

KAREN BARKER
Magnolia Grill – Durham, NC

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Date: January 19, 2007
Location: Magnolia Grill – Durham, NC
Interviewer: Dean McCord, SFA Member
Length: 1 hour
Project: SFA Founders

[Begin Karen Barker Interview]

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Dean McCord: This is Dean McCord; it is January 19, 2007. This is the part of the SFA Founders Oral History Project, interviewing Karen Barker at Magnolia Grill at 11:42 a.m. Glad to have you here.

00:00:22

Karen Barker: Okay. That's official. *[Laughs]*

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DM: Let's just start that I'd like to know how you actually became involved in the Southern Foodways Alliance.

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KB: I think, actually, Ben [Barker] was a founding member of the group, and it was through him, since you know our lives have pretty much entwined, that I really got involved. And we got involved both as a couple and individually and as a business and it's just for us, I think, one of the best groups that we've ever had any participation in.

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DM: So you were not one of the original founders as an individual but—?

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KB: Technically, no. I think he was on the original directors or something along those lines but, I think, from day one I was pretty much involved with the organization supporting it—if nothing else from afar. You know we had to do a lot of events that connected with SFA both—we've had a couple of them locally you know and some of them on the national level—a big party in Oxford every year; so—. **[Laughs]** It's just a great organization.

00:01:29

DM: So were you involved with either of the Southern food organizations that predated the SFA?

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KB: We were. I think Edna Lewis—maybe a couple years prior to SFA had started or—I can't even remember the exact name of it. It was Southern—maybe you know the name of it.

00:01:46

DM: The Society for Preservation and Revitalization of Southern Food.

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KB: That's it. And I think there was maybe one or two meetings of it, and it never quite got going. And the great thing about SFA is it—from day one there's just been a whole roster of really interesting, interesting, you know, programs that they put out there; so—.

00:02:08

DM: So why do you think that the SFA took off whereas the other two organizations did not?

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KB: I think a lot of it has to do with organization, as a matter of fact. But the fact that, you know, John T. [Edge] sort of spearheaded this one, and he's such a charismatic person that it's hard to say no to him when he asks you to do anything, in terms of putting together events.

[Laughs] And Mary Beth Lasseter, you know, is just totally instrumental in—in running the organization, the fact that they've gotten so many really talented interesting people from different walks of life involved with it, the fact that it's not purely cooking, it's not purely educational; it's a mix of music and culture and history and, of course, great food and beverage. So it's, you know—it can't be beat. [Laughs]

00:02:56

DM: Did—did you actually go to this organizational meeting in Birmingham in the summer of 1999?

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KB: I did not, and I don't think Ben did either. But we, you know, we're certainly informed of—of everything that was going on. And we've been to a couple of the, you know the annuals kind of thing again and we—we've been—I wouldn't say on the periphery, necessarily, because again, we've been fairly active—not, though, on a day-to-day, of course, you know, basis with it. I mean we do have a restaurant to run, but it does affect our lives, you know, to a large extent because I think that's what we're all about here at the [Magnolia] Grill.

00:03:31

DM: Right. Did you—do you have any recollections—I mean, did you get any secondhand feedback of what went on at that first meeting?

00:03:40

KB: You know, honestly, I don't remember altogether that much other than people were excited about the group getting together. I remember—we're good friends with Frank Stitt [chef/owner of Highland's Bar & Grill in Birmingham, AL], and I think he was there and he was just all pumped up about it, so he said, "You've really got to get involved with this kind of thing." And so it's, you know, that's one of the best things about the organization, again, is the people—I mean just incredible people. You can't help but meet somebody interesting at every event that you go to.

00:04:06

DM: Right. Did you have any like expectations or visions for this—for the SFA when it started?

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KB: I don't think I did. I mean I was—I think I was hoping that it would be sort of a multi-purpose organization and not strictly food and wine—or food and beverage because I think a lot of times those sorts of organizations become sort of glorified social clubs in a way. This has meant a lot more to me, personally; I've learned a lot more through them than—than just some of the other food oriented organizations that we belong to. It's not just a foodie thing and so—.

00:04:44

DM: There's an intellectual component?

00:04:46

KB: Yeah, definitely.

00:04:46

DM: And how does that appeal to you?

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KB: Well I was a history major in college, *[Laughs]* so I think that sort of appeals to me, certainly from that perspective. The fact that, too, I've just learned so much because I'm not from the South. I'm from Brooklyn, so it's, in a way, given me a great deal of information and helped me sort of really understand where it is that I'm living now. I can almost call myself a Southerner these days; I've lived here for about 25—26 years now. So I've just about earned that right, I think. *[Laughs]* But it has certainly given me a better understanding just about the history, traditions, culture—all that sort of thing, which is—. You know, when I moved down here from Brooklyn I just—I had no idea—no idea at all. So—.

00:05:35

DM: Do you think it's affected your cooking, the way you bake?

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KB: Definitely, yeah. You know, I think I've always been more of an American-style home-baker kind of thing. What this has done is it's given me a little bit more understanding of certain ingredients that are native to the South, which is not to say that I wouldn't have used them or didn't use them before but I—I really understand sorghum now, you know, and that sort of thing. *[Laughs]* You know, bourbon has always played a big part in my baking but you know, maybe because—

00:06:06

DM: Just your baking? *[Laughs]*

00:06:07

KB: Well you know—and imbibing, baking, cooking, you know—general enjoyment of life.

[Laughs]

00:06:16

DM: When you first thought of what the SFA might be or could be and had that vision and where it is today, I mean has your approach to the organization or your thoughts of the organization changed over the years?

00:06:27

KB: I don't think so. I mean I think I'm surprised at how it's grown and I think grown fairly rapidly, and yet has still maintained it's intimacy, which is a really, really hard thing to do—the fact that they do have people from all over the country, not just the South who—who come in for events and participate. The fact that they can put together these, you know, large-scale events and, yet again, it's—and still an intimate setting where people are just out there, you know, conversing and having a good time and getting to know each other. I love the social-ness of it so—.

