

ELIZABETH HEISKELL
Woodson Ridge Farms – Oxford, MS

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Date: July 13, 2011
Location: Heiskell Home at Woodson Ridge Farms – Oxford, MS
Interviewer: Amy Evans Streeter
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 1 hour, 16 minutes
Project: The Cultivated South

[Begin Elizabeth Heiskell-Woodson Ridge Farms]

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Amy Evans Streeter: This is Amy Evans Streeter on Wednesday, July 13, 2011. I am in Oxford, Mississippi, with Elizabeth Heiskell, and we are sitting at her kitchen table on her new farm in her—in her house that is on her new farm. And, Elizabeth, if I could get you to state your name and your occupation for the record?

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Elizabeth Heiskell: My name is Elizabeth Heiskell, and I am a chef, an author, a farmer, and, of course, a long-standing debutante. And we'll talk about that later.

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AES: And what is your birth date for the record also?

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EH: Birth date is June 21, 1971. I just celebrated my fortieth birthday.

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AES: Congratulations. Happy belated.

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EH: Thank you; thank you; thank you.

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AES: All right. So we're here at the farm to talk about the farm and various other things. But does the farm have a proper name?

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EH: Yes, it's Woodson Ridge Farms. This is actually one of the oldest ridges that was named in this county in—in Oxford in Lafayette—Lafayette County. I'm sorry. I just moved here, so all these terms are very new. I'm a Delta girl, and I'm very much a fish out of water right now. But anyway, so it's Woodson Ridge, and the man that farmed this land and was one of the first settlers in Oxford; his name was Mr. Woodson, so that's where that comes from. And so we just kept it. I love it.

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AES: All right. So him being one of the first settlers in Oxford, do you have an idea of what kind of date that was—what we're talking about?

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EH: I think 1816, 1806, something like that, but the 1800s. Let's say early 1800s, just to be safe. It could have been, you know—but it's right around then.

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AES: Right. And so was the original property this size? Can you talk about the size of the property and kind of the general topography of the—the farm?

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EH: I mean I think—I'm sure and certain that the topography was the same. I don't know to what extent the size of this tract of land was during that time. Right now we're 230 acres. We farm on about eighty acres, you know, but that includes all of the middle rows; that includes all the irrigation area, that includes—. You know, so it's not a straight set eighty-acre field; it's all broken up into—into sort of a patchwork quilt of fields, if you will.

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AES: Okay. And I want to delve into the farm, but first let's lay a little groundwork of your background in the Delta and Luke and how y'all met and what you've been doing before you got here.

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EH: Okay. So I'm from Rosedale, Mississippi, and Luke is from Sumner, Mississippi, which that's basically both sides of the Delta. So my Delta bordered the Mississippi River and his was on the other side, you know, sort of with all of this wonderful land and farmland and everything in between.

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But we actually met in Memphis, and then we married and lived in Memphis for, I think, about four years together and then had a longing to come back to the Delta. And so he started building homes and low-income housing developments in the Delta, and so we eventually made our way back to the Delta and have been there for ten years.

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And during that time, he was building and I was catering. And then came to work at Viking Range Corporation, and now I'm the Lead Culinary Instructor at Viking Range. And

which I love more than anything on the earth and—besides, of course, my children, my husband, and this farm [*Laughs*—let me preface that in case they're listening. But then anyway, and so now we've—we've started this farm and—and we're doing it together. And it is—it's—it's been really, really good.

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AES: Tell me how you entered the world of food and cooking.

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EH: You know, it's funny. It's the only thing that I've ever done. When I was in high school my mom was friends with a—a woman in Memphis, Karen Carrier, who is a very well known chef and restaurateur, and she had a catering company, and I worked for her in high school. And then I would come back during college, and I would work for her in the summers. And then I did a little stint at the Culinary Institute, just for, you know, a couple of weeklong sort of classes. And then started catering on my own and it's—it's—it's just something that I absolutely love more than—I mean I do. I just I adore everything about cooking. I mean I really, really do. Even when I'm exhausted and it's my day off, I still cook, you know. And if I haven't cooked in a few days, I really start you know feeling this—this urge to get back into the kitchen. And that's one of the struggles that, you know, with the farm is that I haven't had the time to cook like I—like I normally do. And Kelly English at [Restaurant] Iris [in Memphis] asked me to come up and do his Guest Chef Brunch last weekend. And I—I have—I mean it was just—it's such a—it's such a part of me and I was so excited to be there and it was absolutely—it was just wonderful.

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So anyway, we're—we're trying to work out a balance between the farm and my cooking because I have to do both now. So the farm is becoming a part of me also, so we're—we've got to figure out how to manage all that. But we're—we're working on it, and we're going to get there and we've only—you know Luke has been here only since February. And I've only been here for five weeks. You know, and so to see where we are and to where we've come and how quickly it's happened, you know, it's—it's—there are going to be adjustments and we're—and we'll get to that, so anyway.

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AES: Well tell me how you came to be farmers in North Mississippi. How did this opportunity show itself?

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EH: Well, you know, it's funny; it's a really funny story. One of—one of Luke's really good friends had this property, which is Woodson Ridge, and he lived in New Orleans—or actually in Husser. And he had this farm there. He was a developer and a lawyer and he developed this property called Cubby Rise, and it's like a pheasant hunting and grouse hunting facility. And so anyway, he had a chef there. They started growing vegetables. John Besh [of Restaurant August in New Orleans] is one of his good friends, and he started hunting with them and saw all these vegetables and said, "Look," you know, "if you'll start growing these for my restaurant," you know, "I'll buy them from you." And so Sandy [Sharp] thought, "Well, okay. Well that's fine. We'll," you know, "we'll grow some vegetables."

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So Sandy doesn't do anything small, so of course he goes full board into planting, and he has entirely too many vegetables for John to handle, even though he's got the four restaurants there. So now he does Donald Link. He does Susan Spicer. He does all the Brennan's Restaurants. He does, you know, the Ritz Carlton, pretty much anybody who is anybody in New Orleans uses Cubby Rise vegetables.

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Well he had this property here in Oxford and had planned on developing it with second homes. And then, of course, the market in Oxford and—well around the country—took a downturn and so he just sort of held onto it. And so he started looking for two people that, you know, could take this end of it over, start farming vegetables here, and servicing the restaurants in Memphis, Oxford, and—because of my connection with Viking, now Greenwood.

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And so he grew up with Luke, and they were always good friends, and so they had kind of kept in touch. And so he approached Luke about us coming and doing this. And when it first came up, I said, “You're out of your mind. You are absolutely—you have lost your mind, if you think that I'm leaving the Delta.” I said, “Number one, I'm very, very claustrophobic, and you know that.” And so of course Luke looked at me, and he was like, “Okay, what does that have to do with anything?” And I said, “There's so many hills over there. There's no way that I can live amongst all those hills.” I mean I have to live in the Delta, and I have to live on flat ground.

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Anyway, so we came over and we looked at the farm, and so after seeing this beautiful piece of property, I started kind of thinking. You know, my mind started sort of turning and then we went down to Husser, and we looked at his farms; we're picking all these beautiful vegetables and literally standing in the field and eating radishes and gorgeous Tokyo-cross

turnips and you know—. Then my mind is really turning. But, you know, it's more of these visions of me out there you know in my chef jacket. And I'm wandering through these beautiful fields and I'm—you know this gorgeous basket, picking all these vegetables and then coming inside and cooking them. And, you know, that was sort of the image that was in my head

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And, you know, so then we decided to go ahead and—and do this thing. And so the first day of harvest, we were out there, and I'm sitting there and we're picking, we're picking, we're picking. But the funniest part is that a couple of days—well, the day before, actually. I have—on a side note—always, all my life, have wanted long eyelashes. I mean obsessed, absolutely obsessed. And so in Cleveland, at the beauty parlor, they had started doing eyelash extensions. So, of course, I mean I was the first one—sign me up. So I go running in there and get my eyelash extensions, and now my eyes look so good that I've got to go get my nails done, you know, to match my eyes, too, you know, because we needed to get this whole thing going. So I get my nails done and my toes done. And then they started talking to me and they said, “Well have you ever done a spray tan?” And I said, “No.” And they said, “Well it is just the rage. You've got to get one.” I said, “Okay.”

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So now, I've got my nails done, my toes done, my eyes are done, and I am just feeling like a proud peacock. Well the next day is harvest, and so we come over and we only had, at this point, two other guys in the field helping us, so it's Luke and I. And so we start, you know, harvesting and we're going through the fields and we're picking, and all of the sudden it starts raining literally out of nowhere. Well I don't know if you know this, but with false eyelashes or the extensions you cannot get them wet for forty-eight hours, and a spray tan is a minimum of twenty-four hours. Well it had only been twelve. And so the water just starts, you know, pouring

down my face. I mean eyelashes are all stuck in my mouth; they're all caught up in my nose. You know, my hair is absolutely drenched. I've got mud literally embedded under my fingernails. You know and—and now I'm striped, literally, I'm striped just like the zucchini that I'm out there picking. I mean I look like a variegated zucchini.

