

JAMES ROY REAVES
Westside Barbecue – New Albany, Mississippi

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Location: Westside Barbecue – New Albany, Mississippi
Interviewer: Meghan Leonard, Southern Foodways Alliance
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[Begin James Roy Reaves Interview]**0:00:03**

ML: Alright. This is Friday, July 16th at 10:07. I'm sitting here with Mr. James Roy Reaves, and we're here to talk about Westside Barbecue in New Albany, Mississippi. If I could have you state your name, your birth date, and your occupation again for me.

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JR: James Roy Reaves. I was born May the 12th, 1940. And I'm retired right now from the barbecue business.

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ML: You were saying Westside's been open since 1988. You've been in the business 23 years. In those 23 years, have you noticed anything change about barbecue in this area?

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JR: Well, not really. It's basically the same as it's been for 23 years now. Our method has changed, and you know, we've got to buy different equipment, but other than that, the barbecue hasn't changed that much.

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ML: You were saying your method has changed. Can you describe that change for me?

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JR: Well, originally, we started out with—we had a big fireplace, and we burned slabs of woods to get the red-hot coals. We'd take a *[inaudible]* and sprinkle it underneath the meat. And we'd cook it for twelve to fourteen hours. And we'd cook all night, you know? It's a better way. But it became a problem, we had a fire, and it nearly burned the place down. So we've got some equipment now that you can, you know, you don't worry about

fires. They operate with wood and electricity. Basically, you get the same—same, you know, heat's heat. So, it's just a lot safer. Before, we couldn't buy insurance because of the way we cooked, and now we, you know, after we had the fire, we were lucky. And we've got insurance so started using the modern method of barbecuing which, you know, if you didn't see the smoke and all that, why, you wouldn't know the difference.

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ML: Do you think it makes a difference in the flavor of the barbecue?

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JR: I don't think it makes a bit of difference in the flavor. I've always said, "Heat's heat," you know? No matter what the source is. If you, you know, you smoke your meat a little some to get the flavor, that's where the flavor comes from.

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ML: When did you make that switch from using the wood to using the electric?

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JR: Oh, I'd say probably ten, maybe twelve, years ago. Something like that.

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ML: And you've never looked back, that's strictly what you guys have used since then?

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JR: Right, that's the only—we did the combination of both for a little while. And we would mix, you know, thinking it would be a difference, but it—we eventually went over to the modern method. Most everybody uses the same, you know, where it's gas, electric, or charcoal or—its just heat.

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ML: Your relative from Tennessee taught you guys how to barbecue, and you were saying you'd never cooked before—

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JR: Never cooked before. He had a place called Wood's Barbecue in McKenzie, Tennessee. And he just—he came down, left his son operating his place, and stayed three days, said, "This is the way you do it." And so he always told me—he said *[coughs]*. Excuse me. "We work the meat up," he said. If the meat's not—if you won't eat it, throw it in the scrap box. Don't ever tell the customer you're out of meat. Don't serve any that's not any good. And we've done that, and it—it's worked.

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ML: How would you describe the way your barbecue tastes?

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JR: Oh, I can't hardly eat it. *[inaudible]* It's just a lean, tender white and we barbecue the hams and some shoulders. And it's just a lean, tender barbecue. Now a lot of people say it's just like a chicken, but you can tell the difference. It's a white meat. We don't—we don't serve the crust to them. Now some customers like that, so we'll get some and put it on their sandwich, but it's mostly just white meat. White, tender barbecued meat. Now of course, your sauce and your slaw and all that makes—brings the flavor in, you know.

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ML: What difference meats do you barbecue?

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JR: We only cook hams and shoulders. Occasionally a butt or two if somebody wants one but very seldom.

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ML: How would you describe the way your sauce tastes?

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JR: Well, it's thin, and you can't taste the ketchup. It's sweet. It just mixes in with the meat good. I don't—I don't know how to explain it. It's not like any anywhere. *[Laughs]*

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ML: Is your base a tomato base then?

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JR: Yeah, you could say tomato and vinegar based.

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ML: Now one of the reasons that I'm here talking to you is at the Southern Foodways Alliance, we've noticed that Mississippi barbecue—there's not a strong tradition like there is in places like the Carolinas or Alabama, Texas, Tennessee. Do you have any thoughts on maybe why that is?

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JR: I know exactly why that is. It's a lot of work. And, you know, *[coughs]* excuse me.

You have to contend with the waste. Sometimes you'll burn—I have—I have had to throw away twelve hams at one time. It'd just be bad, you know, and it's just a lot of work. That's the big reason.

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ML: Was there good barbecue near you when you were growing up?

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JR: Well, yeah. There was a guy in New Albany called Tackett's Barbecue, and he cooked his, and *[coughs]* as a kid, I used to help him barbecue. We lived close by. And what I did, I'd sit out and watch the meat to make sure it didn't catch on fire and burn up. He'd slip off and do whatever he did, you know. *[Laughs]* Most people knew what he did, but—and he had the best barbecue around. He made his own sauce, and everybody ate Tackett's Barbecue.

