

**DANDGURE ROBINSON**

**Dandgure's Classic Southern Cooking - Nashville, TN**

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Location: Dandgure's Classic Southern Cooking - Nashville, TN

Interviewer: Ronni Lundy

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

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**[Begin Dandgure’s-1 Interview]**

**00:00:01**

**Ronni Lundy:** All right; this is Ronni Lundy and we are recording because I can see the numbers advancing. Okay; this is Ronni Lundy. Today is July 6, 2012. And I’m here with Dan of Dandgure’s Restaurant. You’re going to help me with pronunciation? But first, I want you to tell me your full name and your occupation.

**00:00:27**

**Dandgure Robinson:** Dandgure Robinson and I’m the owner and restaurateur of this particular establishment, so—.

**00:00:36**

**RL:** Great. And will you tell us when you were born and where?

**00:00:40**

**DR:** Born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, 1950.

**00:00:46**

**RL:** Very good. So Dandgure’s is the name of the restaurant and it’s also your name, correct?

**00:00:54**

**DR:** That is correct.

**00:00:54**

**RL:** It's an unusual name. Can you tell me anything about it?

**00:00:55**

**DR:** Yes. It was my given name at birth and the interesting part of that is only until—and through my elementary education of about the fourth grade—was that Dandgure ever used officially. It was on my school records and I had such a difficult time as a child with teachers trying to call me by name that I was ridiculed and teased. And so I asked my mother to change the name on my school record, because everyone knew me as Danny. And so it was changed to reflect that change all the way through high school and at some point in time in high school I felt as though I was using a little boy's name, so I changed and shortened it to Dan, and by my own doing. So for most everyone that has known me from my high school junior/senior on know me as Dan.

**00:02:16**

If I were to return to my hometown in Charlottesville, Virginia they know me as Danny. And beyond those years up until about ten years ago was the first time I ever used my given name, my birth name, anywhere until I changed the name of this business from Dan's to Dandgure's.

**00:02:42**

**RL:** Now why did you do that? You said there's kind of a bit of a story. What is the actual formal name of the restaurant?

**00:02:50**

**DR:** The—the public records reflect now that the restaurant name is Dandgure’s Classic Southern Cooking. In my earlier years I was known as Dan’s Café, so we are still today Dandgure’s Classic Cooking, aka Dan’s Café. Most people that cannot pronounce the name or are not sure of how to describe this particular establishment they’ll say, “Well you know, it’s that place on the corner.” Everybody knows it as Dan’s.

**00:03:25**

And we’ve been fortunate in many ways to have the location and the specific identity with a—with a difficult name, but on the other hand it did present some problems in the earlier years because having been known as Dan’s Café there was a Dan’s Grill in the city and we often times were confused and mixed by the dining public.

**00:03:57**

So at one point I changed—you know I said I would make a change knowing that I had a true name, my own individual name, different, that I could use. The strange part of all of that is, I did change the name officially on public records and then the other business closed. So at some point there was no Dan’s in the phonebook. People thought that I was closed. They knew the other place was closed. And so, it took a while during the course of that year, or a little more, to really reestablish ourselves as the same restaurant with a different name.

**00:04:42**

**RL:** What year was that?

**00:04:44**

**DR:** I would have to right now, without looking back through files, I can only guess and say that it was about 10 years ago, so—.

**00:04:55**

**RL:** So not long after you opened, because when did you open here?

**00:04:57**

**DR:** Well, I've been open since 1991, so yes. So about halfway through my tenure and maybe even further back, I'm guessing, I'd say no less than 10 years, you know, the name has been changed. But it did take people a while to adjust to the name change. And I still today—we have a lot of fun with it because it's taken a while for people to really learn how to pronounce the name. And I'm okay with the fact that, you know, it's not always pronounced correctly. And people think it is my last name, or it is some variation or some conjured—you know, something that's been conjured up, you know, to reflect a specific theme or whatever. And when they learn that it is not a last name or it is not a theme, but my first name, then it generates a lot of conversation.

**00:05:53**

**RL:** Well one more question about that name. Is that a family name? I've never heard it before. It's beautiful.

**00:05:58**

**DR:** Well, having used it very little until my business career [*Laughs*], you know, to use it actually in my business I—I never really considered it be just a unique name, you know, when I

was a young person. It always seemed to be a very difficult and almost ugly name because during the years that I was growing up, I mean, there were common names. You know, I mean, you didn't have strange names, you didn't have unique names, you know.

**00:06:29**

And so I have learned to actually love my first name [*Laughs*], you know, which I never could take away from the fact that it was there, but it just wasn't ever used. It just—it didn't seem to fit, you know, me. And so it—it's—it has come full circle, you know.

**00:06:49**

**RL:** Wonderful. I want to note that we're sitting here today and you are actually closed for a week in the summer for some rest for your staff. Apparently not for you, because you're here and there's working being done on the restaurant. And occasionally we're going to hear the sound of a saw or a drill in the background. And I want to thank you for coming down to this in the midst of a crazy day. I know that it is.

**00:07:15**

Why did you decide to open a restaurant?