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And so Luke walks by and he says, “Elizabeth, I mean I just—what—what is wrong with you?” And of course I'm bawling crying at this point. And I looked up and I said, “Luke, we've made a huge mistake.” I said, you know, “I just—I don't think we can do this. I mean I'm—I'm a Delta debutante. I am not a farmer. I am not a farmer.” And he looked at me and he goes, “Elizabeth, let me tell you something: you're a farmer now, and you just need to go ahead and get a new attitude about this and go on.”

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And so that was it. And so then, you know, my nails looked like absolute hell every single day. I mean I cannot get the dirt out from under them, you know, and—and this is—this is where I am. And it—but it is amazing because on the days that I do actually go out there and I pick the wonderful vegetables and I do bring them inside and I cook them, and I, you know, give them to my family or my chefs in Memphis, when I open the doors to the prison van that I drive that doesn't have any air-conditioning, you know, and I see the looks on their faces or I go in their restaurants and I eat the vegetables after—that I've prepared, you know that—that they've prepared with my vegetables, it's the most amazing feeling in the world. I mean it is like crack. I mean I don't even know what crack is, but I would imagine that this is exactly what it's like. I'm not kidding. It is—there's something about it.

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And I don't know if it's just me or whether anybody would be like this. I'm not sure, so I don't know, Amy. Maybe we'll get you out here and keep you on the farm for a few weeks and see—see if it's just anyone or if it's—or if it's just something that's always been inside me that now has been unearthed. I don't know. We'll see.

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AES: Well tell me about when you were living and working in the Delta and cooking, what your relationship with your ingredients was and how that's changed.

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EH: Well, you know, that—that's the thing is that, you know, we—I think for so long we've always known better, but we didn't really do better. You know, it was easy to place that order with Sysco, or it was easy to go to Kroger's and pick up whatever we needed.

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You know, I'm talking years and years—you know, years ago. But now it's becoming easier and easier. Yes, it's still more difficult. It is so easy to pick up that phone and get that crap from Sysco. But once you start going to the farmers' market, once you start seeing the difference, once you start tasting the difference, there is absolutely no turning back. And that is one of the most fabulous things that I have on my side when I am selling to these chefs that, even though they have to place another order with me, or even though maybe sometimes I show up and we weren't able to get all the squash out because it was lightning and it was thundering and they're short on squash that day, you know, what they're doing, though, is they're putting up with it simply because now they're obsessed. Now there's no going back for them.

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So like the other day, I didn't have bok choy. We couldn't get out in the field. It was horrible weather. We were only able to harvest a little bit that morning. And, you know, so I said, "But look, I've got these baby mustards. I've got flat-leafed kale." You know, "Just come out to the truck, and let's see." Well, he ended up dying over the baby mustards, and this was even better than the bok choy. So as long as they're willing to sort of bend a little bit and be creative, you know, and the more creative they are the more they buy because they're, you know, they're constantly changing along with the field. They're not rigid, and—and most of the chefs now, this is—you know, this is not a trend. You know, for a while there I think people kind of thought it was going to be a trend, but it's not because they're addicted and they're obsessed. And—and it's just the way it has to be now.

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AES: Well, when you were working in the Delta, did you have relationships—personal relationships with farmers for your catering company, or does Viking [Range Corporation] have a relationship with farmers for any of the produce or things that they use?

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EH: Absolutely. And that's the thing is that, you know, years ago, you know, we would—I would see a farmer. You know, he may come to me with a—you know, thirty or forty pounds of squash, and then I would never see him again. The same thing with Viking; I mean the blueberry man would come up, you know, and we would get these wonderful blueberries, you know, maybe once, but then we wouldn't see him again.

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You know, or things like that. If we—we sort of had begun to build relationships with them but not on the level that—that—that we are now. You know, five, six years ago you couldn't just go to the Farmers' Market on Saturday and stock up on everything you needed. But, you know, now we can. And you know, I had one farmer in Cleveland that I would rely on in the summers. But now, before we moved here—I mean of course I don't have to rely on anybody now, but before we moved here, I mean I had five or six that I could go to, you know, that I knew of that were there and that were constant.

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So it is, it's growing, it's turning, and it's changing every single day.

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AES: Well tell me more about that reliability factor because Taylor Bowen Ricketts, who you supply to in Greenwood at Delta Bistro [*coughs*] excuse me. She—she used that word when she spoke about you, that you're reliable and—what do you think? Is there anything to the dynamic of you being a chef yourself and—and how that works and what you're doing now?

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EH: I think that has everything to do with it because the bottom line is, I know what the chefs need because I'm a chef. I know that, you know, if—if I can't get them something and I know they're expecting it, I need to give them a cell phone call immediately to let them know so that they can make other arrangements, and that's what I do. We are there every Tuesday and every Friday in Memphis. We are there every Wednesday in Greenwood and every Wednesday in Oxford. So they've come to count on me just like Sysco, which they've never ever had that and basically like a rolling farmers' market is exactly what I am.

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If I know that they—if they know that they absolutely have to have something, you know, I'll hold it back for them. But, otherwise, they just get on my van and they shop. You know, they look. They pick. They see. They grab.

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And it is—it is a reliability. We have invested our life savings into this farm. I mean everything we have is in this farm. We have a tractor. You know, I mean we have three children. So this is not something that we are just doing on a whim. This is not something that, you know, we—we are taking lightly. You know, this is a major endeavor and—and so it's—it's different from—from most of the other farmers because we do grow such a variety.

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Right now I've got thirty-seven different vegetables that I'm taking to market, which is unheard of. I mean generally most farmers would have four or five at the most. We're thirty-seven and—and that's what they appreciate and that's why I think it's—it's going so well.

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AES: Well and then you were explaining when we went to the vegetable-processing shed about how, within those thirty-seven vegetables, you even have a variety because of the sizes that people are requesting. Can you talk about that?

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EH: Yeah. So let's just say what—what we were looking at were squash, which I have seven different restaurants that want their squash the size of a—I don't even know. What would that be? I mean just something very tiny like, you know, three inches is—is as big as they want it.

And then I have others that want standard medium-sized and then, thank you, God, for Amerigo's. He wants them as big as bowling pins. And I'm not kidding you when I say that. And I just sort of fell into that with him, which was wonderful.

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So that way, because squash grows in stages, you know, it's not—and that is something that—that my chefs are starting to learn just by talking to me and listening to me is that, you know, they're understanding that this is not, you know—it's—it's coming out of the ground. It's a plant, and it grows in stages. So you know, you—you just—you have to be mindful of that. So, you know, I know who wants the small. I know who wants the medium. And I know who wants the large. And so that's—that's how, you know, we've found a market for what is—for what's here and that helps tremendously.

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AES: And they each came to you with those specifications? It's not something that you asked them to do?

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EH: Well no, it's when I get—when I—when we first started, you know, I would say, “How do you—do you like this? Is this the size you want? I mean because if you want it smaller, I can pick it smaller. If you want it bigger, I can pick it bigger.” And that's sort of the conversation that I have with them. And also, like right now with the fall getting here, you know, I'm constantly on them, “What do you want me to grow? What do you want me to have?” You know, “Tell me what you're going to be cooking in the fall.” You know, “We're ready. We will plant it for you.”

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You know, I have a row out there of squash that is just for one restaurant, you know, because I know how he wants it. Same thing on different vegetables and things like that. If—you know, if they tell me, “Yes, I—I want you to definitely have this squash, and I want this winter squash and I need an acorn and I need—.” You know, whatever in the world, I can plant it for them. We have the space, and we have the ability to do that. And so that’s another service, which helps.

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AES: Is there anything someone has asked you to grow that you have kind of scratched your head over or thought maybe you can't pull off?

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EH: Yeah. The—one of the big needs is for micro-greens and so, you know, that’s—there is no one in town that’s doing it, and I just don’t know enough about it. And I think that the best results people have are in hothouses, but you have to understand, this is a green that is the size of your thumbnail, you know, or smaller in some cases. And so in order to pick it, to keep it, to box it, to get it to market, I think it’s something that could literally make me want to blow my brains out over. So we have to kind of think about our own sanity too [*Laughs*] you know, and where our limits are. We may actually kind of try it, but I don’t know. Right now we’re just trying to, you know, get the farm gelling and get it going and then we may start investigating some of these other things.