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ML: When you started Westside, did you have that barbecue restaurant in mind? As far as kind of making a standard—or living up to a standard of his barbecue?

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JR: No, I really didn't. What I was going to do was get my wife started. I was going to work maybe a year, and I was going back into construction work. That's what I really liked to do, and that was—we had that plan but it never worked out. I couldn't find a place to leave, so I just stayed with it.

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ML: How long did you do construction before opening Westside?

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JR: Oh, all my life, probably thirty years or something—somewhere around that because I was about 46 when we opened.

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ML: And I understand that you built Westside. Mrs. Verna told me that last time.

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JR: I built the building. I literally put the roof on by myself and took maybe six or eight months. When I got it finished, my—my buddy, I said, “Guess what? I’m ready for you to come down here.” He come in, and I had two or three boxes of shoulders, you know. He said, “Man, where’s your meat?” He said, “This is not going to be enough meat!” So, we got on the phone, got 75 more cases in, and we had a cooler stacked full of meat. He said, “Now you might get by.” *[Laughs]* So, everything was new to us. We didn’t have enough change to make change, so we had to go, you know, just—we just barely got opened, but we survived. *[Coughs]*

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ML: It sounds like Westside has been a real labor of love for you both. That plays out in turn with your family working for you. I was hoping you could speak a little bit about that. Was that intentional to have lots of your family members at Westside?

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JR: Well, not necessarily that, but it just worked out to where kids worked, or grandkids, and now we, you know, we hope our kids can take—take it over and keep the, you know, you—you can make a good living out of it, and maybe their grandkids can come and help, you know. We’d like to see it continue.

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ML: You guys would like Westside to stay in the family?

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JR: Oh, yes. We’ve had opportunities to sell but we—we haven’t, you know. We decided not to.

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ML: What prompted the bakery aspect of Westside?

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JR: Oh, my wife has baked all her life. You know, ever since we've been married, she— she just cooks. *[Laughs]* And she started—started off making a few cakes and pies, and it just escalated into, you know, she has a pretty good bakery business now. Matter of fact, bakery's more the bottom line than the barbecue. She sells cakes all over the— everywhere. *[Laughs]*

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ML: She was telling me that the last time I was here. That's really impressive. Does— well, you were just saying you've had offers to, maybe, franchise elsewhere with Westside, and that's not something you guys are interested in. You want to just stay in the one location, right?

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JR: Right. We just want to have a business like we've had and just keep it maintained and, you know, just making a living. We don't want to get rich; we just want to survive.

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ML: Barbecue is something that a lot of people feel really strongly about. Where would you say your passion for barbecue came from?

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JR: I would say my friend—her cousin. We've been friends a long time, and he got me started in it. And he had the best barbecue you could eat. We'd go up there and he'd give me a whole shoulder, “Take this home with you, man, Mr. Hoss!” *[Laughs]* You know,

I'd say Wood's Barbecue in McKinzie, Tennessee. No longer there, he's passed away, but he had the best barbecue in the world.

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ML: Now have you ever been asked to compete in a barbecue competition?

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JR: Well, I have, but you know, we just weren't interested. Most of those guys have sponsors, and they've got these big elaborate cooking trailers. And, you know, we just never wanted to do that.

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ML: Barbecue competitions—it seems like they almost can get a little corporate, whereas I look at something like Westside and it's very down home and very family friendly. Was that something you guys had in mind when you were putting the restaurant together?

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JR: Right. We didn't want a—you know, all these—you see these barbecue contests, all of those guys have got sponsors, most of them. And you know, like you said, we just wanted to be a family operation. We don't want the limelight; we just want the customers.

[Laughs]

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ML: How have you guys built your customer base? When you first started, was it mainly word of mouth?

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JR: Word of mouth, very little advertising, and we treat people right and have a good product, you know. Make sure the food's right, and people will find you no matter what.

We had a—everybody said we had a bad location, but, you know, people will find you no matter where you're at if you've got a good product.

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ML: What made you chose that location off Highway 30?

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JR: Well, the way we were going to cook, we'd look at some other property in town. But truthfully, that was all we could find that we could afford at the time and wondered how we was going to swing that deal, but we did. *[Laughs]*

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ML: Do you think being off a road like Highway 30 has helped you guys get some business where people just drive by and they see you—the big building, and they pull in to get barbecue?

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JR: Well, maybe now, but back then, most—most of the traffic was on 78. And the motels around, people would stop and ask them and they'd send people there. We've had people from St. Louis, all over the country—once they come in and eat with us, they always come back. So that tells you, you know, that you did something right.

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ML: Lots of people view barbecue joints as almost community gathering places. Is that something that you had in mind when building Westside?