**00:07:22**

**DR:** It wasn't very difficult to actually make a decision to open a restaurant having grown up during the times that I came along as a young person. Opportunities for employment was more or less limited—I can say was limited. In the town I grew up in, young boys like myself, you know, willing to go to work, you know, you had few choices of where to go. So a restaurant was one of those places that, you know, family or friends, you know, you—that you knew perhaps would be involved in one way or another. I found early on that, you know, it gave me employment and an

opportunity to work, but I loved the environment, you know, once I was in it. You know, I started as—as a fourteen-year-old glass washer in an upscale restaurant and that was my job. All I did was wash stemware. And beyond that, of course, being in the kitchen, if you're dependable and, you know, you don't break everything they give you, then you have an opportunity to learn more and do more.

**00:08:35**

So I did and—and was able to, you know, move onto the silver station so you learn more. You know, you get more responsibility. So I learned for the most part, you know, as a fourteen-year-old how to wash the glasses, how to wash the silverware. They put me in some capacity as a dishwasher, you know, where you learn how to wash all of the—the—the flatware and—and glassware and dinnerware. And I guess the most difficult time that I had as a fourteen-year-old learning that specific trade was when they put me into what they call the pot station. And being in a big restaurant like that, and a little more upscale, there was a lot of roasting and baking and frying and it was all done in heavy pots. So almost every pot was used or used once or twice and then thrown to the wash station.

**00:09:37**

So it was a tremendous galley and you just had to be busy with it—very wet, very greasy, very slippery, and very hot.

**00:09:47**

**RL:** That explains why you're so good at multiple tasking now. [*Laughs*]

**00:09:52**

**DR:** [*Laughs*]

**00:09:52**

**RL:** Is this in Charlottesville? You said the town you grew up in.

**00:09:55**

**DR:** That is correct. Charlottesville, Virginia, the home of the University of Virginia and of course you know at that point in time my family base, so—.

**00:10:08**

**RL:** Now when you came to Nashville you have this experience and you're starting out in a really fine restaurant and I'm guessing like many of us who worked in restaurants that you worked in many different kinds of restaurants. Nashville is known for this meat-and-three tradition, of having really good Southern foods and sides, really good Southern meats and then sides of vegetables. Why did you decide to do this particular kind of restaurant? Because you could have opened a different kind.

**00:10:42**

**DR:** Easy to answer that one. For the most part, by the time I reached this time in my career and in 1989 when I began to look, and well really began to consider my options beyond my—about 1990 I knew that my last child would be graduating from high school and I was hopeful that by that time I would be able to pursue, you know, a sincere dream and interest. You know, to move into my own business.

**00:11:20**

So that opportunity did present itself. I had long for many years worked in the hotel business and was fortunate to be able to travel to many cities and worked in many different environments and was able to be a part of various types of food preparations and on various levels of service. So yes, I had an opportunity to look at other venues and—and made decisions based on the—my career had been long and it had been extensive, but I had also worked many, many, many hours, you know, in the hotel business. And it had taken me away from my family, obviously by my own doing, but it—I had been successful with it.

**00:12:13**

So I realized that toward the end of, you know, this time that I was looking for an opportunity to—if I were going to work long hours I wanted to be able to do it for me and—and really get the satisfaction of feeling achievement, you know, on that level, you know, versus giving performance, you know, to a corporation. And so when I made the decision to actually open a business, I did not want to build or buy. I wanted to find a good location, even if it meant to renovate a property, but in this particular case I looked at many, many restaurants in the Nashville area that were available. I looked at specific properties that could have been converted.

**00:13:07**

This particular location offered very high traffic, very high visibility per se, a corner location, but extremely difficult parking. And so I looked at the location many, many, many times before I finally decided that this would be a location that would work for me. My choice to move toward comfortable food, we're talking about home-style foods in a meat-and-three type category in Nashville—and that's what it was known as here when I got into it, more of a local type flavor of it. Home-style foods had been available everywhere I have ever been, but not so much really known as it is here in this city.

**00:14:07**

My desire was not just to prepare and serve this type of food, but I also had another interest, and that was not to work seven days a week. And I felt as though this particular idea of serving home-style food, I could begin to look at a specific timeframe of service and not having to look at what I was used to in the hotel business of almost a seven day a week, twenty-four hour concern—even if I obviously wasn't on duty those—those days and hours, but having run and been a Food and Beverage Director for large hotel food and beverage facilities, your mind is there even when your body is not.

**00:15:00**

So I wanted the type of facility and business that would offer me an opportunity to begin to shut down and pay attention to other parts of life other than work.

**00:15:15**

**RL:** Now has it worked out that way? I see you have some fishing poles up on the wall here. I'm not sure if you get to use them or not.

**00:15:21**

**DR:** Interesting observation. I fished a lot as a teenager. I have not fished on any level of—of real satisfaction for—for many years. Most of the—the décor that you might see in here or artifacts and—and pieces are items that people have come to know me and have given to me. I made a point to decorate and/or appoint this place with anything and everything that would make you feel comfortable and would bring your mind to a time, you know, that it reflected, you know, a very hometown, home—homey feeling. And so I've always told everyone that my restaurant was decorated in the early yard sale era. So I attended many yard sales. I attended various types of—of sales where people were getting rid of things. I went to auctions. I found

unique pieces, as I said, that were some parts of the, you know, of the décor in here that were given to me by wonderful customers who just came to like the environment. And some of the pieces are gifts. But most of them I chose as I went through my—my journey, you know, of here.