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Chickens. We're going to have some animals, and we'll have some eggs and you know different things like that eventually. Right now, you know, like I said, we're just new and we've got a lot of plans and, you know, but it just—it's going to take some time, so we're just trying to stay sort of grounded and take it one step at a time, so—.

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AES: So was any of this land turned up when Luke got here in February?

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EH: None of it. None of the—this was nothing but just cattle ground from years before and then they were just cutting hay on it, so it was—there was absolutely nothing going on here. So all the irrigation, all the plots you see out there, you know, are just—been put in since the end of February, early March.

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AES: So tell me how Luke had any clue what he was doing.

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EH: Oh, okay. Well, yeah. I forgot to mention all that. Yeah, Luke grew up a commercial farmer, so he grew up doing cotton and soybeans and rice and milo and wheat and all of those sorts of things, which prepared him in a lot of ways for vegetable farming, but in other ways he still, you know, is a fish out of water learning every single day because with that sort of crop, you plant it, you water it, you watch it, you harvest it, you know that's—that's sort of how it

goes. But that is an entire season, you know, you start in spring, you end in fall, you're done during the winter.

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Well with this you plant it, you water it, you harvest it every single day, so you harvest—you harvest—you harvest and then you plant—plant—plant and then you harvest—you harvest—you harvest then you plant—plant—plant because you have to have back crops constantly growing.

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So right now we have tomatoes out there. We have 10,000 plants, but they're in three stages, okay. So we have babies, we have middle, we have full size that I'm getting tomatoes off on now. And then you saw the transplants. We've got transplants in the barn that are sitting there waiting to go in. So that way we'll insure an even, steady supply of tomatoes all the way through, hopefully, November, as long as everything goes—goes according to plan. And so, you know, that is one of the things that really is—is so foreign to him.

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But—but he's just—I mean he is doing an amazing job. These vegetables are absolutely some of the most beautiful ones that I've ever seen. I mean, you know, Chef's Garden, to me, was always the standard. You know, when we would get a box from Chef's Garden, I would just get so excited. And I mean that—everything that we're bringing in looks like Chef's Garden. It's just—it's unbelievable to me, but it doesn't have to be flown in. It's local; it's right here. It's picked that morning that my chefs get it. It's been harvested that morning. There may be a few things, you know, that we can harvest the day before, but generally it's harvested that morning. They get it that day, and that makes all the difference for them.

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AES: So did Luke use like a—a produce farming consultant or did he just dive in with both feet and cross his fingers?

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EH: Well we're lucky because we had Covey Rise, and so we used a lot of their experience. We used a lot of their growing plans, mainly because—well, I mean we had to adjust it just because our climate is so different, but you know that's sort of how it went back and forth with that, you know. It just—using them and being able to consult with them was unbelievable—unbelievable, a huge asset to us that so many people don't have. You know we—we got to—to learn from their year and two years of making mistakes over and over again before they finally figured out the right way. So that's been—that's been fabulous, too.

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AES: And are you using the same kind of irrigation systems and everything, or is that different here?

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EH: Yeah, we're using the same exact drip irrigation that they use. You know, everything really is—is—pretty much follows what they're doing.

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AES: Did you know anything about the soil quality when you first turned up rows here and Luke first started putting seeds in the ground?

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EH: Well that was one of the things, coming from the Delta, I mean no soil looks that beautiful. You know the Mississippi Delta is synonymous with agriculture and with growing because of the overflow from the rivers years and years ago. And so of course we don't have that here in the hills. And so you know my dad even came over and he was like, "Darlin', I mean I don't know. I mean, you know, these are hills and, you know, it's not like growing something in the Delta, you know. I—hell, I mean I don't even know if you're going to be able to get a crop up."

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You know? And I guess that's just our Delta prejudice. You know, we just think there's no place else on the—you know, in the world [*Laughs*] that can do what we do. But regardless, the soil, we had it tested and it—and it was—it was very promising. But still, you know with just that sort of mentality we weren't—we weren't sure. But it is growing ridiculously. I even had one chef that asked, he said, "Are y'all near a nuclear power plant or something because I've never seen [*Laughs*] vegetables like this before." But you know it—it did and it's doing beautifully. It's absolutely—it's—it's been wonderful, very—very little disease.

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AES: Well and I can imagine that having cows on the property for so many years had to have helped. It sure couldn't have hurt.

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EH: Well, [*Laughs*] absolutely. I mean I think that made—that made a tremendous difference in the soil. So yeah, all of these little things have—have worked in our favor.

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AES: So where are y'all getting your seeds?

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EH: We get them from all over. Johnny's Seeds has been a huge resource for us. And then we get a lot of specialty seeds online and just from different purveyors all over.

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AES: Is there any seed-saving going on at Covey Rise, or will y'all do any of that here?

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EH: We're investigating that right now. You know, at this point we're just trying to keep our heads above water, but that is something that we'll look towards doing in the future, especially if we have a variety that we really, really love or if something, you know, a little odd happens and we end up with something that's—that's a little bit different than it's supposed to be. You know, of course we'll save those and—and replant if we like the product, so—.

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AES: Did y'all keep a home garden, either growing up or as a married couple in the Delta?

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EH: We always—when I grew up in Rosedale, we always had a vegetable garden on the farm. I mean and so I was just used to that, you know, and we would have these huge lunches every day,

you know, with six and seven different vegetables. Mama always canned, you know, and put things up. And I mean pickled beets were my favorite thing in the entire world.

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And you know, so we had an amazing home farm garden then, and Luke grew up the same exact way, you know, because on these Delta farms, even though you're growing commercial crops, you've got the help there and the know-how for having a garden. You know and so we would have big gardens and, you know, sometimes somebody that was older on the farm that maybe had retired, he was the one that would be in charge of that.

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And anyway, so then when we married and moved to Memphis, one of—we always had tomato plants, and then we partnered with a friend of ours who loved tomatoes also. And so we had an enormous tomato garden, you know, for that—that size. I mean now we're actually—I mean, you know, relatively speaking—10,000 plants that's enormous but we would have fifty—fifty tomato plants there. And I'm telling you, they were some of the most beautiful tomatoes you've ever seen in your life. And—and it was always so funny because I would tell Luke, I said, you know, “If we could do everything as well as we grew tomatoes, we would be the richest people on the whole planet.”

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You know, and so now we're growing tomatoes. *[Laughs]*

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AES: Yeah, you are. So, does this feel kind of like an unexpected but natural progression in what y'all were doing and where your lives were going, to be here raising all this produce?

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EH: You know, I'm funny and I think that—I think honestly that we've been working all of our lives to get to this point. It's—it's very strange to say that, but I honestly feel like we have literally been working all of our lives to get to this point to where we are right now.

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You know I went to—P. Allen is a friend of mine and a good friend of Viking's, and Smith [P. Allen's last name], who is a big gardener and plant specialist, and he's sort of like the Martha Stewart of Arkansas. He has shows on The Today Show and PBS. And anyway, so I was on his farm, and he has a similar setup, you know, of course with three Viking Range kitchens and a few other things that are lacking here. But you know, and he's just—these beautiful herb gardens and beautiful flower gardens and, you know, growing his vegetables. And we went and we were picking the vegetables, and we were picking the flowers and doing flower arrangements and then cooking these vegetables. And I mean I just—I cried. I literally stood in his fields and I cried, I wanted it so bad.

00:27:30

And it took me months to get over that place. And you know, I think maybe that was part of this—when I did agree to do this was sort of that being in the back of my head, you know. This place has endless possibilities. There's no reason in the world that I can't have, you know, every beautiful flower and every beautiful herb and every beautiful plant and every beautiful vegetable growing and, you know, and do the same thing here with this. So hopefully, eventually maybe, if you come back in a year, you'll see a lot of different things. But that's—that's where I'm going with this. So yeah, I think—I think everything we've ever done has brought us to this point right now.

00:28:06

AES: Because you're talking like you've been doing it forever.

00:28:08

EH: Well, maybe so. Maybe that's it and—and, you know, and everything has happened so easily, you know, even—. I shouldn't say that. It's—the progression has been very easy. I mean Luke and I will get in dog—cussing fights out in those fields at times. You know, but—but it doesn't last very long and, you know, and then we're right over it and we move on. You know, it's just—it's just sort of—it's difficult working with—with your husband that closely when I—when we haven't done it before.

00:28:35

But anyway, we are—we're—we're making it and—and we're getting there. We're getting there. So as long as I don't run over him in the van one day out of a fit of anger, we'll—we'll get through it.

00:28:46

AES: Well tell me how—I know you're still making adjustments, but how your multiple hats that you wear, how—how those parts of who you are and what you do have changed and how they will evolve now that you're doing the farm.

