You should go and at least go look at it. I’ll pay for you to fly out there and look at it.” And so had he not provided the wherewithal to do that, I doubt that I would be where I am today because I probably wouldn’t have done it without him supporting me with the—the chance to get the exposure.

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BE: That was actually—leads to my next question—what was your first job? How did you get your first job working around food?

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BB: My very first job was at the Carolina Inn when I was 13 at Chapel Hill, and it was being a busy boy and that was—the Inn was predominantly food service for the university community and—and the village itself and it was still a village at that point. There was obviously a number of restaurant entities in Chapel Hill, and it was a cafeteria mainly at that point the way the food service approach was. So you know I—as a—as a bus boy, you know, you're really not exposed to food so much as—as the environment and it's the—the environment that I appreciated. My first cooking job was when I was 16 at a place called Mom and Pop's Ham House, which was started by, I think, some guy in—and my memory is somewhat clogged on this because I was—I was an adolescent and it's just another job in some respects, but the guy I think made—he had a country ham production facility somewhere in the Piedmont or—or around Concord or Salisbury or something like that, and had opened a restaurant as an adjunct to that facility and had some success with it and—and went onto open two or three more. I don't think they lasted particularly long but we did—

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BE: At Chapel Hill?

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BB: That was in Chapel Hill; it's actually where Southern Season was prior to their most recent move. It was in that location there and it was—I cooked with an old black dude named Louis who after the shift would sit on the back dock and drink scotch out of a sweet milk carton and said it eased his stomach that way. I have very little memory of what I cooked, if any, other than I knew that the—the—I liked being in—in the action. I liked the hours being working at night and—and I liked that you did a repetitive job but there was a sense of accomplishment, and you

were able to repeat the same action with some skill, you know. And they'd, you know, be back a night where they really worked you hard. And you'd come out of there feeling good about it. It was stimulating.

I kept ending up in—in restaurants either, you know, waiting tables or—you know, I cooked in a couple places that were not particularly good. As a matter of fact, I don't—I had no experience that would lead one to expect or believe that I might ever amount to anything in this field. And there's still some question about that.

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BE: No, there is not.

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BB: But—but ultimately it—I think that trip to Hyde Park gave me direction and then sitting next to Karen [Barker] the first day of class gave me someone to pursue it with—with an unbridled fashion and—and I think that was a—.

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BE: So you ended up going to the CIA [Culinary institute of America]?

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BB: I did. We—I came back to Michigan State, finished another semester-and-a-half there. And I was working full-time at a—a seafood restaurant in—in Okemos, Michigan, [?] and [*Siren in Background*] J Ross Brown's [fish?] station. I mean it was—[*Laughs*]—I started in the kitchen working in the kitchen and got tired of thawing out fish to sprinkle it with paprika and—and butter and baked butter stuff and then shoving it into an oven until it flaked and it was—it was

really a terrible cooking situation, so I managed the bar for the last six months, while I waited to—to fill these CIA's then requirement of six months of work experience before you could start.

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BE: And how—how long were you at CIA—what—I don't know what—?

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BB: Well I went through their full Associates Degree program, which is a two-year program which is—between the first and second year there's an externship period that they quantify by hours now, though it was more like a three or four month thing at the time. Karen and I went to do it together to see if we could stand to work with each other. And it was a—an extremely good exercise because we worked in a small chef-owned restaurant on Cape Cod, where we were the sole prep team and the sole line team. The owner was old; he was a retired first violin for the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra who had purchased a 300 year-old cottage on Cape Cod and turned it into his retirement dream—a restaurant with his wife, his British wife. His name was Costanzia Theorems [?]
—Ned—and his wife was English, Dorothy—Dot—and I have a picture still hanging in the kitchen in there. It's something of a reminder of—of—that one hopes we will retire before we get to that point because he—he was 81 when we went to work for him and he had—I think he really did love food and—and sort of liked the restaurant business, but he was tired and he was old and he hurt. He had a throne in the kitchen that had been made out of a Volkswagen seat that had been mounted onto a wine crate, and he would sit on that chair throughout service and yell at us, you know, to move along; and Dot would come out because we were—they would hire culinary interns every summer to try to do this seasonal restaurant and, you know, we weren't capable of doing what they really needed to do on the busiest of nights,