**00:16:59**

I've got several pieces in here that I brought from a time when I was even just a young teenager, gifts and pieces that were given to me by family members. I've got a—a long black what? I guess what you would call a—a bull whip that was given to me by a family member when I was 15 years old that came out of the—out of the Vietnam Era when he was passing through Cambodia. And so it was a gift to me. It means a lot to me. And so I still have it today and hung in that fashion on the wall. And most people will look at it and think of it in terms of being something that was used on—you know in a farming type situation but it—it was never used in that capacity.

**00:17:48**

And I've got, you know, a lot of other, you know, odd pieces, unique pieces, some are antique, but mostly they bring your mind to times that you might feel, you know, or reflect on something that you might remember. And then I also chose pieces that would be talking pieces, things that—that I might not even have the full history of it, but I knew it would generate conversation, and I've got a number of those kinds of pieces in here.

**00:18:21**

**RL:** So kind of those things like, “what is this for?” sort of pieces?

**00:18:24**

**DR:** That—that is correct. That is correct. And I've got several pieces in here on that line and that level. I've got a—a metal cage in here that sets on top of one of our food warmers and it's always been a strange looking piece. Often times, people just look at it and think of it as a cage, but upon questioning it, you know, it is actually—was built and designed as a fish scale(r) and you attach it to your motor boat and it swirls in the water and scales the fish. *[Laughs]*

**00:19:09**

**RL:** That's pretty clever.

**00:19:10**

**DR:** Yeah; it's—it's interesting that you find pieces like that, you know, and that may not—it may very well be something that someone would hear this conversation or—or be a part of a conversation in—in general and say, “Oh, yeah, I've seen that before.” But for the most part, it is unique, you know.

**00:19:27**

**RL:** So we're talking about the art inside and I want to talk to you about the art outside. You have a pretty spectacular mural on the side of this building. Tell me the story behind that.

**00:19:38**

**DR:** I—I had an idea many years ago—because the art on the outside, it covers a broad wall on this building—and I had an idea that I wanted to do, firstly, inside. The idea was started with an idea that I had for the inside of the building. I wanted to do—find a large window that had been removed from a building and have it brought here and hung on the inside of the building and

then have a drawing done on the wall to reflect an outside view, because there was no windows on that side.

**00:20:20**

So that never happened. But at the same time I was considering, well what would it be like if I could find, you know, the right people to help me come up with a mural that would reflect, as you drive by the building, a dining scene where it looked like you were looking into the building? And so what you see on the outside is, in fact, a mural reflecting a dining scene. It’s for the most part reflective of who we are inside, you know, with the—with the tile floor design and the wall and some of the hangings that you see in the mural, reflect of who we are in here. But I wanted it to captivate you when you drove by the—the property, that you would see people talking and dining and eating. And you will see this—the cafeteria serving line. And I wanted to try to bring you in the building just by driving by.

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**RL:** You know it looks like a party, not a wild party, but just one of those great get-togethers like in a neighborhood where you would maybe—everybody brings food and everybody kind of knows everybody. Is that reflective of your clientele here? Who eats here?

**00:21:37**

**DR:** Well, when you look at the—the faces in the—in the mural, they reflect for the most part anyone and everyone that would walk through these doors. Of course, just on gender alone, we obviously are able to attract both men and women. When I first started this business in 1991 I had nine men to every woman that would ever walk through the door. It was—it was just this specific area and it’s very industrial. It was a day—a lot of day labor, kind of a tough area at the

time. I wouldn't want to say dangerous by any means, but yet, a lot of transient traffic per se on the street. And so I went immediately after building the business to attract, you know, both men and women, and to try to draw away from what, you know, initially started. So as I moved beyond and was on my journey, you know, I saw an opportunity to reflect my clientele by the time the artwork was done on the wall. And the wall reflects your—your hard hat customer, the blue jean guy, the bib overall guy. You've got the shirt and tie. You've got a lady in a nice dress. You know you—some of the food that's been drawn and depicted out there reflects, you know, different types of foods that we, you know—are offered.

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You see in the background behind the serving line the server and servers and one of them being depicted as—was my main cook at that particular time when it was done. And so everyone knew everyone here. You know, I had doctors, lawyers, you know, the Indian Chiefs and all. I mean we—you know, just like the old saying goes, you know. I can't remember the rhyme but the doctors and lawyers, the—the candlestick maker, you know, whoever. You know, they—I felt as though we had every—people from every walk of life, you know, came here. You know, we fed the governors. We've had the mayors. You know, we've had all, you know, various politicians throughout the years. We're well known throughout the business community, you know, the healthcare industry.

**00:24:16**

Obviously through the years, as we talk about today, as many, many, many more choices available to the dining public for lunch, so we don't have quite the volume that we did in the time. But we do have the history. So people know who we are and when they come here today they want to come here. It's not a—generally, a happenstance. Often times, back then, you know as I say back then, but years back people were interested in, you know, specifically maybe more

in the meat-and-three idea. And so now that there are many, many more choices, ethnic, you know ethnicity wise, you know, we're not a soul food type restaurant. I always classify myself as a classic home-style food operation and so with that I want to bring you to a level of soul food, but a comfortable feeling, you know. And I express soul food really being something that—that makes you feel comfortable, that brings you back to a time regardless of the—the type of food being prepared. But it makes you—if it makes you feel good, then it's soul food, you know, so.

**00:25:34**

**RL:** What would you say on your menu would be the most characteristic of the soul food items, things that you see that way?