00:28:57

EH: Well that's the thing that's so interesting is that, you know, when you think about it, I've got three children, a cookbook, Viking, catering, a farm, two dogs, and a cat. [Elizabeth's

cookbook is *Somebody Stole the Cornbread from My Dressing: A Hilarious Comparison Between the North and South Through Recipes and Recollections*, Overmountain Press, 2010]

You know, I mean it—it is a lot but—but it’s always been a lot. You know, it’s always been—and it’s funny how things have progressed. You know, I started out—you start out small. It’s just like having a baby. You know, you start out, and they’re an infant, and they don’t do a whole lot, you know. And you think, what in the world is everybody talking about? It just, you know, it lays there and eats and poops, and there you go. But as it gets older, then you know—had I literally woken up one day and had all of this going on, I would have just had to step right back out of the picture. But because it slowly progressed, you know, it’s like you kind of get used to this. I got used to the catering, and then we put in the Viking on top of that, and we got that managed and that’s rolling around, and then the book comes along and then that sort of filters in, and then you make a balance there. And now it’s the farm. And although the farm was—is keeping me as busy as all of those things have, I know that there is going to be a way to meld it. I know that I didn't get to this point to have, you know—to be overwhelmed and not be able to handle it all.

00:30:06

We’ve got a great crew out there, and Luke is amazing and, you know, I think it’s—I think it’s all going to—it will all come together. And—and I will get that balance back, you know, because, like I said right now, I haven't cooked in months, you know, which is good. Catering is always very slow in the summer. Viking is a little bit slower in the summer. But now that the farm is kind of gelling, and we’re getting all that together, then I can get back into those things. But yeah, it’s just going to be one more of those things on top of everything else.

00:30:36

AES: Well and tell me about your plans for your catering kitchen and event—and event space out there.

00:30:40

EH: Oh, it's amazing. So what we've got there, we're building a kitchen, and then we've also got two bathrooms. And of course we've already got the huge cooler for the vegetables, which I'll share for my catering. The mid-section or the actual barn part, you know, it's just a pole barn, so it's poles, it's open, tin roof, gorgeous rafters. I mean the most beautiful rafters. I don't know what—I need to have like a pallet party one time where no—you know, everybody just lays around and looks up at the rafters because they're so beautiful.

00:31:10

And then on the other side of that, we'll have a smaller enclosed dining room with big glass windows so that you can look out over the farm and over the lakes. We do have three lakes on the property that are really magnificent. None of them are very big, you know, but they're—but they're nice to look at. And the rolling hills, I mean it really—you know, I was talking about, you know, the flat ground in the Delta, which will always be my—my, you know, deep inside me, but you got a little something going on over here with these hills. **[Laughs]** You know, I mean they really are pretty to look at and—.

00:31:44

Anyway, so we've got that all open and—and so we can—I mean I can do farm-to-table dinners. I can have people go out and you pick your own vegetables. We bring them inside, and then we cook them. I can bring some of my chefs in from Memphis or from Oxford or from Greenwood to come down and do dinners. I mean it is endless what we can do with this place. I mean we can have weddings. I can do luncheons. We can have garden clubs coming in. I mean,

you know from this interview that I love nothing more than to talk. And if I have a captive audience, my gosh, I'm so excited. You know, I mean having all of that, you know, three kids, two dogs, a cat, you know, very rarely does anybody ever listen to me. So the thought of me being able to stand in front of, you know, all of these people and teach classes is—will be very exciting, so—. So we'll see how it goes, but I think that's the thing is that there's just endless possibilities for it. It can be whatever—whatever we make it or whatever a client wants it to be. You know, it's just a blank canvas with a lot of potential.

00:32:41

AES: Well and tell me about keeping one foot in the Delta and with taking your produce to Greenwood and then also your relationship with Delta Bistro.

00:32:51

EH: Well that's the thing is that, you know, being able to go over there and to—to come out of the hills and onto the flatland and see the cotton and the soybeans and all of that, you know, it does—it—it kind of fills me back up for that—that need that I have to be in the Delta, which I didn't even know I had until we moved over here.

00:33:11

And there's just nothing like it. And so it is, it's a gift to be able to go over there. And honestly, Taylor [Bowen Ricketts at Delta Bistro], I mean, you know, and somebody had said, "Well, my god. I mean you can't be selling that much in Greenwood." You know, "It can hardly even be worth your gas." It is. Nick [Seabergh, chef at Giardina's Restaurant] and Taylor are two of the most conscious chefs that I have on my—on my books. They're two of the most creative. They're—they're fine with whatever I have. They'll turn it into, you know, turn it into

something. You know, they're not rigid. They're very accommodating and—and they're big buyers. They—they really, really are. And so it's wonderful. And of course the cooking school, which we've sponsored, we're partners with the cooking school, and so we donate vegetables to them, and they give us wonderful press. And you know, it's—it's so nice because now students that are coming in there from all over the world, from all over the country, are being able to have Woodson Ridge vegetables. And they're seeing the difference. They're learning the difference firsthand on what, you know, one of our tomatoes looks like compared to the one that they got at Kroger's, which hopefully will inspire them to go back out and to seek and to search for, you know, better quality vegetables at their farmers' market, you know or find—find a farm. Find a farmer.

00:34:27

You know, we're here and we need help, and we need you to come and buy from us. I mean if someone pulled up here and said, "Can I buy some of your eggplant?" Oh my god, I'd say, "Yeah. How many can I load in your car?" You know, so don't ever feel intimidated. If you have a farmer—if you see a farmer with a huge corn stand or whatever, you know, outside of town, go by and talk to him. You know, you'll be surprised. They will probably be more than happy to work with you.

00:34:53

AES: So do places like you know Delta Bistro and the Alluvian [hotel, which houses Giardina's Restaurant], do they advertise the localized nature of their produce on their menu and—and what they're cooking?

00:35:04

EH: You, know it's funny. Some of the restaurants—most of the restaurants will put *locally grown cucumbers* or *locally grown tomatoes*. Some of them go so far as to put, you know, *Woodson Ridge Heirloom Tomato Salad*, you know, which makes me very happy. Kelly English, he does—he'll put *Delta farmers*, you know, so and so—and so and so or *Delta debutantes* so and so—and so and so.

00:35:26

You know, so it just—it kind of depends on that but—but, yes, it has become very much a catch—a catch phrase. And, you know, I don't know. Maybe it's becoming—when I first started seeing it before I was actually a farmer, I was kind of getting tired of it, and I know that sounds so terrible to think. But you know, it's like ugh, blah, blah this and so-and-so farm this and so-and-so farm that—you know, every other word on it is so-and-so farm and so-and-so farm and this and that. But of course now that I am a farmer, I understand why that is so important.

00:35:56

It's—it's important for—it's important for the farmer. It's important for the chef. And it's also important for the guests to know, you know, that—that their food is—is local and that it is locally grown. And I think we should get a little bit of acknowledgement for that, as hard as we work. I kind of think we should.

00:36:16

AES: Well and how is like the price scale of what you're doing and how it relates to what other people are providing restaurants in the area and how you manage that?

00:36:24

EH: Well, you know, it's funny: I only have one chef, and I'm not going to mention his name because he just might listen to this, and I'm just teasing because he's my friend and he knows who he is, you know, that really questions the price. They don't mind paying for quality. They absolutely do not mind paying for quality and—and that's what we're providing. But it's funny: with our pricing, it seems to be right in line. Like the other day when I was—we've got field peas now. They're shelled Texas Pink-Eyes, and they are lovely [*Excitement*] and anyway, so one of my chefs in Memphis said, "Well, okay. So wait, how many pounds was that bag?" And I said, "It's five pounds." And he said, "So how much is that a pound?" And I said, "It's five dollars. And he said—and he kind of looked down, and I said, "Oh, my god. Don't even start with me. I had to pick that pea. I had to shell that pea. I had to bag that pea. I had to bring it all the way up to you, and I'm bringing it into your restaurant. Don't give me—." You know, and he goes, "No, no." He said, "That's what they're selling it at Easy Way for." And I said, "You're kidding me?" And he goes, "No, that's exactly what they're selling it at Easy Way [chain of produce stores] for. And I know you and I know where it came from, and I know how well it was taken care of, and I know it was picked this morning and—and you brought it to me. I'm not complaining, Elizabeth. I was just wondering."

00:37:34

And so I do kind of, you know, get a little defensive [*Laughs*] at times, but you know, it seems most of our prices seem right in line with, you know, what you would pay at the grocery store. Sometimes it's a little bit less and sometimes it's a little bit more, just depending on the size. You know, if they want a turnip that is the size of a golf ball, and they're very specific about that, they're going to have pay a little bit more. You know, because it takes more time. But if they're happy just to take a turnip the size from a golf ball all the way up to a Ping-Pong ball, you know, then—then we can keep it kind of in line. So that's sort of it and—but no, no one

complains and it—and it seems to be, you know, a little bit less than Kroger’s but certainly not wholesale.