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DM: Do you think that's what has led to the growth or—?

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KB: I think so. That and the fact that, you know, Southern is sort of *in* these days, you know. You know the magazines glam onto those sorts of things. John T. has been a great promoter of the organization. There's a lot of extremely entertaining people—you know, fabulous writers—who really get out there and promote the organization who were sort of—their names are tied to it. To me, that's always a big draw. So it—there's just always something interesting and different going on; it's never repetitive.

00:07:42

DM: Right. Now I know you didn't go to this organizational meeting. Did you go to the first symposium in [nineteen] '98?

00:07:47

KB: The—you know the only—the first symposium we went to, I think, was the barbecue symposium, which we actually cooked at; we were asked to cook at that one, and we've been back to a couple more of them since then, so it really was a little bit later on that we were traveling to Oxford. We certainly were doing a lot of reading about the organization and doing a couple of other things in other places, but that was the first major one that we attended.

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DM: Can you tell me some more about that first meeting—first symposium?

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KB: Well again, we were cooking and so we were in the kitchen a great deal of the weekend. Both Ben and I were doing events for it but first of all, Oxford is like a magical place. I remember being incredibly impressed with Oxford. We got to spend a lot of time with John T.

and his minions, which is a lot of fun. I remember [Mississippi bluesman] Otha Turner playing, which was amazing. I remember eating incredible pig all weekend long and all different guises. Again, every place that you turned you met somebody interesting; there were all these food writers that I had really looked up to, who were there, so I was sort of, you know, walking around with my jaw dropping half the time. You know Johnny Apple [of the *New York Times*] was there, Calvin Trillin [author and contributor to the *The New Yorker*] was there; it was just—it was great. We got to know John Currence [chef/owner of City Grocery in Oxford, MS] really well; he was the coordinating chef and he's become a really good friend of ours since then, so just the whole combination—Taylor Grocery, I mean just everything about that weekend was great.

00:09:13

DM: Talk to me a little bit more about Taylor Grocery.

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KB: I remember getting on a double-decker bus thinking oh, a double-decker bus, how cool. And I didn't stop to think about the weather at the time, which was kind of cold and kind of drizzly and kind of windy and I thought oh, I'm going to go up on the top deck, you know. And I remember sitting up there and being driven out into the country on a very dark, very windy, turning road thinking, where the hell are they taking us and pulling up in front of Taylor. And the band was playing and people were out there just, you know, partying out and having a good ole time eating amazing fried catfish, sitting around the table talking with hours with people. You know, what a party—.

00:10:00

DM: Yeah, the return ride is usually a little more enjoyable because well—. We won't go there. Now what has your role been in developing the SFA's mission over the years and, you know, as far as its programming—just its overall—?

00:10:18

KB: More as a participant, I think, in certain events in terms of providing food for a lot of people for a lot of different events. In terms of its mission, it's something that I take to heart when I train people in my restaurant—my bakers—to uphold tradition and to try and do things the old-fashioned way, to learn about the place that you're cooking in—even though not everything that we do is necessarily Southern here, I think there are certainly a lot of Southern overtones and a lot of Southern influences. And I think it's important that people understand where it is that they're coming from, you know. We're not just, again, the bourbon and pecans and buttermilk and putting them into things; there's a, you know—that stuff has a history, it has a place, and I want people to learn about that.

00:11:03

DM: Great. I think we've already touched on this. But the SFA you know focuses upon food as culture. and what does that mean to you I mean intellectually, personally, professionally?

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KB: Food is culture. You know, food is just—not for everybody, but for a lot of food so much of who they are, where they came from, just their entire personality. My family, I came from a nice Jewish family in Brooklyn that was just totally food-obsessed. I mean it's—maybe that's one of the reasons why I—I love that focus of SFA so much is it's all about sitting around the

table. My grandmother used to tell me, you know, the one thing that you never skimp on in life is food. So for me it's—it's about my whole life—it's my working life, it's my social life, it's what I do with friends, it's what I do every day professionally, it's what I like to read about, and certainly, it's more than just sustenance. You know, again, I love the history of it; I love to—I love everything about it; it connects people in—in a really good and special way.

00:12:18

DM: All right. I agree. As far as the future of—of SFA, you said it's grown. I mean, it's evolved. What—what do you see as the future of—of SFA short and long-term?

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KB: I think I'd like to spread the gospel a little bit and see even more people involved with it. I'd like to see maybe some more things done in local levels. We're really starting to get into that now; we're actually in the process a planning a Triangle Day Camp, which I have just been in touch this week with [current SFA Board President] Marcie Ferris about. So that sort of thing—I'd like more localized events. I'm not sure if it necessarily has to be something that's, you know, on a calendar, where you're absolutely doing regular things all the time. Sometimes I think spontaneity is great, although certainly with events, you know, you do need to plan—at least on the level that we try and do them. But I would like more people to find out about the organization, support it, all the great things that it does in terms of scholarships, you know everything we did for [Hurricane] Katrina relief—that stuff is really important, and it's done in such a good way and it's managed so well through this organization that, again, I'd like to just—I would like to see it continue doing exactly what it's doing and just perhaps maybe get, you know, a few more people involved with it.

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DM: Twenty years from now, when your children might be involved in the SFA, I mean what—what would you like to—I mean do you want to see pretty much the same thing, or do you think that there is going to be a different role of—?

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KB: Well the South is changing and so certainly, you know, the organization will probably, I'm sure, change along with it to some extent. I would like to have them have a really good sense, again, of where they came from. I have, you know, one son who is 18 right now, and he's spent his entire life in Chapel Hill [North Carolina], and he's going to school not too far away—he's still in Greensborough; he's still in North Carolina and we've—we've tried to give him this background. I'm not sure if he's totally—if he's buying into it yet. I would—I would like to have him read a little bit more about it, you know. It's just interesting; we just gave him the wide-stuff about the Tar Heels, which—

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DM: All right.