**00:25:41**

**DR:** Well again we—we specifically capture all of the meats that are home-style foods. I mean you can't move far away from fried chicken or chicken prepared in some fashion. I don't care where you go today, chicken is out there. But our fried chicken is—is *our* fried chicken. I mean you can get chicken everywhere, but here it's done the way we fix it. We like—you know, we certainly enjoy that success. We're not a large chicken house by any means, but what we prepare is very much accepted. And we do prepare chicken in all sorts of fashions, you know, other than fried. You know, we bake chicken, we smother chicken, we, you know, we've done different chicken dishes, you know, and other ethnic ways. I use chicken in many of our—I want to say casserole style or type ideas that we do. I make a jambalaya that contains, you know, three meats and—and a fish and—and spices accordingly. But chicken is in—is in many, many, many dishes that we do here.

**00:27:02**

So it's really hard to say, you know, what would be one of the most popular. I mean, every day our meats change on a Monday through Friday rotation so what you see on a Monday is normally there on a Monday. And, you know, but people come, they do come specifically for, you know, like on a Monday we do have on a seasonal basis the jambalaya, so they know it's there on Monday. And I say seasonal because when it gets in the dead of summer we normally take that off the menu. We do a baked tilapia, you know, with a seasoned rice base and during the season of jambalaya then the jambalaya is the base for the tilapia on Monday. Other than that, I will create, you know, what I might term as a country-style fried rice and in that fried rice might be something to, you know, captivate you at that specific time.

**00:28:03**

Tuesdays is our beef tips day along with four—three to four other meats. That's a popular come-for item on Tuesday. And I'll just mention kind of the come-for items, but every day we've got no less than four meats.

**00:28:17**

On Wednesday we do our fried catfish fillets and people come specifically for that and meatloaf as well on Wednesday. On Thursday for twenty-one years we've always served and never changed turkey and dressing, liver and onion. We do barbeque ribs and fried chicken. I had one other meat on Thursday, which I did take off and I moved it to another day but those four meats I spoke of on Thursday have been there for twenty-one years. And if I should make a change on Thursday, I think that's the day I'd have to take off because [*Laughs*] I'm going to upset somebody that day.

**00:28:57**

And then on Friday we do a fried whiting fish. It's—it's a fillet. And of course, if you like fried fish you can certainly—certainly know the difference between a catfish and a whiting.

But Friday would be our fried whiting fish day and then alongside of that we do have that being our chicken and dumpling day and we do a roast beef and—and fried pork chops. And I want to say fried pork chops is a very, very popular item here. I do serve them three days a week, Tuesday, Wednesday, and a Friday, and people definitely come for those days, so—

**00:29:39**

**RL:** Now when you were talking about the décor inside you were saying that it reflected you and your life. What about the food? What about this menu? Is this—are these recipes from your family? Are they recipes—what are they? Where does this come from?

**00:29:56**

**DR:** The recipes are, for the most part, they've come from certainly a time when some of the foods served were items that I recall, you know, from my upbringing. My mother was a great cook. I thought my grandmother was a great cook as well. But I didn't know her as well, you know, in the kitchen as I did my mom. And even though mom cooked, she didn't really have to cook so much that it was, you know, great meals on the table every day. You know, we did come up during a time when we had our difficulties and there was always food on the table, but not just maybe what we wanted. So, you know, I came from a time when whatever was prepared was appreciated, and I always have that in the back of my mind today.

**00:30:55**

I don't like to see food wasted, and whether or not I'm feeding, you know, my family or friends or even in my own business, you know, if I'm feeding my employees or the dining public, you know, I'm conscious of the fact that wasting food is just not something that needs to—needs to take place.

00:31:16

I enjoy all types of foods and the recipes that I use here have obviously come from many times of—of creating and changing and tweaking some of the things that I did start early on. But I enjoy full flavored foods. It doesn't matter what type of food it is as long as it's seasoned well. And I'm not talking about over-salted or over-peppered, but I like to—I like to be able to taste. And I can pick apart—I like to be able to pick apart what I'm eating and tell you that, you know, there's a degree of herbs and seasonings in that I enjoy, you know. When they meld together and they just make the dish, you know, be where it's just delectable, it's enjoyable. You know, it's not just about eating, but it's about enjoying what you eat.

00:32:17

And most of that comes from foods being properly seasoned and—

00:32:24

**RL:** Is there anything—I'm thinking about a couple of things I saw in your menu that intrigued me and one of them was the deviled eggs. And I'm wondering, how you do your deviled eggs in that context? Or if there's something that you perhaps season a little differently than we might expect because of that?

00:32:42

**DR:** Deviled eggs, of course, I remember—it takes me back to, you know, to my childhood. That was a specialty item. It wasn't something that was made routinely, but when it was prepared I always enjoyed it. And I can remember that distinct flavor. I don't recall ever seeing my mom make it, but having worked through, you know, my—on my journey, you know, coming through the—the hotel days and even before that, we would have prepared countless thousands of dozens

of deviled eggs, you know, for hotel functions and such. And so I always wanted, depending on the type of party and what specific flavor they were looking for, because, I mean, that's one item or one dish that allows you so much flexibility to—to prepare it in whatever style or—or presentation you choose, and the taste to kind of be reflective of what you're looking for that day.