00:38:15

AES: Yeah. And I want to go back to what you said about Kelly English when we were talking about people putting Woodson Ridge on the menus. You said he puts *Delta debutante grown* on the menu?

00:38:24

EH: What he’ll do is he’ll put [*Laughs*] *Debutante Farmer*, which is a line that we’re sort of playing with and experimenting with. And it’s something that I can see as a—as a brand for me at Woodson Ridge, so *Debutante Farmer at Woodson Ridge*. So who knows, maybe a cookbook along the line of that, maybe, you know a—different, you know, articles written under that name. We are working on a Golden Bloody Mary and it is—we’re juicing these Golden tomatoes because we have so many of them, and then we’re making a Bloody Mary mix, which we’re going to can and sell as the *Debutante Farmer Golden Mary*.

00:39:05

And so this is something that’s kind of an offshoot of it, but if you could see the house that was on the property when we moved in, so we had nothing to do with this house. It was built when the property was developed, and it literally looks exactly like Southfork, if you’ve ever seen [the television show] *Dallas*. And it does look like either that, you know, or Tara [from *Gone With the Wind*]. I mean it looks like a debutante is about to walk out the front door. And anyway so this is sort of an image that I can’t really get away from and I find very hysterical. And it is very much a play on words because if you could see my nails right now, you would

know exactly how funny that is that I still consider myself to be a debutante. Or the mud on my shoes, which are, you know, of course caked. And anyway—but that is—yeah, it’s kind of funny, so we’ll see where that goes. You may see *Debutante Farmer* on your—on your next store shelf. We’ll see.

00:39:57

AES: I love it. So you’re selling to—to restaurants and all of that. Tell me how you made those connections and also what it was like to have the conversations with like Nick [Seabergh at Giardina’s] and Taylor [Bowen Ricketts at Delta Bistro] and be like, “You guys, guess what I’m about to do.” Because y’all are friends and colleagues and have known each for a long time.

00:40:11

EH: Yeah, that—when—when Nick and Taylor, you know, they—first, they kind of thought, “What in the—you know, what is she doing? What has she—what is going on?” But then what I did is I—I brought some vegetables down from Covey Rise and brought them up, just like a big basket of them, you know, just so that they could kind of see the quality and the things that we were going to be growing.

00:40:25

Now at that point, these were just Covey Rise vegetables, so they still were kind of looking at me like, “Yeah, they’ve been doing it for two years down there. These are their vegetables; they’re not yours.” You know? Well anyway, once we came the first time with the first harvest, you know, that’s when they really started getting excited. And I knew that I had their support, you know. I knew that I had their support 100-percent. I mean no, if I was bringing them, you know, vegetables that were sub-par, um-um. I mean they would not—I mean you

know, just because they love me, it doesn't mean that they would have been buying my vegetables. I mean Taylor and Nick are perfectionists when it comes to their produce, when it comes to, you know, what they're doing in the restaurant. And—but they were, they were quality. And it was the variety that they needed, and so they've been supporting me.

00:41:07

And with the restaurants in Memphis, Kelly English is a good friend of mine from Restaurant Iris and so you know, of course I went to him first [*Laughs*] just to kind of, you know, get built up a little bit before I started knocking on all the doors of these other restaurants. And you know, but I think part of it being a chef and knowing how a kitchen works and knowing what they need and knowing, you know, when you first walk into a kitchen there's certain times that you don't go into a kitchen. You don't go in at noon, if they're doing lunch service. You know, you call ahead. You see what you can do. You know, does the chef have time to meet with me? But it wasn't a struggle. If I could just get them to the van and once those doors opened up, there was no question. I mean and everyone has been absolutely lovely, I mean just lovely.

00:41:50

I mean we had—finally I got up the nerve to go to the Peabody [Hotel in Memphis]. This is one place that, you know, has been on my list since the beginning, but it's just very daunting. But we have 1,000 pounds of cucumbers in the cooler. We have, you know, 1,200 pounds of eggplant. I have got to find somewhere for it to go. And anyway, so I went and we had the executive chef over the entire Peabody in my van with me yesterday. You know in 110-degree heat, which is another thing [*Laughs*] you know, if you can get them out of a hot kitchen into the hot heat and onto a hot van, you're really doing something.

00:42:25

But I mean, he was blown away. You know and so we'll start selling to him on Friday. So those are the things that—that get excited. It's just a matter of getting the product in their hands and once they do, it's—it's easy from there, you know.

00:42:37

AES: How do you keep it all straight, what everybody wants and how much?

00:42:40

EH: It's funny, you just kind of know because I know the chef's personality, and I can see him in my head, you know, and—and we—it—it becomes very easy because they're so adamant about what they want and what they need. So I don't know. And I make a lot of notes and you know sometimes we have to go right back up to Memphis with something, if I've forgotten it.

00:43:02

You know but—but no, it all works out. And another thing is that they're so laid back, you know, they're so easy. A lot of times these are things that they're using for specials. And so they'll just change the special if I don't have it, or they'll just substitute something else in. You know, and—and so that works out well but yeah, I make a lot of notes. We send out a harvest list on Sunday, and so if there's something that they absolutely have to have, they'll let me know. And so I always make sure I have that for them. And then it's just a balance of trying to keep the van full enough so that everybody gets a variety, even if you're the last on the stop or whether you're the first on the stop, so that it's not—by the end of it, you know, we end up with absolutely nothing.

00:43:41

AES: Have you had the opportunity to sit and eat anything that anybody has made out of what you're supplying them?

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EH: Yeah. You know that was—the other night we went up, and I really needed this because after five weeks of driving that hot detox van on the streets of Memphis and fighting traffic and all of that and you know, Luke and I going head to head over a lot of things and—you know just being exhausted, Loren [Walker of Viking Cooking School] and I went up to Memphis, and we went to three restaurants in one night, and it was the best thing in the entire world. You know and then the next day Luke came up, and I was Kelly's guest chef, so we used a lot of the vegetables, obviously, for my—for my brunch that I did with him. And it does, it makes all the difference in the world when you see something come out. And it's so, like, bad that it's like they're my children, you know, and they're in a play. Like even the people next to me, I'm like, "That's my spinach, just letting you know," you know.

00:44:32

You know, “, my God. You've got one of my squash on your plate. **[Laughs]** That's one of my squash. We have a farm outside of Oxford. Just wanted you to know that, you know—I'm here.” I mean seriously that's how bad it is, so I think finally Loren was getting a little embarrassed by the end of it, as I would have a few more beers and a few more beers, I would—my comments about people's, you know, vegetables on their plate would get a little bit louder and a little bit louder. But regardless, it was fun and it—it made all the difference in the world. It just made me want to work harder, grow more, sell more, you know, it really did. It's amazing.

00:45:05

AES: Who is Loren?

00:45:06

EH: Oh, Loren. I'm sorry. Loren is the Kitchen Manager at the Viking Cooking School, and she was so sweet and kind to come up and help assist me that weekend, but she would only do it if I took her to two or three different restaurants, so that's what we did. So we started at Acre and then we moved onto Interim and then we finished at Andrew Michael's. So it was a good night. We were very full.

00:45:25

AES: I'd say. So you just got the Peabody on your books. Are there—do you have room for more, or are you kind of at a place where you've evened out and you can only supply what you have now?

00:45:36

EH: You know, the thing is, it's not a—it's not a problem of the supply. It's not a problem of growing it. We've got plenty. It's a problem of getting all—to every single restaurant in one day. Memphis is so spread out. You know and Oxford is very easy. I mean you know you're just right here. And most of them, I can hit three restaurants on one back alley, you know, around the square, so that is not an issue.

00:45:57

It's Memphis, where I'm literally going from downtown all the way through Memphis, fifteen stops in between, and then I end in Germantown at Los Tortugas. That's my last stop and so you know, it's—that's the—that's the challenge is getting from downtown all the way through

because I love talking to my chefs. You know, I can't just drop the produce off and run, you know. We talk and we visit and then of course, you know, being a chef, I go in their kitchen and then we start talking about this and I'm looking at this, and I'm like, "Golly, that's amazing. Okay, so I never thought about doing it like that."

00:46:33

So you know, so I'm learning as I'm going about, you know—. So we're going to have to—I don't know what we're going to do. I'm just going to have to get faster at driving, I guess—or better at driving that van. I don't know. Anyway, we got to figure out a way to start getting to everyone in a timely manner because, you know, chefs aren't there at—generally at eight o'clock—some that are open for lunch are, but you know the—my primetime is between one and five [in the afternoon]. Anything before that or anything after that, I miss the chance of the chefs not being there or, you know, or they can't see me because they're too busy. So that's the—that's the challenge.