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KB: —and that's really, I think, why I'm here in the South, to be honest with you. **[Laughs]** I think that's one of the major reasons why I stuck around in North Carolina, but that got him interested because it was something he could relate to. I think the food keeps him interested; I'd like him to know a little bit more about the actual historical, you know, goings on you know—

where he came from, North Carolina, you know, specifically, and the south in general kind of thing. I wish kids got more of that.

00:15:05

DM: Right. Has he been to an SFA symposium?

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KB: He has not. And, you know, I think that's something that I would like to take him to at some point. He—he might be around next fall when we do the one here, you know, the local Triangle Day Camp; and I think it would be real interesting to try to get him involved and see, you know, what he'd have to say about it.

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DM: Do—do you see kids or families playing a part or a role in the SFA at all?

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KB: I would like to, if nothing else, because you know to pass it on, you have to pass on that torch. You have to pass on that love and that interest, so certainly food-wise I think he's gotten a whole lot of that from—from Ben and myself without a doubt and travel-wise, you know, we've tried to take him to some places that we felt were important. We took him to New Orleans actually right—the December before Katrina, which I'm really glad that we made that trip just to give him some sense. He had always heard us talk about it because you have to experience these things, I think, yourself sometimes. It's—it's good to give kids a perspective outside of their own little box, and it was a very different place for him, and I'm glad that he got a chance to go.

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DM: Right. Did he appreciate lot of the iconic—?

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KB: He did. He appreciated a lot of the food and—and the restaurant scenes and we tried to take him to some really traditional places. I think he was slightly appalled at, you know, what he considered to be the tawdry nature of it, you know. We're standing there in front of you know Larry Flynt's place, you know, and he was like, I think, a little taken aback. But I think he also understood that that's part of New Orleans, you know, and—and I—I think it was a good thing. You know, the music he's totally into; he's totally into music—that was great. You know, a lot of the food—it was a great thing—really was.

00:17:08

DM: Well let's—let's switch gears a little bit and—and start learning a little bit more about you and your background and the question that everybody hates but they all have to answer it is you know what—where were you born and what's your birth date?

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KB: I was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1957—June 7, 1957.

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DM: Now can you tell us a little bit about the food of your childhood?

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KB: Uh-hmm, sure. It was, I would say, typically New York, in that we ate ethnically a lot, although my grandmother was the main cook in the family. My mother worked ever since I was probably about five or six years old, and so my grandmother, who lived upstairs from us, actually did a great deal of the cooking and that tended to be Eastern European. She was Russian—pretty simple, pretty hearty, lots of old-fashioned Jewish-style cooking. My mother was Queen of the Broilers, so **[Laughs]** dinner to her when she would, you know, cook was broiled something with some sort of steamed vegetable, usually—pretty simple. What we did do a lot was go out to eat, which was wonderful to be exposed to, you know, great Italian food and Chinese food from a very early age, you know—lots of different, you know—go to Chinatown—Asian food, travel a little bit, which, you know, nothing too exotic but, you know, my parents did believe in taking the kids traveling when they went, so that was wonderful to just be exposed to a lot of different things.

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DM: Where did you go?

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KB: Oh, places like Montreal and Mexico and up and down the East Coast—Pennsylvania Dutch Country, you know, pretty simple, you know, kid—kid-oriented trips, I think, but always a little bit different, you know, to be able to go to a place like Montreal, which to me was terribly exotic when we went, you know, just to get that sort of exposure. I mean they never took us to Europe; they never took us to Asia or anything. But just to even get on the road and travel, you know, to get on the road and drive from, you know, New York down to Florida. Because I had

an uncle who owned Jewish delis in Florida and we would go and visit him—not every Christmas but, you know, often so—.

00:19:28

DM: Right. You said—I mean, you described a little bit—the style of cooking but do you have any specific meals, I mean, that you can think back and go boy, that was my mother’s and my grandmother’s meal?

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KB: Yeah, I do—everybody does. [*Laughs*] You know everybody does. Stuffed cabbage—and the cabbage part was great, but the really good part was the lamb meat that went around with it kind of thing. They always did braised lamb, and I think it was neck and shoulder, I’m sure, were the pieces kind of thing, and they were boney and succulent and delicious—you know sometimes shanks, so that was you know—again, the cabbage part was great, but it was the lamb that was the star to us. My grandmother made phenomenal potato knishes. She’d get up and it—it would be like a potato knish factory; you know, she’d turn out—it seemed like hundreds of them. I’m not sure if there was. I had a big family and we did do big group meals a lot—lots of extended, you know, aunts and uncles, cousins running around. We all lived within maybe two or three blocks of each other. So that was a big deal—potato latkes, of course. You know the holiday meals—Hanukkah meals and Passover meals, where you’d get together with a big family. Lots of good baking—and baking on both a home-baked level—my grandmother was a big baker, but also we had great bakeries in Brooklyn. There was a wonderful bakery on every corner and so that was always you know—while my mother didn’t really bake, there was often, you know,

stuff from Entenmanns's or Ebinger's or Leon's or you know—there were just all these great little bakeries.

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DM: When—when you sat down—your nuclear family and just sat down for dinner, was there a protocol or a ceremony or just the way—the way it worked—did certain people sit in certain places? I mean how—?

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KB: Everybody sat you know—everybody had a place and we lived in a small apartment, so it was an eat-in kitchen, and pretty much everybody had their own place. And we had a small family—it was just my sister and I, my parents and—and a lot of times my grandmother. And no, it was pretty basic. It was, you know, when—just for a regular meal it was—it was pretty much sit down and would eat fairly early, as I recall. Dinner was usually just one course; it wasn't a multi-course kind of thing. Occasionally, you know, there might be dessert afterwards; we were big believers in ice, cream. There was always ice cream in the freezer kind of thing.

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DM: [*Laughs*]

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KB: But relaxed, pretty casual—just all about good fresh food—always fresh food. I mean we shopped, if not every day, every other day. And you know again, there was always—the fruit market was right down the block, you know. There was a butcher shop pretty close; there was

you know—you take your cart out and you'd wheel it around from place to place, and I have really you know great memories of going shopping with my grandmother that way.