**00:33:56**

I essentially just like a salt and pepper type seasoning, nothing, you know, really above and beyond that as far as the restaurant goes. And we do use a combination of some mustard and mayonnaise and—and just a little sweet relish. Our recipe is very basic. I mean, it just depends on what quantities we're—you know that we're preparing as to how much we—you know seasonings and—and dressing we use to really bring it, you know, to the point where it's really—it's very tender and, you know, it's not stiff and it's not runny, you know, but it, you know, it's carefully, you know, mixed.

**00:34:40**

**RL:** Okay, the other thing that you're very famous for is the best lemonade in town. What's the secret to your lemonade?

**00:34:48**

**DR:** Well I'll take the Fifth on that one. [*Laughs*] We—we are known for the lemonade and we enjoy making it. It—it's not something that we're selling near as much of today as we have in years past and that's just because the volume is down. But we certainly still enjoy making it and, you know, squeezing the lemons and—and mixing the—the right amount of sugar. We found

over the years that we're not fortunate to always get the same lemon we had, you know, last week so we have to kind of tweak it a little bit to get the flavor there.

**00:35:22**

Sometimes the lemons are very, very full and ripe; sometimes they're not quite, and so you have to tweak it, you know, to get it there. But lemonade is very touchy. I've been playing around with different flavors of lemonade more or less changing from the base that we make. And I've been making a strawberry lemonade, which is basically taking my strawberry batch that I mix for my strawberry shortcakes and take that and—and—and do some things with it in order to mix it, you know, with my—my lemonade batch. And it's—it's been interesting. You know, you learn as you go, you know.

**00:36:03**

**RL:** That sounds great. How do your customers react when you do something new like that?

**00:36:08**

**DR:** Well, it's always great to do something different. I mean you—you go to the same place, you more or less know what you—you're perhaps going in for if you're a regular in a specific, you know, establishment. You can just about see what's available before you ever walk through the door because you've gone enough times. You know, you get to know the servers. You know the cook, the owner. You know how, for the most part, how foods are presented. So it's always great from an entrepreneurial standpoint and—and particularly—specifically, you know, in a restaurant to kind of keep it fresh. So you know, just tweak it and change it, you know, put out something a little different in color, you know, change your recipe a little bit. I mean, if you're always doing, you know, a—a roast, per se, done in a certain way, I mean, present it a little

different another time. Do a pot roast out of it or something and, I mean just the same meat item and just a different presentation.

**00:37:03**

And so, you know, a lot of color. You know, obviously we’ve learned, you know, in this business people not only eat because they’re hungry. And you can draw their attention to food items by way of color, you know, and design, you know, so you...

**00:37:20**

**RL:** Give me an example.

**00:37:24**

**DR:** Well, I mean I can make you a Salisbury steak and put it in brown gravy and just, you know, stack them on the line or have them or present them in a—in a serving, you know—in a serving pan, but if I give that pan just a little more color, you know, i.e. sautéed onions or, you know, maybe some peppers or something to give that pan some color, your eyes are drawn to the color in the pan. And while you may not know exactly what it is by looking down on the line, just the color itself may, you know, generate a question. “Well what is that?” You know. “What are you doing over there?”

**00:38:00**

And—and so I use—try to use color and create a little, you know, imagination sometimes in—in—as you’re looking at, you know, the serving line, you know so—.

**00:38:11**

**RL:** Now I'm going to ask you about something specifically. You were talking about people coming in and knowing the servers. You mentioned when we were talking about the mural that one of your long-time cooks is portrayed in the mural, as are you. You're over in the corner of it.

**00:38:28**

**DR:** Right.

**00:38:28**

**RL:** And then as I was walking around looking at the things on your walls I noticed that you have several awards for *Employer of the Year*. How long do you keep your people here? You know, restaurant businesses can be pretty quick turnover. Have you had your staff a pretty long time? And why do you get those *Employer of the Year* awards?

**00:38:49**

**DR:** I've—I've been very fortunate through the years to maintain a core of staff. The lady that you mentioned that was the cook in the mural, she's no longer here, but she was a very vital part of my business in the early years. Her personality was one that she was very well known and—and loved and appreciated for her—for her cooking ability, but also her personality. She was very friendly. And I'll have to express something at this point. I had a very unique time here. In my early years I allowed for people to walk through my kitchen from the outside, and you could pass through the kitchen into the dining area as well as using the front door. But it created an environment that was not specifically well liked by the Health Department, but it was a very low—it was a very low point deduction. And I created an environment where I was always very proud of my kitchen and my staff.

**00:40:03**

So you could actually walk off of the parking area through the kitchen and into the dining area. And it offered an opportunity for many customers to meet all of my employees on a one-on-one, whether they were cooking or carrying dishes or carrying food or they were just transporting trays from the restaurant back to the kitchen, you know, to be washed. It—it created a very home-style environment. So it was unique and we all got to know one another more or less in those early years.

**00:40:44**

I did finally change that after many years because having done some repositioning of equipment and the volume had gotten to be so heavy in the kitchen and during those early years people were—the public was still allowed to smoke, you know, in—in most buildings. And so my—my—my customers would enter many times or exit many times with a cigarette in hand. So for various reasons, I finally shut that, you know, that part of what we offered down mostly due to liability. My back was always turned to the public as they passed me at the register. So I had a security concern. I had some liability concerns with repositioning of equipment. I didn't want anyone to get hit with any hot pans or pots or spills or anything like that. And like I said, having a heavy volume, we didn't want to—you know, have a slowdown, you know, where we're trying to wait for somebody to move. So that was a unique situation that many people got to know us on a very personal level.