00:47:09

AES: What is Los Tortugas getting from you?

00:47:10

EH: Oh, you know, Jonathan [Magallanes] is—okay, Los Tortugas is a Mexican restaurant in— in Germantown, noted as one of the best—the best, the most authentic, I mean it is absolutely unbelievable. And so I thought Jonathan would buy nothing but, you know, peppers and tomatoes and, you know, onions—that sort of thing, which he does buy that. But then he buys melons because he makes all these wonderful fruit juices. He buys kale because he may want to make some wonderful Mexican, you know, soup that his mother used to make. He buys tons and

tons of cucumbers. So he buys all of these different things. Oh my lord, the spring onions. When the spring onions first came in I thought he was going to cry because he and his dad had not really seen those since Mexico, you know. It's—it's like a—well it's like a scallion, but it's much larger. It's—it's an onion as it's developing. It's the—the beginning.

00:48:05

And so in Mexico they grill these and they squeeze lime over them and a little bit of chili powder and they are unreal. And so this was something, you know, that he literally bought all I had on the van. So he—he's different. You know I would really not—you know he—he surprises me. Like yesterday he bought okra. I thought, "What in the world are you going to do with okra at this Mexican restaurant?" But you know, he had a plan for it, so—.

00:48:31

AES: Well what kind of stuff does Taylor at Delta Bistro in Greenwood like to buy?

00:48:34

EH: Taylor is funny. Taylor is—I love her because what she says is, "Just bring me a little bit of everything," you know and that is so nice. And I've kind of gotten to—like I know what her—what she can use in a week, you know what I mean, so I know sort of the amounts of it, and I just go out and I grab everything.

00:48:54

So like this week she'll take some Tokyo-cross turnips. She will take some beets. She'll have heirloom tomatoes. She'll do some slicing tomatoes. She'll do some cherry tomatoes. We'll do—I'm going to try force her to take a few cucumbers, which is a big joke because now what I do—because I've overloaded everybody with them. I mean at this point we're just giving them

away, but nobody wants them because they have so many because I've been giving so many—is that I'll just drop them at the door and drive off in the van and act like I forgot them. *[Laughs]*

00:49:24

Anyway, so she'll take some cucumbers because I'll make her, and then she'll do some field—field peas. She's going to do some okra. She's a big okra buyer. She likes her some okra. And then she'll take some peppers and whatever else I guilt her into buying that day.

00:49:42

AES: And have you seen some of the stuff she's done with it?

00:49:45

EH: You know, it's funny: I haven't been back to eat with her yet. I haven't been back to eat since—since we started selling to her. So I need to get back in there. Luke and I will have to go down and—and do a little Delta trip pretty soon and—and have lunch or dinner.

00:50:01

AES: Speaking of—so tell me, I said before we started recording that I was going to have you give us a little virtual tour of the farm, which we just drove through, so can you kind of walk us through and describe the landscape and then what you have planted where?

00:50:16

EH: Okay. So when—when you first come into the farm, you go through these brick gates that have been there and a cattle gap, you know, because, like I told you earlier, this was a cattle farm and so right—as soon as you come over that cattle gap, to the left we have the majority of the—

of the crops are there. So that's where the chard is; that's where the kale is; that's where the—you know, thousands and thousands of tomato plants are. That's also where our peppers are. That's where the—the squash, the—the cucumbers. The bulk of the field is there.

00:50:47

And then if you look to the right, we just planted an amazing, amazing plot that will have all of our sunflowers and our beautiful heirloom pumpkins, which I am so excited about. I cannot wait for those pumpkins. And then as you drive up the driveway, you see to the left you see the pole barn and we also have our equipment shack, as I call it, but it's just—it's a huge sort of metal building that—that stores the tractors and different things like that. And then there are a couple of lakes. And then by the pole barn we have planted sort of our secondary backup crops. So we've got more squash there. We've got more arugula. We've got more lettuce. We've got peas, and those are all to back up the big crops in the front, so that once the squash up there starts to kind of die out, we'll have another one coming right behind it.

00:51:41

Around the pole barn, we're in the process of doing the raised beds, which will have herbs and flowers, so that's really going to be something that I'm going to be so excited about. I cannot wait for that to come up. You know. And anyway, so we're working on that. And then we have a lake behind that. And then at the far back corner of the property is where the house is where we live, and it's sort of separated from the farm with a—with a pond that the girls swim in, you know, at least two or three times a day and it's—that's really kind of how it is. It's—it's very hilly. It's really lush and very green. And—and it's—it's really, really beautiful because when you come in, you come down this tiny little tight driveway, you know, and you really have no idea where you're going. And then as soon as you hit those gates and go over the cattle gap, it's just like this immense, you know, rolling hills and farmland. And it's—it's pretty impressive

to drive through. It actually—you know, it got me hooked and—and got me moved from the Delta, so it must be pretty impressive.

[Luke walks into the kitchen.]

00:52:45

AES: Do you want to pause and do you want to join us, or do y'all need to talk?

00:52:52

EH: No, Luke needs to sit down and talk for a minute. Luke likes to talk even more than I do.

[Laughs] Come sit Luke, please. Are you busy?

00:53:05

AES: So we paused for a minute while Luke came in and gave a little farm update to Elizabeth and talking about some orders and he—he mentioned that the—that y'all didn't plan on doing pumpkins but you insisted, and that they're not irrigated either.

00:53:16

EH: Yeah, that's one of the things. Well one of the things that we found from Covey Rise to here is that the restaurants in New Orleans demand different things, you know. They are heavy on bell peppers. I mean you think about it: it's the trinity [of Louisiana cooking]. That's all they're using is bell peppers and onions. And you know—which my restaurants in Memphis, I don't think any of them use them. I finally found a few Mexican restaurants in Oxford that will buy them, you know, but I basically am just giving them to them because they're—they want the big giant ones and these are small. You know, it's stuff like that—that we're learning. You know

we will never plant as many cucumbers again. In New Orleans, the restaurants, they eat them up, not so much in Memphis. So it's things like this. But pumpkins, you know, Sandy—because of my catering and because of the—I mean I do flowers. I do full-on events. I mean I don't just do the food. And so I would spend around \$500 a year on pumpkins during the season. And I would use them over and over and over again, but it's an obsession of mine. It's an absolute obsession and—which I'm finding out I have a lot of obsessions, but at least they're healthy—most of them.

00:54:24

And anyway, so that's one of the things that we did, and so I finally convinced him that we needed to plan sunflowers and we needed to plan pumpkins. I can sell them to my florists in Memphis that are friends of mine. I mean they are desperate to get these. And I kept saying, "Luke, I swear I'll sell them. I'll sell every one of them, I promise, if you'll just plant them."

00:54:41

Well he's planted this huge plot, and it's not irrigated. It went in yesterday, and we still haven't gotten any rain. So this may be the case of me out there with a bucket watering this huge plot. But yeah, we're going to have to—everybody needs to just pray for rain, so we'll see how it goes. By the time this thing is out, we'll—we'll know for sure whether it worked out. **[Laughs]**

00:55:01

AES: I think it's supposed to start raining later today or tomorrow.

00:55:03

EH: I'm praying. I mean I am really praying. You want to see somebody do a dance—a rain dance, you see me about five o'clock this afternoon out at that pumpkin patch. **[Laughs]**

00:55:12

AES: I'll come back for that. So tell me—. [*Laughs*] You can have a few beers and dance in the pumpkin patch.

00:55:19

EH: Exactly. [*Laughs*]

00:55:20

AES: You mentioned earlier that you haven't had any problem with disease. Are y'all spraying, or what's your management and fertilization kind of schedule, if you have one?

00:55:28

EH: Well you know, it depends on the crop, and it depends on exactly what it is. We have been so lucky that I hardly even want to talk about this. But the bugs have been to a minimum, worms to a minimum, you know, and we're not spraying for weeds. We are hand-removing them, so whether that's with the weed-eater or whether that's with, you know, an actual sort of hoe and chopping, that's what we're doing. These are the vegetables that my children are eating, that I'm eating, that you're eating, and I feel a responsibility. No, we are not organic. We aren't and but we try to do the best we can in order to provide as much as we're providing and on such a scale like this—it's not impossible in our climate, but it's damn hard. And so we're—we're doing the best we can to be responsible with that. So you know, we're minimally spraying for bugs and, you know, it's funny though because, like we've figured out on certain crops the weeds are actually a huge advantage, so where we have our melons planted—because they don't like to get

sunburned, you know, they love the sun and they need to be in the sun, but they'll get sunburned. And so if you—the Johnson grass grows up on them it's like a—you know, a natural shade for them.