you know. We just weren't—I mean there were some people, probably, who were, but certainly Karen and I weren't. I think we cooked pretty well using his recipes and delivered pretty much what he asked us to do, but in terms of speed and the adroit ability to handle the summertime crowd, we weren't always there. So, you know, Dorothy would come back there and she used to say, “Neddy, they’re waiting out there.” And he’d say, “God dammit, Dorothy. They wait at Anthony’s,” which is Anthony’s Pier Four, you know, “if they wait on-line there they can wait here.” And he would always yell at us to—he had a seasoning mix that was predominantly MSG that we refused to use, so he’d yell at us, “Got to throw it on the food to season it!” And we’d pretend to throw it on there but wouldn’t. We’d put salt and pepper. But it was a great kitchen, beautiful windows all around and copper cookware. He had some extremely good recipes; he was an accomplished potter who made—who did a Cioppino style dish there that he had made these kind of like Portuguese fishermen boats that we served the Cioppino in. He handmade those and fired them and this kind of—we did Paellas that were really authentic and wonderful—had beautiful Paellas for, you know, two to six people that we would do to order. And the swordfish that we would get out there was extraordinary; the cod would be—the fish was really wonderful to cook, but he had an exemplary Italian sausage recipe that he taught me how to make; it was really just as good and fine a blend as—I’ve never tried to do anything better than that—than what he taught me how to do. But he would also make us do these—we had to do these little dinners that were sort of like early-bird things, and it was like we’d do gross stuff; I mean they had a Finnan Haddie [*Scottish-style smoked haddock*] that we did in a—it was almost a [inaudible] style; it was like Finnan Haddie with grapes and a cream sauce, and it was like ah-ah-ah. It was really disgusting, but that was what he would offer to the—to the early-bird diners.

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BE: But you spent a summer there then?

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BB: Yeah, it was basically from June until Columbus Day, and then we went back for our second year of school.

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BE: Right. And then when you all came out of CIA or—did you go to New York or—?

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BB: No. You know we—there was a strong debate about what to do at that point. You know, I had—I had written to Bill Neal because I wanted to come and work at La Residence and—and the story has become applicable because we've told it so many times, but he wouldn't hire me because I was a culinary grad. Karen and I were at a position where I had some—some family relationships that drove me to want to come back to North Carolina, and I really did want to cook in a good environment. In hindsight we've always—or at least I've always regretted that I didn't go to New York or—or some other place and cook and find a mentor. We strongly debated about going to Northern California, and we came this close to doing it; and you always wonder how different your life might have turned out if it had been set up—set yourself up in 1982 in Napa Valley and, you know, and—and have been working as hard as we've worked for the last 20-some years in that arena. You know, it was attractive to us because it seemed like we could resource great ingredients there; it would be—and wine was the burgeoning interest for me even at that point because I thought that food and wine went together and was the thing that you could be truly passionate about and—and enjoy the relationship and that—that soil thing that I was

talking to you about before came back to us. So I ended up in North Carolina, and Karen went to work on Nantucket. And we got married about six months after that.

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BE: Well in terms of Southern food, how have you seen it evolve in the last what, couple of decades?

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BB: Yeah, it's—and that's really what we're looking at because, you know, we're into 23 years as professionals now, so we've certainly seen some considerable evolution at least in our perspective of this immediate region as well as the—the broader region as a whole. I think that I am proud to be a cook in the South because I think what we do is—it is—it is filled with a sense of—of history, a sense of pronounced regionalism in the way we cook that even though we might do a bunch of different things or we might cook them with ethnic inflection the broad and diverse approach to it is still—it's very much—is farm driven and ingredient driven. It is very much a—a farm driven type of experience. I like that part of it; I am proud of what we—our ingredients and how much they've changed and how dramatically they've improved and—and disappointed in areas where they haven't improved maybe as much as they should have in this period and disappointed maybe with myself for not having driven it to go farther.

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BE: But you—you're speaking in terms of locally raised products?

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BB: In general, yes.

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BE: Like you mean—?

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BB: Well by that I mean—

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BE: Vegetables, herbs—

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BB: You know, vegetables and herbs have really grown dramatically.

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BE: Meat and poultry and stuff like that?

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BB: Meat and poultry have improved but not at the same expansive rate that—that the produce growers, the—the food growers have improved their elements. And you know it's—I was talking to Louis Osteen a couple weeks ago and we agreed—and we both agreed that we were the most challenged finding quality seafood than we ever have been in our professional lives—now at time when you would hope people have—because they have a greater understanding of sustainability and—and fish-handling that you should be able to get tremendous product now, and it's really difficult. There's so much competition—

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BE: Yeah, and the demand is so huge now.