**00:42:05**

**RL:** I would think so. How many years did you do that?

**00:42:07**

**DR:** I did that—I did that for, I believe, right at ten years. And it—it was always an interesting situation. I did also serve breakfast during those years so, you know, a part of my security concern was as we opened in the mornings it would—it would often times be before light and as I didn't always know everyone that was entering, you know, the building at that hour I just, you know, obviously towards the end was more concerned for safety than, you know—at that hour of the day.

**00:42:49**

**RL:** Have you had much problem here? This is—you're—you're close to downtown. You're still in a kind of industrial area but there's a lot of businesses around and—.

**00:43:00**

**DR:** Never any major problems. I can't say we would be any different from any other business in this area. We've had, you know, some break-ins. We've had some broken windows. We've, you know, had to call the—the police authorities from time to time for someone that may have been a little unruly, but never anything to the extent of anything dangerous. I've never had—had anyone to walk in on us, you know, and—and attempt any—any robberies or anything like that.

**00:43:33**

I think also I tried to treat everyone fair, you know, in the early years. I did know that from a business standpoint of view I could never feel good about feeding anyone because of all the transient traffic that I saw on the street or felt was on the—you know, there. I—I established a policy that I wouldn't feed anyone for free that would come to my door because just being in this area I felt as though I could be, you know, feeding many, many people and that's not what I was here for. Knowing that in this general area there was a—or is a—an entity that will work

with people that need help, so I would always direct people, you know, to where they could get the help instead of trying to come out of, you know, my pocket for that.

**00:44:37**

So alongside of that I often times had to run panhandlers off and I believe we just got to be fairly well known for a business that would not allow for, you know, the customers to be hassled day in and day out. And while you may come to this building on any day and be approached, it is—it is an exception to the rule. And so I don't worry too much about having made those decisions, you know, so I feel pretty comfortable with where we are with security.

**00:45:17**

**RL:** So I'm going to go back to the *Employer* awards for a minute. Now you've worked—since you were fourteen you've been in restaurant and hospitality business a large part of your life. Is there anything that you feel that you do differently or bring differently to being an employer in a restaurant that is one of the reasons that you're recognized as a good one?

**00:45:40**

**DR:** As I look back on my career, I certainly was fortunate to, you know, I was a hard worker myself and—and certainly did recognize that as I moved along in my career, you know, with other employees and other businesses. But having been more in a corporate environment, you know, there were programs designed to recognize the employees and management.

**00:46:12**

Being in business for myself, I decided that as we—as I moved along that it—it would take someone with a personality, you know, similar to at least a lifestyle and a desire, you know, that would be likened to how I operate, you know, for that employee to feel comfortable, you

know, working under my demands. And so I've tried to create an environment, you know, in my small business where I am in fact a worker, but I try to create an environment where I am setting, you know, the—the—the model, you know, for what is to happen. You know firstly, we come into work to work and, you know, I don't want to just show up, you know. So I work harder than anyone here and I—I make that known, you know, that I don't ask you to do anything that I can't and won't do myself. So I mean, it's not a point of, you know, just having you here. You know you need to do your part.

**00:47:21**

So having been here as long as I have, I mean I do—and I am fortunate to have people that's been with me long-term that recognize the fact that I don't have to do everything anymore—but I've trained everyone and tried to—tried to really cross-train anyone and everyone that I hire regardless of the specific job duties, you know, that they may be brought in to do. After that I want everyone more or less cross-trained as deep as I can so that at a point in taking care of the volume of business for that day, you know, they all can work together.

**00:48:01**

Now when it comes to some of the awards and—and some of the acknowledgements that's—that's hanging on these walls, they come from a time of where, like I said, I've been fortunate to maintain a regular staff for the most part. But I've also adopted the attitude that everyone really deserves a second chance. And with that, sometimes it might be a third chance or more. But the point I want to make with that is to have been able to maintain a long-term crew of—of dedicated employees I have to get to know over time each and every one and what their makeup is because we are all different. And I find—have found and will continue to find I'm sure that being a—an owner and operator, that I'm not only the—their manager, but I may very well, you know, someone to—you know, to listen to their problems today. So I may be daddy

today and—**[Laughs]** and boss tomorrow and—and uncle and friend and brother and—and doctor and lawyer and—and whatever else there may be, if I can offer assistance or at least give you guidance and at the same time achieve you know what I need to—to run the business.

**00:49:37**

So you get to know your people, and I have had many employees that have come from tough—tough walks of life, so some of the accolades here have come from organizations that recognized me for having worked with difficult people. And so some of the people that I've had success with have been felons, some have been challenged mentally, some have been challenged physically. And I always feel like this: I mean, aren't we all, you know? And we all deserve a second chance. And so everyone has challenges, you know, and it just depends on the attitude of management as to how you're going to deal with the people that have these challenges in their life, you know.