00:56:43

So it's kind of interesting how you sort of, you know, learn to—to use the weeds and different things like that in a—in your actual farming practice. But anyway we're—we are; we're as responsible as we possibly can but we're—unfortunately we are not organic.

00:56:59

AES: Do you foresee that changing at all or are you just—or taking it as it comes?

00:57:05

EH: Yeah, we're definitely taking it as it comes and—and we'll just see. I mean it would be wonderful if we could work ourselves into that sort of a situation, you know, but at this point in time we're just—just beginning, just seeing and—and we'll kind of see where it grows.

00:57:20

AES: So tell me how you got the people who you have working for you now, how you met them and how they came to work at Woodson Ridge.

00:57:28

EH: Well the good thing about Ole Miss, number one, there are lots of college kids in the summer, and none of them want to go home. You know, they don't want to go back and have to live with their mama and daddy, so they're desperate for work, and they'll do just about

anything. So we found a few boys that, you know, either their parents were friends of ours or my nephew lives in town, and he had some buddies that wanted to come up to the farm and work. And the thing that's interesting about them is that two of them, who had never thought about cooking or a career in cooking or farming for that matter, have taken a huge interest in it. And I've even got one of them riding the van with me sometimes just because he wants to go and see what's going on in the kitchens, which I found very interesting.

00:58:07

He's a P.E. [Physical Education] major and works out all the time and, you know, all of this but you know he's—I can tell that, you know, things are really kind of gelling and moving in his head a little bit. So that's fun. And then we also have—we have some Hispanics that are absolutely amazing. And one—to our benefit, because the housing market took such a downturn in Oxford and in the country, there are a lot of people that are out of work. And you know and so that's how we were able to get these guys. And I have more respect for them than anyone and so does Luke. I mean they—they are the ones that really make this farm happen. And without them we—we couldn't do it; we absolutely couldn't do it. And they are here on time and they want to work seven days a week, and they never get tired and they never complain—unlike me [Laughs]. You know they just—they're lovely and—and I'm truly grateful for them.

00:59:03

AES: And they really have pride in what they do. Retell that story that you told in the van about the tomatoes.

00:59:08

EH: I will. You know, it's funny: they—I do a show on television once a week—or not once a week—once a month or once every two weeks. And so the tomatoes had just come in and that weekend I had the best BLT I've ever had in my life. And I don't know whether it was just the best or whether it was the first of the summer and so that made it the best. You know sometimes, oh my God, there is just nothing like a BLT with [Alan] Benton's bacon and Donald [Bender's] bread and some good lettuce out of the garden and a tomato. I mean and homemade mayonnaise. Oh, my God. We need to have one for lunch.

00:59:42

Anyway, so that's what I did the show on. And so I had taken a bunch of the tomatoes, and they had just picked them that morning for me to take up to the show. And so Luke brought all the guys in from the farm to watch me on television, which is pretty hilarious. And so anyway, so Jairo, he like started getting really emotional. And you know, started kind of tearing up and he said, "Those are the tomatoes that I picked with my hands this morning. Do you see them? They're on television. Those are my tomatoes. That is our tomatoes. These are," you know, "this is our vegetables," and you know it was just unbelievable. I mean Luke was retelling me the story, but you know he said, you know, "It's true, Elizabeth." I mean you know for them to see you know something that they're doing being put on television is—you know, it's a major—it's a big deal. I mean I kind of take it for granted because I have done a lot of television and you know I understand that it's just local television. You know it's not NBC you know, Today Show, you know or whatever, but to them it is. You know it's—it was that big of a deal. So I don't know. Who knows. But any way they do, they take immense pride in what they're doing.

01:00:46

AES: Is there anything that they—any skills or ideas or thoughts about farming that they’ve brought to y’all?

01:00:52

EH: Well that’s the thing is that some of them did work on farms in, you know, where they came from or grew up with farms and grew up farming and so, you know, certain things that we have no idea what we’re doing, like with the melons. You know, we’re out there picking melons, picking melons. They look big. They look ready, you know. And anyway so Carlos, he kept saying, “No,” you know. “No, no, these—no, no.” And I kept going, “Yes, yes, yes.” And he said, “No, no,” you know because he speaks very little English. And then he finally showed me one that was ripe and literally if you—you shouldn’t ever have to cut a melon unless you’re trying to pick it unripe. It should literally just pull from the vine. The whole flower should just separate with just not even a tug, just a barely—just moving it, really. And that’s when you know it’s done.

01:01:41

And, you know, so things like that—that they’re actually teaching us you know has—has been really, really important.

01:01:50

AES: So what do you think—I mean I know you’re in it now and you have—you’re still I mean, like I said earlier, it sounds like you’ve been doing this forever but you’re still—there’s still a great learning curve and you still have a lot going on and every day is different, but what—what are your thoughts for the future?

01:02:04

EH: Hmm, I don't know. I mean I just hope that it keeps just growing and getting better and better and better. You know, I hope that there are a lot of—lot less questions, you know, on the farm [*Laughs*] and a lot more just knowing. You know, I don't know but I just—I can see it in my head. You know, I can see what those rosebuds are going to look like. I can see people standing under that pole barn with a drink in their hand, looking out over the lake. I can see, you know, chefs from all over the country around that amazing smoker, you know, with whole pigs on there. You know, I can see all of this going on. I can see the chefs going out in the field and getting whatever they need, you know, and bringing it in and cooking it. I can see me doing that, you know.

01:02:53

I just—my children running and enjoying this place, you know, and having their friends out and having barbecues and having, you know, lake parties and all of these sorts of things. So I just—I see a really, really happy future here that's filled with lots and lots of things going on. You know, I think that the farm is so—it's set up to be so many things, you know, not just a vegetable farm—a place where people can learn more about vegetables, a place that children can come out and pick their own squash and then go inside and cook their own squash, because that, to me, is one of the most important gifts that, you know, that we can give children is the ability to cook and to know where their food comes from.

01:03:35

You know, but then it can also be nothing more than just a place where I can display all my beautiful pumpkins, you know. [*Laughs*] I mean so who knows where it's going to go. But I do think that there's—I think that anything that—that you work this hard for, it's—it's got to end up good.

01:03:53

AES: Well and then tell me, too, you know when you were talking about that BLT and Benton's bacon, which is not a Mississippi product [it's from Tennessee], but it's fabulous, but Donald Bender's bread in Greenwood and your tomatoes and you know, John Currence is making his own bacon in town in Oxford—what this, you know, fresh, local food movement means for Mississippi and how y'all are doing this—what do you think that means for Mississippi, I guess?

01:04:21

EH: Well I think one of the things is that, you know, we've always been behind the curve. Okay, you know, behind California, behind New York, behind everybody and everything and you know with food we—we originally were the ones that grew everything. I mean everybody had a garden because we had the land. We had the space. The soil was fabulous, you know. We had the ability and that's how a lot of us grew up if not, you know, our last—you know if not our generation, our last generation, at the very least.

01:04:48

But then, you know, everything—we finally caught up with the rest of the world, and it all went to hell in a hand-basket and now we're the most obese country—I mean obese state in the—in the Union. And now it's time for us to get back to where we have always been, you know, which is growing our own food, cooking our own food. And I do think that slowly by, you know, by us having the farmers' market, by the government finally giving coupons for mothers and children of WIC [a federally-funded health and nutrition program for women, infants, and children] and the low income that can take those coupons to a farmers' market and use them just like they can use them at the grocery store, things that are making changes like this are going to

help us to become a healthier, better society. And you know any time you know where your food is grown and—and have that gift it—it's going to make all the difference in the world.

01:05:44

You know, I think it's one thing for our income sect to be able to go to John Currence's restaurant and to have some really fabulous bacon that he's got. And it is changing our thoughts about it; it's changing, you know, everyone sort of in that—in that economy is becoming very, very aware. But the ability to change the lives of people that don't have the money to go to John Currence's restaurants and don't know what the food trends are or maybe just people that don't really know, you know, much about food—not so much an economic background, but for them to really be impacted by this, for them to be inspired to go out and grow their own tomatoes or to grow their own food, it's tremendous. It is tremendous and I think it—I—I do, I think it's one of the most important things.

01:06:28

And you know, we've got the area. We've got the land. It's not like we're in New York and we have to go upstairs to the rooftop and try to grow a tomato. You know, it's very simple. Every—you know, the majority of people have enough room to do this and—and I think just the more talk that gets around and the more that—that we help people understand how important it is, the better it's going to be for everyone.

01:06:47

AES: Do your neighbors around here know what—that you're here and what you're doing?