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BB: The demand is huge, and the competition is so great that we have a difficult time getting the caliber of seafood, really. And when we do get it, it's extraordinary. And I'm blessed to be on, you know, a coastal state where I have, you know, a 20-year association with someone that I can buy from and get something that—. You know, most of the time, that's pretty damn good; but you know when you know the difference between pretty good and extraordinary, then it's tough to look at pretty good.

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BE: But in—in terms of the—of the evolution of Southern food, I mean—

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BB: And I did digress. [*Laughs*]

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BE: No, that's fine. But if—if you could just speak to that maybe a little bit because—well I mean, because those of us who were raised and born in the South, you know, we have this background of food and Southern food as we knew it. Today, you know, we still love it, but it seems to have evolved a little bit.

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BB: Well I think, you know as—as—as has been often discussed, we didn't really grow up with a profound history of restaurants as part of our legacy, particularly if you lived in the rural South.

So there's two different kinds of cooking and two different kinds of Southern food: there's restaurant Southern food, and then there's home food. And so, you know, to—to differentiate, specifically restaurant-style cooking, I think what's happened is more than anything has been a profound advance in technique, finesse, the skills of the individuals who are cooking in the South these days. And I think that's—it's the individuals who have brought their exposure to great technique and other regions back to this region and employed our ingredients and our—our social and—and culinary history to the technique that they have developed elsewhere. So that's where I see the—the greatest leaps and bounds and most intelligent cooking is—is this international and national exposure to—to wonderful stylistic approach to running restaurants, to preparing food, to execution that's employed in the context of what we know and love. That's about Southern cooking ingredient-wise, and there's great cooks down here and—who do it as a profession.

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BE: A lot of the talk about Southern food is talk of continuity and tradition. In this age is such talk really romantic or accurate or—? How do you see that?

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BB: Well I think there's—there's considerable value to that—the preservation of technique of traditional food combinations of approach to the season; I think all of those things are important to teach people. I like the fact that the—the best people in our kitchen have come to understand that rhythmic, you know—well, “It's the first of March and so, you know, what I guarantee you, Ben, is going to put shad roe on the menu here in another week or so because they're running,” and we know that we'll see it. I may not do it the same way, but we'll have shad roe—that

Daniel's watercress is coming up in that spring out by his house, and so we'll start having watercress around the restaurant. It's—that part of it, I think, is really valuable. It's even if you don't necessarily want to fix your mustard and turnip greens this way, this is the way he fixes them and it's a good way to do it; and it's true to the way that he grew up eating them, and so there is a flavor profile there. But you know it's legitimate and—and it is a tradition, whether it's my tradition or someone else's. And, you know, it may not be how Deb Council [*meaning Debutante Council*] cooks their greens, but it doesn't make it any less good or—or less true. I like taking—the best students have been the ones who aren't—haven't been natives, interestingly enough.

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BE: How—how—?

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BB: The ones who have adapted our culinary technique and our approach to ingredients, the consolidation of several components within a plate that makes it whole, the way that we use pickles and try and achieve that yin yang of sweet and spicy and acid all in the same place—that makes a plate interesting and—and complex from start to finish—.

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BE: Which Southerners did.

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BB: Yeah.

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BE: I mean, you know—.

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BB: It was never something that was intellectualized; it's just it was the way that we ate. And so I've had some incredible people work with us who—who understand that almost more so than—than the ones who grew up here, maybe because I'm familiar to them and they're able to look at it from an outsider's point and recognize that it is, in fact, a fairly intricate approach to stimulating their palate.

It's kind of like when we cook for—for our son; some—there are things that he—he really loves and things that he doesn't. I can set a bowl of—of purple hull peas in front of that child, and he'll be as happy as if you'd given him, you know, the best hamburger on the planet because he loves peas, you know. Is that because he's Southern? No, I don't know that it is or not, but the fact that they taste like the same way that my grandmother made them is good for him to have that in his mouth for me to know that—that that's something that's as real and genuine as—as what I had when I was four or five.

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BE: Could you describe a meal that to you is totemically Southern?