**00:50:24**

If you have children at home, as a mom or as a father, you've got a sick family—you've got problems. You know, if you—if you're an alcoholic and you—you're trying to deal with your problem, then it's your problem but you need to manage it, you know. And I've counseled many people through the years who have had drug problems, alcohol problems, family problems, you know, divorces, you know. I've had successful marriages, you know, within my staff and I've got some that haven't. I mean, but it's—it's the walk of life and, you know we're all—we're all in it. You know, we just have to find a way to make it work. And so I feel like I do accept some moderation and I know I do, but I also try to operate on the principle of no excuses and that has helped me many times. It's difficult to really pound down the “no exceptions,” but I think the “no excuses” does help to, you know, kind of set the pace for everyone today. I mean, we can all find excuses for why, you know, we don't do something or didn't do something and when it gets

into the blame game and gets down to the exceptions then it gets watered down and we all end up doing what we want to do instead of taking care of the vision of the business, you know.

**00:51:47**

So—and I think we should, you know every—everyone should try to have that and that's where I've, you know, tried to be strong in the fact that I try to treat everyone fairly. So again, I guess the awards and acknowledgements have come from a time of—of organizations having seen me work with young men and women to help them be gainfully employed. And so, it's been successful.

**00:52:19**

**RL:** How many people do you employ here?

**00:52:22**

**DR:** On any given day I guess I've got a regular staff of six. And so I've had more in the past, I've had less in the past. So—anticipating a better future than we've had over the past couple of years, I—I see where we'll—we can move forward with a good strong six and look forward to the day when I need more.

**00:52:45**

**RL:** You know I want you to hold that thought. Really quickly, before I forget, I want to ask you who painted the mural on the side? That's been in the front of my head.

**00:52:54**

**DR:** I met in my early years—one of my customers was a gentleman that was a professor at two of the universities. He taught classes at Vanderbilt and—and Fisk and he—unbeknownst to me at that time, as I learned more about him, he also owned an art gallery. And so I didn't know much about his—his teaching ability. I kind of learned more of that as I went on learning more about his—his gallery.

**00:53:35**

And so his success, I believe, wasn't so much in—in art forms of painting but he, having a gallery, he had all forms of art, you know, sculptures and paintings and drawings and photography. And I think that was his field. I believe he was a very successful photographer. But we got to know one another fairly well and certainly I appreciated him as a customer and he enjoyed my, you know, environment here. And you heard me tell part of this story earlier about some of my thoughts about how I would create some—some background or—I can't quite draw the word but I wanted you to be able to feel as though you were dimensional. You know, like I was talking to you about the window hanging on the inside and looking out. And it got to be to where I created this thought about maybe driving by and looking at a dining scene, looking in. And this gentleman, having expounded some of those thoughts along the way with him, he said, “Well, you know, what do you think about that?” You know, and we got into many conversations. And I think from the point of ever that being discussed the first time to when it actually—ever actually took place had to be several years.

**00:54:58**

But he talked to me more and more about who he was, and he represented different artists. And so somewhere in the course of that timeframe in those years, he recommended that I pursue this idea that I had, and he had an artist that he would like to see get involved in that project. And I thought about it and thought about it and got too busy to deal with it, and he never

dropped it. He kept after me with it. So I had actually—even by that time I had created something on paper that I felt, you know, might look like a dining scene. And so, you know, having not being, you know, someone that could really draw per se but I could put some ideas on paper, I, you know, kind of gave him some—at one point of the conversation, gave him an idea of where I’d like to go.

**00:55:48**

So he recommended this one guy and he said, “Well, why don’t you give this guy a chance?” His name was Samuel Dunson as the artist. [Interviewer note: Artist Samuel L. Dunson is also assistant professor of art at Tennessee State University.]

**00:55:59**

**RL:** Is that Gunnison—G-u-n-n-i-s-o-n?

**00:56:02**

**DR:** No. Dunson—D-u-n-s-o-n. I believe it’s D-u-n-s-o-n—Dunson and Samuel being his first name. He was and I believe still is a teacher of art and I don’t know his specific, you know, area but he was at Tennessee State University with his work.

**00:56:26**

But I was able to finally come to some agreement with him. Carlton Wilkerson was the owner of the gallery, and he wanted to promote this artist, so we came to an agreement where, with his artistic style, which was different from what I really wanted because he was a little bit more abstract and he’s a little bit off on—on his design like his—his figures would be disfigured. And I wanted real, you know, I wanted realism and not, you know, that—that other kind of art. And I can’t really say what it’s called. But we came to an agreement. So as you may look at the

mural you'll still a little bit of his take on how things are done. You can see some extremities maybe enlarged or, you know, just different parts of it that's not as close to reality, you know, as it could be, but that's his style. And I had to, you know, make sure that I got what I needed but allowed this artist an opportunity to do his thing, too.

**00:57:39**

But the deal was, I would be able to get my mural at a very discounted fare compared to what I would have paid if I had hired an artist, because the—the—the owner of the gallery representing this specific artist, you know, was acting as his agent. And so he wanted to promote the artist. So this would give him a broad wall to be promoted from and to get his—get his art style out there. So that's how that happened.

**00:58:11**

I got a very wonderful piece for a very reasonable price in comparison to what it would have taken to really do this, you know, from—from, you know, from a standpoint of just hiring someone. So it took a year to actually do it. It was to take three months, but because the artist had some scheduling problems that really plagued him, you know, and from the beginning on it took a year. So what made it interesting was the fact that it took a whole year for this thing to go from beginning to end. He never stopped working on it, but it might be spells where he wasn't here you know for a few weeks or something like that. But on—on any given time [*Phone Rings*]—.