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DM: Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

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KB: Well the one place that really stands out in my mind is she often would go—there was a live poultry market that we would go to. *[Laughs]*

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DM: Okay.

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KB: *[Laughs]* And that was—especially if we were going to do a big family meal, that's where she would go for her chickens because she felt that those were—those were the best chickens because you can go and pick out your own chicken. And in fact you'd go in, and you'd pick it out; they were in crates, and you'd point to the one that you'd want, and they'd take it out back and pluck it, I guess. But I remember seeing—you know turkeys and chickens—rabbits. I had a pet rabbit that actually came from there. We didn't eat rabbit but you know, my pet came from there. *[Laughs]*

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DM: *[Laughs]* And let's take it back.

00:23:09

KB: But you know, going to the fish store, again, it was all about planning what was fresh mostly in terms of produce because we ate pretty seasonally, as I recall. And then, you know, what were going to prepare; what were you going to have with it and—and nothing fancy—just really, really good basic food.

00:23:32

DM: Great. You said that you know you're a Jewish girl growing up in—in Brooklyn and you know, one of the things about—people talk about with Jewish culinary traditions is—I mean it's very much a tradition-based type of cuisine, and a lot of people say the same thing about Southern food.

00:23:51

KB: Right, a lot of parallels.

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DM: Have you thought about that, or could you talk about those?

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KB: I have. I think there are an awful lot of parallels. The fact that you do get together for the certain special holidays kind of thing—the fact that there's very much—my father's family came from upstate, and they were farmers and so again, for me, it was also that agrarian connection. I always equate Southern cuisine, Southern cooking, you know, it's farm to table—it's farm-based cooking, very agrarian and that's, you know, what I got from his side of the family. The fact that they raised their own chickens. They had dairy cows; they grew their own crops. You know, they pretty much sustained themselves out of their garden kind of things and just that whole seasonal

again—seasonal nature of things, the fact that you—fresh fruit and vegetables, you know, as often as possible. So I see that parallel to traditional to Southern cooking, which was again very, very seasonal and the fact that, you know, sometimes I—I wasn't exposed to what, you know—what I say as a lot of Southern stuff, as putting up stuff by canning and pickles and relishes and that sort of thing and that we didn't do that much of but the—the rhythms of seasonality in terms of cooking, I think, were very similar.

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DM: Fantastic. You said your family was food-obsessed, and so this next question may be self-evident, but when did you first cultivate an interest in food? I mean did have that defining moment where things clicked?

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KB: Oh, goodness. I think it was really from about the age of maybe three or four on. I remember sitting in restaurants, like I mean I can go back in my mind now and think about the little Italian restaurant that we used to go to or the Chinese restaurant that we used to go to and have very vivid memories of sitting there and eating this great food and, you know, hanging out with my parents on a Sunday because that's often what we did on Sunday is go out to dinner. And so in terms of professionally, you know, that didn't get going until I was—I think I became interested as a teenager but didn't really consider doing it professionally until I was in college—again being that history major and not knowing what in the world I wanted to do and not wanting to go to law school. *[Laughs]*

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DM: Can't all do that, right. [*Laughs*] But I mean, what was the trigger for, you know, that enlightenment or where you realized that you wanted to go and do it professionally?

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KB: Professionally, I think, I worked in restaurants while I was in college, mostly waiting tables some.

00:26:30

DM: Where did you go to college?

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KB: Stoney Brook UNC—not UNC—University of New York at Stoney Brook. It's out on Long Island. And I had worked in restaurants and had enjoyed the restaurant lifestyle, I think, and had always done a fair amount of cooking. I started cooking a lot and baking, in particular, when I was a teenager. My mother used to have amazing kind of coffee klatches with her female friends and I would often do—when it was her turn to entertain, I was the one who did the baking for it. My grandmother would, you know, really take me aside and—and I was the one who picked her brain about baking and watched her bake. So it was something that I did for enjoyment, and then when I got to college, I realized you can make a lot of friends by, you know, making cookies in your toaster oven, kind of thing. And we had a sweet setup, where the food wasn't fabulous in the cafeteria, and the girls that I was living with at the time agreed that maybe we should just share cooking duties, kind of thing. And it's amazing, again, what you can do with toaster oven, hot plate—you know, everybody has had that experience, I think, at school where we were just turning out some really good food. And again waitressing turned me on to

the restaurant lifestyle. I managed a student café; it got me thinking about, “I really like food and I like to cook and is there something that I can do to do this to make money?” And the Culinary Institute was putting on—kind of a big push to increase their enrollment of women applicants, I think, at the time and this was back in, I guess, the late ‘70s—the very end of the ‘70s and women chefs were just coming into their own in New York. There was a woman named Leslie Revsin, who was becoming pretty famous—and [Steve] Rosen’s wife, I think, was in New York at that point, and they’re names that you started reading about. I’ve got subscription to *Bon Appetit* magazine that I just tore apart cover to cover. I would read them and just be fascinated by this world of food out there. So I found out about the Culinary Institute, and I talked my parents to sending me there instead of grad school, which they very, very graciously supported me in.

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DM: Did they resist it?

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KB: They didn’t quite understand it, I think. Again, my uncle owned restaurants, so it’s not like they didn’t know anything about the professional world of cooking but not on that level. They couldn’t understand cooking on that level, I don’t think. But my father took me up there to take a look at the place, and it was pretty amazing you know—hundreds of kids walking around in big white toques, carrying their knife kits, looking terribly serious and directed, kind of thing. And I was just, you know—I said, “I’m going to try this; this looks great.” And it was great. And I wound up meeting my husband, Ben [Barker], my first day of class—cooking together ever since.

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DM: So do you remember the rigors of the CIA [Culinary Institute of America] and what you went through and what it was like to be a minority?

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KB: Yeah, I think it's very different now. The program has certainly changed and my particular group, because we were divided into groups of, I think, 18 students, was actually unusual in that we were slightly older as a whole and had more women in our group for some reason. It was just the breakup of—I think happenstance. But again, everybody, I would say—probably about half the kids in there—I wonder—I sometimes wonder if they ever professionally continued on with it. Half of them were incredibly directed. I mean it was just very focused, wonderful instructors, like any school—you know, some great classes and some not so great classes, but I learned an incredible amount in two years time for never having really done professional level cooking other than very casually, I would say. It was a lot of information packed into two years, which a lot of it didn't become apparently useful until way after graduation.