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JR: No, not really, no. A lot of places, you know, will have a certain group that comes around and stay and drinks coffee. But we just never had that. We're, you know, only

open for lunch and no breakfast—opening at lunch and then mealtime at night. And that's about it.

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ML: What inspired you guys to do the Thursday, Friday, Saturday schedule?

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JR: Well, the business in a small town on the first part of the week is—you just barely break even. Sometimes you wouldn't break even. And the hours, you know, we put in twelve, fourteen hours a day. And we've got it down to the three days a week where you still get to work forty hours a week, if you can hang with the hours. But it's the money, you know, it's all about the money.

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ML: And I'm sure it's helped you guys too, being retired, to not be there seven days a week. Like you were saying, it's so labor intensive.

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JR: Oh, yeah. You couldn't—you know, you could kill yourself in a place if you want to. I've been retired since Christmas, and health—I got to where I couldn't—couldn't work like I once did, so I just turned what I was doing over to my son, and he's taking care of it now and doing a real good job with it.

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ML: What's his name?

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JR: His name is Jimmy. Now most everybody calls him Jim Bob.

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ML: You said he's been running it since Christmas?

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JR: Right. Well, he's helped me all during the time we've been open. But he more or less would take care of the front, and I'd take care of the back.

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ML: What—when you guys first started out, what was your menu like?

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JR: You know, the menu is just barbecue. Basically, it's—it's not much different today. We had barbecue ribs, barbecue sandwiches and plates, and we sold the meat by the pound. And we had barbecue chicken. That's it. And today, the only thing we've added is chicken strips. Of course, when we first opened, we didn't even have french fries. We just had potato salad. So, we've added the fries and the chicken strips, and I think they've got some nacho—barbecue nachos. I don't really—they've added a few things since. But you know, the simpler you can keep it, the better off you are. Keep it simple. That way you don't have so much waste, you know. You just can't—it's just a barbecue joint. If you don't like barbecue, you're in the wrong place. *[Laughs]*

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ML: Something I hear a lot from barbecue owners is [the importance of] keeping it simple and keeping it consistent. Why do you think that is for barbecue joints as opposed to other restaurants?

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JR: Well, barbecue especially, you know, a lot of places buy the meat already cooked. Now, we--a lot of people think that we do that. But we do our own cooking. We get fresh

hams in on the truck each week, and we cook it all night. Fourteen hours. When we start serving it the next day, it's as fresh as it get. And, you know, that's just--I think the key to it is just keeping it fresh. You can't do that if you try to have so much--many different items, you know. Occasionally, we'll run out, you know, at 6:30 or 7:00. We'll have a big day, and we didn't cook enough. It's--it's, you know, sorry, but we're out of meat.

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ML: How much meat do you guys cook per week usually?

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JR: Well, usually around 50 hams, and they weigh around 25 pounds each. You do the math, sometimes, you know, it's between 16 and a hundred and 2,000 pounds a week.

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ML: That's a lot of meat.

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JR: I'd say between, say, twelve boxes of ribs, which is 30 pounds per box. That would be--what? Between 300 and 400 pounds, 300 to 500 pounds. Sometimes we'll have an order, you know, people will buy 25 pounds.

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ML: Wow. What's your--if you had to chose a specialty on your menu, what would you chose? What makes Westside unique?

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JR: Well, I think all the ribs. People really love the ribs. But, you know, a lot of people don't. Barbecue, the trains running around the inside of it--I mean, people love that. You know, it's just a unique place, I think. It's different, just a barbecue joint. You know, if

you don't like barbecue, you're in trouble. We had hamburgers one time, but it was just--it became a problem. Of course, they were good but *[inaudible]*. So, we have people now saying, "When you going to get some hamburgers back?" But, you know, I don't know. They talk about doing it again, but you just got to have more help. You know, it's just--you got to keep it simple.

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ML: What do you think the future holds for Westside?

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JR: Oh I don't know. I hope it can survive like it is now. Just a simple place where you can stop and get a good barbecue.

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ML: If you had to choose your favorite thing about being the owner of Westside, what would it be?

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JR: Probably working around my family every day, which, you know, sometimes is tough. It--it's good, and in a way, we all work together close. Of course, we're set up kind of in divisions, and I'm in the back, wife's in the bakery, and the son's on the front counter, and everybody's kind of separated, you know. *[Laughs]* But we've managed to get along, and we've all made a good living out of it, so, you know, what else would you want?

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ML: Do you have any statements on where you think barbecue in Mississippi is heading?

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JR: Well, there's always been a few places like we are. You just have to find them. They'll be in small towns, out on the side of the road somewhere. But if somebody likes to cook and likes to cook barbecue and he's got a good--good barbecue, people will buy it, you know. They'll find you. You just have to hang with it. You can't give up and go home. You've just got to stay with it. *[Laughs]*

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ML: Do you have any final thoughts in our interview?

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JR: Not really, not really.

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ML: I think we've covered about all. I guess that will conclude our interview. Thank you very much.