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BB: You know, it's funny because the—they had a researcher from LA call and ask us about—about that. In other words, I don't know that this satisfies that characteristic: Brunswick stew is what it is to me, probably. And the reason is because on my mother's side of the family they—she—her mother had eight brothers and sisters, all of whom lived within about five miles of each

other outside of Lexington, North Carolina, and they had a ball Brunswick stew-making ritual that they did as a family. And a big old cast iron stew kettle that hung over a hardwood fire and my great-grandmother raised rabbits—they had rabbits and, you know, somebody would bring the butterbeans, and somebody else would bring the corn; and they'd bring the tomatoes and they'd cut the potatoes up, and it was a big party. And then canning and processing of that was—was a festive—. And to me, sitting down to that done just right represents where I'm from—what I—what I come from, you know, who—who—who I am—that sort of polyglot mishmash of somewhat African American—these guys were all mostly German settlers from—that used to come down from Pennsylvania to settle in that western Piedmont. How did that dish define them? It was as much because of the ritual of putting it together or was it just because—? I don't—there's no German influence in that dish that I could see, and my great-grandmother was part Cherokee so, you know, did that come from her side? You know, was it something that she stimulated amongst all those children, because it's more Native American than anything as far as ingredients. That is an interesting element. The other side of it is my grandfather used to make me bring him eggs for breakfast—scrambled eggs and pork brains. And then that also makes—to me, makes me know that I'm from here and not anyplace else. That—and it may be that that's a dish that's someplace else and—and I don't know about it, but I was almost 18 before I realized those pink things were—really were pork brains. You know, I didn't know what the hell he was putting in there. *[Laughs]* But they tasted good, and that was his Sunday ritual for us.

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BE: And he'd mix them in with the eggs?

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BB: Yeah, he scrambled them in with the eggs.

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BE: Yeah, Sunday breakfast. Well I was—you said something a minute ago that reminded me somehow to further ask about, but maybe it will come back to me. But so that was Sunday breakfast—tradition—?

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BB: You know, that was something. And this is my mom's dad who, you know, as I told you, her mother was a retailer so you know she—he'd let her sleep in on Sunday mornings when we were staying with them, and that's what he would fix for breakfast for us. And I don't know if that's because that was—he had a limited repertoire; that's always my supposition, you know, that—either that or a cinnamon bun kind of thing but it was something hot that he could put in front of us. He was usually nursing a pretty major hangover on Sunday morning, so that probably is the thing that he could most tolerate assembling.

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BE: Well for him, maybe. *[Laughs]* Well let's switch gears just a little bit and talk about your involvement with the SFA. How did you come to be involved in Southern Foodways [Alliance]?

00:45:02

BB: You know something, it's a—it's—I'm not sure that—that—we were not—even though I think, you know, we're charter members of SFA, we weren't really—really involved at the outset and the reason primarily is because I think a lot of the organizational stuff that—that happened in Oxford occurred in the season of year that wouldn't let us leave the restaurant, and we've

remained unable to—I, at least, remain unable to organize my life to the extent that enables me to get away from here. You know, it's—it's a deficit of character or—or work ethic or something; I'm not sure what it—or all of the above, but—but so we weren't really intrinsically involved in SFA and its founding, other than its principles and its concept fulfilled our own ideology about—about what we should be as a restaurant—as restaurateurs. And as I don't say this in a pompous way, so I don't mean it to sound that way, but as stewards for what the Southern cook means. It all—and it wasn't high and mighty; there had been some efforts earlier and prior to that on the part of Miss Edna Lewis to try and associate a—a league of Southern cooks and writers and folks into an organization but the—the leadership wasn't strong enough to make that ever really fulfill its—.

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BE: Were you ever a member of—of any of [*the Southern food organizations that predated the SFA – the Society for the Preservation and Revitalization of Southern Food or the American Southern Food Institute*]?

00:46:55

BB: Yes. I mean we were involved with that and with—with her [Edna Lewis] only because we had met her when she was still at Farrington House, when we subsequently went to work out there. And she's such a dynamic and yet quiet and powerful influence on us. I mean so it's—it's—that I think was a function of timing; we were, you know, in the mid-'80s and there's a strong sense of regionalism creeping into most Americans, and Edna, being an icon of that, was able to inspire a lot of people to—to want to seek to preserve what we thought we were about but it wasn't—it wasn't about, you know, how you promote yourself or anything like that. But

because we were associated with Ferrington and—and the owners there were—it was a business and promotion was part of what they were trying to do that I think the association was important for them that we have that—that relationship with them—developing the organization. But we didn't do anything that—that strong to—to be really leaders in the group.

I think what really made us the most prominent effect was really when Marlene and Louis Osteen started hosting that Salute—Annual Salute to Southern Chefs in Charleston because it brought together a group of individuals who were each making an impact on—on cooking—as restaurateurs within their states, and to a significant degree, gave some definition to—to our region that there was a strong contention of adept cooks who were doing something on a level that was comparable to the urban restaurants of the Northeast and—and the Midwest and—and the West Coast. That group remains pretty strong even to this day, if you think about it because I mean it was Emeril [Lagasse] and Mark Militello and Elizabeth Terry and Frank Stitt. I mean—.