00:30:37

DM: Now did you—when did you decide you wanted to go into the dessert side of things?

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KB: Pretty much from the beginning. They didn't—they now have a specialty baking program where you can go in and just do the baking program. At that point they didn't, so everybody went through the general program, but I loved the baking classes and I did take some extra—extra-curricular stuff, and I think I was always attracted to the world of sweets. I mean part of that is I'm a real sugar hound; I mean I've always loved dessert, and I think it's just—it's—it's—

I love cooking, I like cooking a lot and I think being a good cook makes you a much better baker, so the two play off of each other. But it's the sweet world that's always attracted me. **[Laughs]**

00:31:23

DM: I notice you keep referring to yourself as a baker and the other people and—and that make desserts here [at magnolia Grill] as bakers and not the—the term pastry chef—why?

00:31:33

KB: Pastry chef—I think they're slightly different in scope. I think I have certain skills that would qualify me for being a pastry chef, but I think I'm a better baker and I think, baking to me, is more intuitive. It's a little bit more nurturing in certain ways; it's more home-based. To be a pastry chef it's a very specific skill-set that I think I prefer to be a simple baker, as opposed to **[Laughs]** you know, some upper echelon pastry chef. I don't know; it's a different way of looking at things. I think—quite—pastry chef as being a little bit more European in style and more technique oriented, and I'm, you know, get in there with your hands and make that fabulous pie crust kind of thing.

00:32:27

DM: While you were at the CIA, did you go back and cook for your parents and they suddenly said well this—is there a moment there?

00:32:35

KB: Yeah, I think they saw what I was capable of doing, what I was learning, and so they—they got it. And I think they're really proud of me and—and what the restaurant has attained here and what Ben and I have done together—and the fact that we've been doing it for all this time and

we're still happy doing it, and it's a good thing, and not that many people can say that, I think.

You know, it's one thing—my son, the doctor kind of thing or my daughter, the lawyer, and that's great, but they didn't have too many friends whose kids were chefs and so that gave them a little cache too. I think it was an interesting thing for them to experience that.

00:33:14

DM: So what was your first job after graduating from CIA?

00:33:19

KB: Let's see, my first full-time job was working in a restaurant in Staten Island that was called Framboise at the time, and it was fairly new, and I was the pastry chef. So it was kind of out of school—no, I was more of a pastry chef in that position because I think it was very white tablecloth, and they were trying to do something there that was really almost ahead of its time for Staten Island and it was—it was a very fine restaurant, really good chef, and it was sort of trial by fire there, you know. Yes, I had two years of school experience, but I've never baked for a restaurant before, and I was responsible for an 80-seat restaurant. So that was interesting; I learned a lot.

00:34:09

DM: So where did you go from there?

00:34:10

KB: After that we moved to North Carolina—got married, moved to North Carolina.

00:34:18

DM: And how did that come about?

00:34:18

KB: Moving to North Carolina?

00:34:21

DM: Yes.

00:34:21

KB: When we graduated the Culinary Institute, it was sort of toss-up for us. We decided—I knew I wanted to leave New York, and Ben really wasn't very interested in staying in New York, and we thought very seriously about moving out to California. We almost moved to the Bay Area, Napa Valley—that was very, you know, high on our list of places maybe we should go. But his family was in North Carolina; he grew up in Chapel Hill and he—there was interesting things happening here. A lot of them had to do with Bill Neal—we had read about what he was doing at La Residence down here, and it sounded very appealing. And our thought was well, we've got family connections down there, you know. Maybe it would be easier, at least as a first, move to go someplace where we had some support systems in place, and so we decided well you know, let's check it out and he took me through the mountains of North Carolina in October—.

00:35:21

DM: That's not fair.

00:35:22

KB: Not fair—not fair. And he brought me to Chapel Hill, and it was a great time, and I loved it. I loved the people that I met like the, at that point, smallness of it. You know it’s grown quite a bit in the last 25 years, but he kind of had me hooked. And then he introduced me to Carolina basketball and that was it after that. *[Laughs]*

00:35:46

DM: What year was that?

00:35:48

KB: We never moved—we moved down in ’81 and he took me—I remember the first basketball game I saw in person in Carmichael was, you know, Michael Jordan, James Worthy, triple overtime, you know. It was like we never considered moving after that, you know, I think. We set down roots here and, you know, we’ve been here ever since. And there are times when I think, oh well, it would have been interesting to find out what had happened, you know, if we had gone to California instead of North Carolina, but I really don’t look back. I mean, we’re here.

00:36:25

DM: What were your initial impressions of the South when you came—?

00:36:31

KB: I loved the friendliness of it—the fact that people would just wave to you kind of thing. That took me a while to get used to that because, of course, being from New York, New Yorkers, I think, sometimes have a bad rap, you know—they catch a bad rap; it’s not that they’re not friendly, but they do tend to be a little bit more reserved and certainly a little gruff. And things

are a little gentler and nicer down here in the South, I think, so that was—I loved that. Once I got to understand people, which took me a couple of months, because we—we kind of lived out in the country in Chatham, and I had a real hard time, you know, with the Southern accent for a while and just certain expressions. It just was very foreign to me on a certain level but again, people were so overwhelmingly nice and pleasant on a daily basis—the fact that anybody would talk to anybody. I loved that—very different from what I was used to.

00:37:29

DM: What would you say was your first introduction to Southern food?

00:37:34

KB: Probably well, of course, through Ben. I mean his family—great cooks in his family and his grandmother was a wonderful cook, his mother is a fabulous quintessential Southern hostess type cook, so certainly dinners with his family, family reunions with his family, which is something that I had never really experienced before, was amazing you know just you know Alamance County, you know, church kind of luncheon kind of things—covered dish. Everybody would bring their stuff, you know, and great food.