01:06:50

EH: Yeah. It's really funny because I've started like dropping off cucumbers at everybody's house because, you know, we have so many. And anyway, so we do—I've met my neighbors this way. And they're still—don't know me well enough to look at me and say, "If you bring another cucumber to this house, I'm going to murder you." Or, "If you bring another squash, I am going to run you down my driveway with my car." So they've been very, very sweet. But yeah, they do. They do know what's going on and—and it's exciting. And you know, I've invited them, you know, to come, go fishing, you know, and come out to the farm. If you ever need a tomato, just come pick it, you know. Use this garden like it's yours. We'll never even know you were there. You know, you can't pick too much.

01:07:30

You know and so that's—that's something that's been fun is just getting to know the people that are—that are right around here, so—.

01:07:37

AES: Have you been here long enough to see like on Saturdays, people, there's like a little informal kind of truck market at the corner there across from the Littlejohn's [store], where people will take collards and melons and things?

01:07:48

EH: Uh-hmm. I love it. I love it. You know it's great and—and there have been times that, you know, when our collards hadn't come in yet or if we were sort of in between a week, and I needed some, I mean I would go and just buy them out because, you know, I needed them for my chefs in Memphis. And I knew they were local and I know the farmer, and I know where his

farm is, so I felt fine about doing that. And of course I let my chefs know. You know it's not from my farm, but it's from, you know, a mile away.

01:08:11

And of course they were great with that and it helped that farmer out because you can't imagine, you know, if—if you're out there in that heat and somebody says, "I just need everything on your truck, and you get to go home and lay on your couch today," you know, "or that—or get back out in the field, which is where you need to be, rather than sitting on this truck," you know, it's—it's kind of a gift—a gift for them, too, so—. Yeah, I love that market. I absolutely love it.

01:08:35

AES: So is that something that you're going to like intentionally develop more relationships, or is that just something that you can take advantage of when the need arises?

01:08:43

EH: I can see the more restaurants that we are getting, you know, there's going to become a point in time that we will have to start possibly—now I'm not saying that we're going to have to, but I mean possibly I could see that happening, which for them it's wonderful, you know, because they're not going up to Memphis. They don't have, you know, the ability to—or not that they don't have the ability. They do have the ability, but it's just not, you know, it's not something they're doing and—and I am. And so if I can kind of help them out, take, you know, a few hundred pounds of tomatoes off their hands if I'm low on—on slicers, you know, I mean I think it's great. I think it's great for them and it—and it's certainly great for me, and it's great for my chefs.

01:09:21

AES: Uh-hmm. So if—if I were to ask Luke if he were standing here and he would answer me—if I were to ask him what the transition for him to—has been like to transition from big crop farming and his experience with that to doing this, what would he say?

01:09:38

EH: Well I mean I think the main thing is harvesting every day, you know, having to harvest every day and having to plant every day, you know, because there's never a break. That was always the funny thing with farmers is that, you know, they'd kind of work really, really hard to plant it. And then mid-summer, you know, they could kind of kick back a little bit. And then it was harvest season, so everything would kind of ramp up again. And then winter, full-on nothing but hunting, you know. **[Laughs]** I mean and so that—that's not sort of what—what he's seeing with all of this. You know, he works and has worked since February, seven days a week. He's had one day off, and it's five o'clock every morning. And but the thing that I know about it, even with all that being said, I mean he's not complained once. I mean I think he's happier than he's been in—in years.

01:10:24

Not to say that he doesn't get frustrated. Don't get me wrong. But you know, I mean I do—I think he's very, very happy and I think—I think he's proud of what he's doing. He's doing an amazing job. But I think that probably would be the difference, you know, and—and hand-harvesting, hand-planting the majority of it and hand-harvesting is totally different than what he's used to, you know.

01:10:45

So that's—that would definitely be two things.

01:10:49

AES: Does he share your passion for the final product?

01:10:51

EH: Absolutely. Yeah. I mean you know it's—he—he's not the type, like nobody is out there jumping up and down like I am when I see them bring the tomatoes in, you know, or clapping my hands, you know [*Claps*] “Oh my God, look at those green beans!” You know, nobody does that because nobody is like me, but I can tell inside there's a little person jumping up and sitting down, you know, inside going, “Look at me. I grew that. Look at me. I grew that.” I'm convinced there is somewhere deep down in that—in—in him that—you know, that he is jumping up and down inside.

01:11:20

AES: And can you—we talked a little bit about this, but some of the varieties of what you're growing like that lavender eggplant, specifically, and—and some of the different—different items that you offer?

01:11:32

EH: Well, you know, it's funny: with the—with the radishes, we have three different colors, so we have purple, we have white, we have pink, and then we have the standard sort of red, which they look little Easter eggs out there in the field when you go to look for them, you know, when you go to pick them because you can just barely see their little heads, you know, just barely see

that little bit of color. And then on our turnips we have four different varieties, and we pick them at four different stages, so some are the size of a golf ball, some are the size of a Ping-Pong ball, some of them are the size of—the one that you saw in the car today is a very overgrown scarlet, which is probably the size of a—of you know, a softball.

01:12:09

So you know, it's—it's that sort of thing and then—oh Lord, what were you—what was your—oh, the eggplant. Okay, so we've got four different varieties of eggplant. We have two types of lavender—no five. We have Lavender Bells, which I didn't even show you those, and they are gorgeous, so it's like a big bell eggplant. And then we have the Japanese Lavenders and we have Dark Purples and we have White eggplant and we have, you know, just your standard Black Beauty Gold, you know, one. So I mean Gold—what am I talking about—Black Beauty, the—the dark purple. So yeah, we do have probably five varieties on that. And that's one of the things that the chefs love. You know, they love to be able to—to have that sort of variety.

01:12:51

AES: Excellent. Well, we have been sitting here for a long time, and you've been very generous with your time. And I'm sure we could stay here all day because I love listening to you—

01:12:59

EH: The way I talk. [*Laughs*]

01:13:01

AES: —and I love—yes, but is there anything maybe that we haven't talked about—about what you're doing that you want to make sure to add or comment on?

01:13:09

EH: No, we would just—I think one of the things that I really hope is that anybody that listens to this, if you're—you know, if you're anywhere near Oxford or if you're passing through Oxford, we would love for you to come by and visit the farm. I mean that's something that makes me prouder than anything is to be able to have somebody actually come here and see what we're doing. You know, so I don't care if you're just driving by. We're having a sign that's being painted as we speak. And so it's going to be really easy to find. It's only five minutes from the square, literally. Wasn't it, Amy? I mean it's five minutes from the square. We are not out, you know, in the way, way out.

01:13:41

And don't even call. Don't even, you know, try to find our email. If you want to, that's great, but you know just come out and see what we're doing. You know, go to Woodson Ridge Farms dot com (www.woodsonridgefarms.com) and you know look at that and—and then come out and visit us. Come pick some vegetables. You know, come take a class. Come—come—I don't care. Come fish. If you want to fish, come get in our lakes and fish. I mean we just—I love people and we love to have people out here and, you know, pick up some vegetables, so—.

01:14:11

The other things is—is that soon we will start providing a CSA in Memphis and also probably in Oxford and for sure one in Greenwood. And so that's a vegetable—I always say that—a prescription—it's not a prescription; it's a subscription. Anyway [*Laughs*] it is kind of—it is a prescription for health. So this will be vegetables that will be sent—I mean that will be at a drop-off point, and you can come and pick them up. So it's enough vegetables for a family of

four for a week, and so you'll get to taste all of the variety and all of the wonderful vegetables that your chefs when you go to their restaurants have been used to getting and serving.

01:14:50

And I'm going to be really excited about that happening, and so that will kind of amp up in the fall, so—

01:14:56

AES: Why does it sound like you're not too sure about doing that in Oxford?

01:14:59

EH: Well I think that we already have a pretty good number of CSAs here. And I think that, you know, I don't want to encroach on what they're doing. I don't think that's fair because they have been here a lot longer than we have. And, I don't know. So we'll just kind of see. We'll see how Oxford goes. We may do a farm pick-up, which is not so much a structured CSA, but we'll have a farm time that you can come visit the farm and bring your kids and come out and pick some squash, and then we'll have somebody, you know, in the pole barn and you can buy some vegetables, if you want. And that may be a nice way for people to come out and see the farm and get vegetables without stepping on anybody's toes, you know some of the farms that are more established that have been here that are you know—. I just—I don't feel right about that. I feel like we're kind of like the new kids on the block, you know, and I don't want to—I don't know. I don't want to step on anybody's toes, so—. We'll just have to see.

01:15:51

AES: Well thank you, Elizabeth, very much, for your time.

01:15:53

EH: Thank you. Thank you.

01:15:56

[End Elizabeth Heiskell-Woodson Ridge Farms]