00:49:46

BE: Is it still—I mean—?

00:49:48

BB: That event doesn't happen anymore. It ended when the Osteens left Charleston Place because the—the hotel was really underwriting it. But it was a powerful thing to come together with those guys on an annual basis and—and cook a dish that I always invested some considerable effort into creating a dish that—that represented me, where I was from, that was—that was of North Carolina that we weren't doing any infusion of stupid things that—that was evidence that—that great cuisine happened in the South.

00:50:38

BE: Did you go to the meeting in Birmingham in 1999 that organized the—got SFA going?

00:50:45

BB: No, no. The—you know, it's interesting because we really—I don't think we can take—to say that we've tagged along with it might not be quite fair, but to say that we were instrumental in—in the early stages of SFA would be also not accurate.

00:51:10

BE: Did you have a vision for the SFA when it—when you heard about it and when it began and how has that evolved?

00:51:18

BB: I think that—I think what was the most powerful influence, again that regard was there, was the association that we had with several people who were intent on bringing SFA to—to fruition including the Osteens, Marlene and Louis. We were friends and had been strong supporters of—of SFA at its outset and were also intent on preserving some of the relationships that they had developed through that Salute to Southern Chefs. You know they said, “Here's a fraternal group of people who are leaders in defining a public or a national image of—of what constitutes Southern cooking.” The historical aspect of it was intriguing to me that SFA would work to promote and preserve Southern foodways, its culture, its diverse orientations and origins, so you know it—it was—there was a romantic aspect of it that—that felt particularly right to be associated with that I could—that we could feel as a restaurant proud of that relationship that we [inaudible]. I had never felt as—as proud to be cooking in the South as when we went to Oxford to the symposium. It was—to be amongst that group of people was very moving in that there—

there was a clear acknowledgement that—that, you know, what we do is good and—and significant and may have some lasting impact. And I hope that’s the way it comes across, but that was what it felt like for me to be in there.

00:53:29

BE: Do you—do you have any ideas for the future, or is there anything that you’d like to see happen within it or projects that you think they might take up or have you—?

00:53:43

BB: You know, I think that it’s been interesting, the pursuit of—of understanding that’s gone on in the organization. What I find most intriguing about it is—is the academic, mainly because I’m deficient in that particular arena, my academic background being so limited that it’s most powerful to me that the understandings of the economics of—of Southern development vis-à-vis food that the place—that race has played in our understanding about Southern culture and Southern food—each year there seems to be a very clear and—and almost cleverly designed simple focus that—that has numerous appendages and a wonderful opportunity to explore how it affects—. I mean I’m excited about this sugar thing—.

00:54:51

BE: Are you going to that?

00:54:52

BB: We’re going to go this year. We—we have made our commitments to try to be—be as involved—if there’s anything that we’re going to do, this is the thing that we want to do, mainly because of the associations that we’ve developed with the people that we’ve become better

friends with because of it, the—the—the power of the relationships that have come out of it have been extremely powerful for us and rewarding. There are some very special human beings that we've become friends with because of this organization, and that is gratifying, as well as justifies, you know, trying to preserve that opportunity. And that's pure selfishness right there.

00:55:43

BE: Well but is there any topic or area that you'd like to see them focus on any time in the future? I mean there's so many aspects of Southern—.

00:55:56

BB: You know, I think that, were I to come back to you and give you an answer to that, I could probably tell you that. I have not stopped to evaluate something that—that feels, you know, singularly in need of examination or is broad enough to—to warrant an in-depth evaluation and—and symposium on things that might interest me, which may not have the breadth of interest to everybody. You know, where is—where is the organization going to take itself? You know, you're at—we're at five years now, almost six and, you know, it seems to be evolving and it seems to be you know pulling—pull from outside of the region because of its strength of character and the—the very strong contingent leaders within the group have pulled a lot of people to it. Why is it that Southern food attracts more people than any other type of regional food? That's really the question that—that comes to mind more than anything because, I mean if you think about it I mean I love life and I love—the New England cooking has got its own precise and wonderful character, but yet I don't think that—that to see a New England restaurant in Tempe, Arizona—but I bet you can find a place, you know, that does some sort of grits or

something like that out in Tempe, you know. I mean it's—our food gets carried to other regions. Maybe it's easier to replicate than some other things. That might be—

00:57:56

BE: Maybe one of the things that's migrated and—

00:58:01

BB: Whenever there's more than two of us we want to eat. But we just ate.

00:58:04

BE: [*Laughs*] Right. Well I think we will end on that note.

[End Ben Barker]