00:38:10

DM: Do you remember any of the dishes?

00:38:11

KB: Oh goodness, you know, incredible ham biscuits and you know, wonderful fried chicken, butter beans, you know, Brunswick stew, great pies and cakes, you know—caramel cake. And I remember bringing—I was so nervous the first time we went, and I remember bringing

blueberry/blackberry pie and apparently it passed muster, so I was okay. You know my grandmother—his grandmother [*Laughs*] you know, said, “You know, she’s all right. You know, she can make a pie; she’s all right.” So it’s just you know everything seasonal, everything fresh; I think it all comes back to that whole thing that we were talking about before—just good basic delicious food.

00:38:52

DM: Do you remember your first taste of barbecue?

00:38:55

KB: I believe it was—I’m not sure exactly what event it was for and I—I think Ben took me to—it must have been in Alamance that we went to—I’m drawing this blank; this is terrible—famous—famous where does everybody go outside of Burlington?

00:39:19

DM: Short Sugar?

00:39:21

KB: No, no. Oh God, it’s terrible.

00:39:24

DM: It doesn’t matter, but what was your initial impression of barbecue?

00:39:26

KB: Delicious—oh delicious, I mean incredible. We didn't eat a lot of pork growing up other than in Chinese restaurants, and I'm like a pig-a-holic. And so perhaps—maybe that's one of the things that kept me in the South too, I don't know. But it's just the—the sweetness, smokiness, spiciness, you know, just amazing stuff. And to this day, we still eat it often and make it ourselves and take it out, eat it frequently, you know. We live not too far from Allen & Sons so that's, you know, always welcome as—as a dinner treat kind of thing.

00:40:03

DM: Right, right. Have you—or have you—how have you seen Southern food evolve over the years, since from the time when you first came and actually, what I'd like you to do, is describe you know, those initial impressions of—of Southern food both in the home and in restaurants then—and now where it is today.

00:40:22

KB: I would say I think—I think people—first of all there were more people from the South living around here when I first came down here. It seems to me that—that is almost a rarity these days and that he is, you know, a born and bred native Chapel Hill-ian kind of thing. And it just seems like at least every other person that you talk is from someplace else these days. And so that—that's a big difference; it's a big difference in terms of the food. I think the food here to some extent has become slightly Americanized in the sense of just rather than being particularly Southern it's—there are so many people from other places that I'm—I'm not sure if—if a lot of people even recognize Southern cooking anymore. Although there's also a vanguard of folks who want to preserve that, and that's a good thing. The markets have changed; what's growing down here has changed a lot. The vegetables that are available then as opposed to now—it used

to be if you went to the Farmers Market there was tons of corn and peas and tomatoes, but you didn't see that much in the way chilies and torpedo onions and, you know, broccoli raab and that sort of thing, and so now all of that stuff is available to us, so that's—the supply line has changed.

00:41:49

DM: Do those have a place in—in Southern cuisine?

00:41:53

KB: I think they do with some modern interpretation, and that's what you get a lot of these days, I think, is Southern food updated. It certainly has been lightened a little bit. I mean even what we do here, which has, you know, firm roots, I think, in tradition has certainly been lightened up slightly. We don't cook with quite the heavy hand maybe; for us it means you know using lots of fresh herbs and—and we cook with a lot of acidity here, which is a little bit, you know, unusual but the roots of the food, the flavors I think are familiar still. We use maybe pork as more of a seasoning than a center of the plate—that kind of thing. You know it—on some levels I think it's gotten better, and on some levels I think we've also lost a lot.

00:42:45

DM: How so?

00:42:45

KB: Some of those traditions people that don't bake as much at home I think as they used to, people don't seem to have the time to put into it; good food takes time sometimes. It's not about convenience, necessarily, and I just think that not as many people have quite the devotion to

doing it at least on a daily basis. I think people still get together, you know, for those family reunions and—and family suppers and that sort of thing but it doesn't happen as often. It tends to happen around holidays, maybe; I mean, you know, so many people my age love that holiday season because it means going back home and getting the food that they grew up with, and you don't get it the rest of the year a lot of times.

00:43:29

DM: All right; one of the terms that I think you used in your—one of your books, I mean I think it's your *Sweet Stuff* book was—turned out here all the time—it's cooking with a Southern sensibility. What does that mean to you?

00:43:43

KB: That means layers of flavors in a lot of ways—the sweet, the salty, the acidic, the—you know, the pickled flavors, it's punchy flavors. It's, again, seasonal above all else. It's that farm to the table as fresh as possible; it's that—just mingling of flavors, where I almost feel like every plate of food should be like Thanksgiving in a way, you know. **[Laughs]** It's just like that—that stuff just is really interesting to eat texturally, you know, from the—a temperature standpoint and again it's not shy; it's definitely not shy.

00:44:29

DM: Right, right. One question I have is—is why do you think Southern food is celebrated across this country more than just about any other—I would say any other region's cuisine? What is it about the American Southeast that—?

00:44:43

KB: It's—it's comfort, you know. It's familiarity and comfort and we do it really, really well down here. It's not to say that you can't find similar things in other places; if you go to New England there's a lot of parallels between New England cooking and Southern cooking or Heartland cooking and Southern cooking. And I—I just think we do it particularly well.

[Laughs]

00:45:07

DM: And a lot of the talk about Southern food is talk of continuity of tradition; do you think this is really romantic talk or is it reality?

00:45:18

KB: I think there's a lot of reality in it—things that have been handed down—and it's one of the things that I think we have to work really hard on is to not lose that. I think, at least people of my generation, my husband's generation, I mean he made sure that he cooked with his grandmother to find out exactly how she did things because she did them really well, and he wanted to be able to do that and not let that cease at any point. There's so many things that if you don't pass them on or write them down they're gone and once they're gone they're gone. And so I worry about that sometimes—that whole tradition of pickles and preserving kind of thing—the whole baking tradition. It's one of the things that we have been thinking about as to what role can we play in trying to preserve that because I think it's really important.

00:46:14

DM: Okay, let's talk a little bit about dessert.

00:46:19

KB: Uh-hmm, my favorite subject. *[Laughs]*

00:46:22

DM: Well let me—let me talk about one more—let me ask one more question, and then we'll get to dessert. Describe a meal that you would characterize as the iconic Southern meal and something that really binds us all together.

00:46:36

KB: It would probably have to be fried chicken—homemade. There would definitely be biscuits; there were definitely be a slew of vegetables—probably butter beans, maybe mashed potatoes, an array of pickles and relishes—

00:46:54

DM: What kind of pickles?

00:46:56

KB: Probably I—you know, pickles, green beans, chow-chow, perhaps, especially if you were serving some sort of peas, you know—peas and chow-chow, maybe some watermelon pickles or pickled peaches or that sort of thing—whatever was seasonal and canned up and, you know, tasted good kind of thing. There would probably be—there might even be cornbread and biscuits, if I had might have my druthers.

00:47:23

DM: You are the baker. *[Laughs]*

00:47:24

KB: I am the baker. And there would probably be some tea, you know, and for me it wouldn't be sweet tea. I still can't get used to that; that's the one thing that I haven't gotten into down here. I like iced-tea but not sweet tea, you know, and there—of course, there would be dessert and it would probably be pie.

00:47:41

DM: It would be pie?

00:47:41

KB: It would be pie. Because pie is just a great end to any meal. Again, it's a seasonal meal, so you work with whatever is available at the time. If it's summertime, then it's probably going to be blueberries or peaches. If it's wintertime, it might be sweet potato or pecan. In between it could be, you know, buttermilk or you know, it's adaptable—lots of different flavors. You can top a lot of them with ice cream, which just makes it better. The best part is that it's home-produced; there's nothing like a home-baked pie. And, you know, bakery pies are great, but there is nothing like a homemade pie, and you can have the leftovers for breakfast the next morning.

[Laughs]

00:48:31

DM: **[Laughs]** Well I think you've answered the question that I needed to ask you, is that a friend of mine always comes up and says you have to choose one or the other—pie or cake—and you have to forego the other one for the rest of your life, what do you choose?

00:48:43

KB: Pie. *[Laughs]*

00:48:44

DM: That was easy.

00:48:46

KB: Pie. *[Laughs]*

00:48:47

DM: *[Laughs]* So would you consider pie—I mean if—if you had to consider an iconic Southern dessert, what would that be—the single?

00:48:58

KB: The single—it—it would be pie and do I have to name a single type of pie?

00:49:04

DM: Yeah, go ahead.

00:49:05

KB: I'll take two of my favorite ingredients and put them together and say blueberry/peach. So I like combo fruit pies; fruit to me means summertime; it's when things are a little bit slower, maybe, and have a little bit more time to bake. Those fresh ingredients are right there; the Farmers Markets are in full swing and so it's the—you know one of the best times for pie—not that there's a bad time for pie. *[Laughs]*

00:49:30

DM: *[Laughs]* So, I mean, if you were to define what is a Southern dessert –I mean can you come up with a definition or—?

00:49:39

KB: I'm not sure if I could. I mean I—it's one that is familiar to most people. It's—it's—there's no you know cilantro-flavored tapioca in it or anything like that, you know. It's—it's basic ingredients; it's generally stuff that you would find in your pantry or at the Farmers Market—pretty simple. It's not gussied up too much. For me, you know, I bake with a lot less sugar than I think the Southern tradition calls for because they tend to be pretty sweet a lot of times, but that's not one of their strengths to me, and so that's something that, again, I'm trying to change a little bit—change that up a bit. But it—it should be seasonal; it should be warming to the soul, I think. It's just—it's something that makes you smile. Desserts should be, to me, kind of familiar. I'm not trying to reinvent the wheel with dessert, and I don't think most people want that; I think they want flavors of their childhood, you know, that everybody can relate to.

00:50:45

DM: I mean do you think the role of the dessert at the Southern table is substantially different than, you know, any other of the regions and—?

00:50:52

KB: I don't think so. I think you know American dessert is American-styled dessert. I think most people would be pretty happy with a Southern-style dessert, and I think most people are pretty happy with any home-baked dessert because it means that somebody, again, took the time to do something special and it—it's become pretty special these days to, you know, take that

hour or two and prepare something for your friends or family. And there's something about sugar; sugar is easy. Sugar makes people smile, you know. It's—it's the final cap on sitting down, and it's the last bit of conversation around the cup of coffee or whatever, you know. It's a good—good finale.

00:51:34

DM: Hmm. A few more questions. Talk to me a little bit about what you view as the—the triangles that—the research triangle area of North Carolina, its influence on Southern cuisine since you came here.

00:51:48

KB: Since I came here—I think one of the biggest things is the Farmers Market scene. I mean the Carborough Market was in pretty good swing when we moved down here. I mean we're incredibly lucky for that resource because we've had it for a long time early on, and as far I'm concerned, it competes with just about any decent-sized market that we've seen anyplace. I mean we—whenever we travel, that's one of the things that we do is go check out the Farmers Markets, and Carborough Farmers Market is wonderful. And that's spawned the Durham Market, which is really coming into its own these days; Raleigh now has started—not the big Farmers Market but the small Farmers Market, you know. It's planted the seed, and I think that's going to take hold, so that and the way that chefs have used their—these resources have really, I think, changed Southern food for the better around here. Again it's all about local products, local producers—the more local the better. We're starting to see cheese artisans now and, of course, the role of, you know the pig around here has really changed dramatically in the last couple of years, and that's very exciting. I think that there are some people who have taken the time, again,

to really research things and understand things, who may or may not be from around here, but a lot of the better chefs, I think, are actually Southern born and they do have that understanding. It's different than just taking a bunch of ingredients and whipping them together and saying, "Oh, this is Southern because it's got grits in it," you know or—. That bothers me. **[Laughs]** You know, sometimes people who really don't have that historical perspective or understanding or the palate memory of it and that's important.

00:53:36

DM: Right.

00:53:37

KB: To understand what it is that you're cooking, if you say that you're cooking Southern food.

00:53:42

DM: That's interesting because I know when Ben had previously stated that his best students haven't been Southern.

00:53:50

KB: I think we've been fortunate in that they've come from all over the place, but they do all come with an interest in learning what—you know, how we do things, you know, and—and the way that we do things, it's not the ultimate way of doing things. There's a lot of different ways of doing stuff. There's a lot of different perspectives; it's just the way that we choose to do it here, and a lot of them have taken that and some of them have stayed here and continue to do it. And some of them have gone all over the country, and we've got people cooking all over the place, so hopefully they've spread that gospel a little bit.

00:54:23

DM: Well and that's what I want; I want to get back to the Triangle's influence. I mean you're talking about the Farmers Market and the use of ingredients that—I mean beyond that, how has the Triangle influenced other communities across the Southeast or across the country and, as far as preaching the gospel, so to speak?

00:54:41

KB: You know, we've been lucky enough to garner some national attention, which has certainly brought attention to the Triangle in the long run. A place like the Beard Foundation, when all of the sudden they start having people from this area up to New York to cook, it gives you a stage up there. It exposes more people to the food, and I think, again, people tend to really like it because there's a lot of exciting flavors, you know, happening on the way people put food together. It's you know—it's a very positive thing and so it—SFA has done the same thing of really introducing people from all over the place, all over the country to, you know, the fabulous world of Southern food.

00:55:27

DM: Let's talk a little bit about you and Ben and—and the [Magnolia] Grill. I mean, what were your first thoughts about opening up your own restaurant? When did that idea first hit you, and how did it come about?

00:55:40

KB: We knew that we were heading in that direction when we were in school before we were married. We talked about it. I think that had always been our ultimate goal is to have a small

restaurant together, and we set out to do that pretty much after we graduated, and we wanted to make sure that we felt that we were in the right place. We worked at La Residence post-Bill Neal, unfortunately, because we always did really want to work with him, but that was after he had already left. And then the Farrington House. And then we used to come shopping in Durham to Wellspring Grocery because it was such a great resource, if you were a cook. There was no place—I mean we had Fowler’s in Chapel Hill, which was also wonderful on a different level, you know, two different places, and so we would go once or twice a week, you know. We’d make that trip to Durham and come to this little building on 9th Street, and the first time we walked in here we said, “You know, this would make a really cool restaurant space.” And we met Lex Alexander and said, you know, “If you guys ever move out of the space for some reason, let us know.” And two years later he called us [*Laughs*] because they were moving up the block to bigger quarters and he said, you know, “The space is going to become available,” and we just—we knew—I mean we just knew this was going to be where the Grill was going to be.

00:57:01

DM: And what did you envision for this restaurant when you started?

00:57:05

KB: That it be a really fine neighborhood restaurant—that we wanted to do Southern influenced cooking, although not strictly Southern because we were just coming out of a venue, and at Farrington House it was totally Southern. I think we felt a little confined sometimes because we loved Asian food, and we like you know Latin food and not that we necessarily wanted to, you know, have an Asian restaurant, but occasionally we wanted to use those flavors. So we just

wanted to be able to cook food that we really liked that, hopefully, other people would really like in a pretty casual atmosphere, and it remains a pretty casual atmosphere. I think it puts a lot of people off sometimes; it's sometimes not what a lot of people want us to do, but I think that we stay pretty true to our mission here.

00:57:56

DM: I agree. Going to finish up with just a few kind of—I just want to run some Southern desserts by you and like to hear your thoughts about them—just off-the-cuff responses.

00:58:09

KB: Okay.

00:58:08

DM: What—these are desserts that a lot of people view as iconic Southern desserts—Red Velvet Cake.

00:58:14

KB: I don't like the use of food coloring; can't get—can't get by that. [*Laughs*]

00:58:20

DM: Caramel cake?

00:58:21

KB: Love it; super sweet and just a sliver will do you, but I love it.

00:58:26

DM: Coconut cake?

00:58:28

KB: I'm not a big coconut fan; however I do make one coconut cake whose recipe came out of Shirley Corriher's book [*Cookwise: the Secrets of Cooking Revealed*]*—that's the best damn coconut cake in the world, I think. [Laughs]*

00:58:42

DM: You have an extra slice laying around, let me know. What about pound cake?

00:58:48

KB: I love pound cake; it's buttery. I love the texture of it; I like the fact that you can flavor it a lot of different ways. I like to serve it with fruit and ice cream, and that's probably one of my favorite cakes to both make and—.

00:59:03

DM: Banana pudding?

00:59:05

KB: I love banana pudding, too. You know, I tend to make it from scratch and not with, you know, the boxed pudding and Nilla wafers, but it's such an old-timey*—that's different a reunion dessert. There was always a big ol' bowl of banana pudding at every reunion, and I think most people like that. People like custard; it's very sort of smooth and comforting, and just about anybody could be won over with a really good banana pudding.*

00:59:32

DM: Pecan pie?

00:59:33

KB: Often too sweet, but when made well can be delicious. [*Laughs*]

00:59:43

DM: Moon pie?

00:59:44

KB: You know when I grew up I was a big fan of Mallomars, which is sort of, I guess, a northern Moon Pie of a certain persuasion. And I didn't know what a Moon Pie was until I moved down here. And I kind of like them—not the banana ones or the flavored ones but just the plain ole ones because they remind me of Mallomars [*Laughs*]

01:00:10

DM: Buttermilk pie?

01:00:11

KB: That's one of my husband's favorites and I'm—I don't love buttermilk, in terms of drinking it. I can't—I can't get by drinking it like out of a glass, but I love baking with it and particularly when you use like Maple View Whole—full-throttle buttermilk and real vanilla bean and that sort of thing; it's a wonderful pie.

01:00:34

DM: That's all I have. I just want to thank you for your time.

01:00:37

KB: Sure.

01:00:38

DM: Do you have any final thoughts?

01:00:39

KB: I don't, other than thanks to SFA for giving me this opportunity and for having me be involved with a wonderful, wonderful organization. It makes my life—.

[End Karen Barker Interview]