**00:59:01**

**RL:** We're going to pause.

**00:59:03**

**[End Dandgure’s-1 Interview]**

**[Begin Dandgure’s-2 Interview]**

**00:00:01**

**Dandgure Robinson:** Probably one call from the towing company and if I see a call from my wife or something I’ll answer it.

**00:00:10**

**Ronni Lundy:** All right. What year was this?

**00:00:15**

**DR:** Forgive me for not being precise, but I’ve got the dates actually on the mural. In one corner of the mural you’ll find the beginning date and in the corner on the other end of the wall you’ll find the ending date and I think it was 2003 and 2004, I think. It may have been a year or so varied. So it was either 2002—2003 or 2003 and 2004, but somewhere in that span.

**00:00:46**

**RL:** Okay. Now I’m struck by how this place is such an expression of who you are. Do you have that sense of it? It’s almost a piece of art that you’ve created.

**00:01:02**

**DR:** I’ve never thought about it from that standpoint, but it is me, every—every part of it in that way. I would have to, you know, really think about that now. I’ve not done any major, major

renovations to this building. I always called it a bunker. The square footage on this property is somewhere around 3,000 and the dining area, I'm not sure exactly what that is in here. But it does look different today compared to 1991 when I came in here.

**00:01:44**

It looks extremely different. The square footage is the same, the open space is the same, but the previous occupant tried to operate a restaurant here and it never worked. They weren't restaurant people and they failed. They wanted to, so badly, to get out of this building, I think they would have done anything to just leave. But they did want to leave gracefully, so I was able to help them leave gracefully, but I needed them to be out in order for me to be me.

**00:02:16**

And so it took me several years to pull it together. I mean, I was operational in a very short period after you know taking ownership. But it took me several years to really pull it together from the standpoint of beginning to make it feel like me. And that's where some of the earlier ideas of, you know, looking for pieces that would come in here and changing the tone and the colors and just making it feel more like home.

**00:02:56**

And compared to the—the beginning, even when I started I—it was a little hard. You often times walk into cafeterias and you find tabletops that are just hard. You know, there's no cloth and everything slides on the table, you know. And I decided to put, you know, a vinyl cloth on all my tables and match, you know, the—the color scheme for the most part that's in the room. I've changed my cloths over the years, enough times to change the tone of the color in the building. But just to put, you know, a wood on the wall and to, you know, change the paint colors and add artifacts, you know, it keeps your eyes moving. So I try to keep it, I guess you would want to say more of an ambient environment, you know. The screens that are up and they

more or less draw your attention to just advertisements that are continuously rolling. I did have TVs in the earlier years. I took them out, but I'm in the process of putting TVs back.

**00:04:04**

I found that the TVs weren't something that was really needed, but we do and are more or less, you know, in an era now where, you know, you can find something to view even if it's in the palm of your hand so, you know, just an ambient background and maybe just have news scrolling or whatever have you. I'm going to put those back in.

**00:04:26**

But I found my employees too often times drawn to the screens and not paying attention to their work, so that's why I took them out.

**00:04:34**

**RL:** Good plan. You have this twelve-top right in the middle of the room here. And I'm curious about that? Do you get large groups a lot or is that a—people just sit with each other and what happens when they do?

**00:04:47**

**DR:** Right; I want to reflect back to when I served breakfast. I had developed a—a regular crew that I called them, and in some of the pictures that you find hanging on the walls you'll find some of the actual clientele that attended, sometimes daily, but certainly weekly for some of these group gatherings. I had one group that would come, I believe, every Thursday. Some of them might come, you know, every day. And to expound on that everyday thing, I had one gentleman that—that came to this restaurant day in and day out. He would always come for breakfast, eat the same thing. He would sit at the same table, same chair, eat the same thing every

day for breakfast until he got sick. When he got sick and came, he would sit in the same chair, same table, and eat the same thing even when he was sick. We just changed his food.

**00:05:57**

After he got to a point where he couldn't come anymore, then you know we began to lose a little track of him, but that was some of the clientele that would sit at this long table. Along with him at that long table, sometimes on a daily basis, it might be one or two others that would sit around him at breakfast.

**00:06:20**

Now, once a week at this long table there would be a long table of these groups and I always called it The Liars Table because they were fishermen, hunters, they were outdoorsmen. And these were guys they were all—if it was—if it was twelve guys at the table, it might be two of them that wasn't retired. So the rest of these fellows would be retired, having either retired from a career or maybe some of them were previous business owners that might still have some contact you know with their—their business. But for the most part, all retired. They had plenty of time to just sit around and they would tell the biggest lies, and a lot of them, like I said, being outdoorsmen, hunting, fishing tales, you know, it's all kinds of stories. They would sit in here with duck horns and make cattle calls and just—they'd play tricks on one another. And that's some of the group that I expressed some thoughts earlier about the fact that I would have some gifts given to me along the way.

**00:07:28**

Some of the guys, their wives would, you know, maybe bring me in an old painted teapot. I've had an old gourd that was converted to a birdhouse. Just, you know, gifts—I had one of the guys give me a picture of his birddogs. And I've had one of the fellows brought me a saw blade, a cross-cut saw blade. And eventually I took that old cross-cut saw blade and made handles—out

of wheelbarrow handle—myself and hung it on the wall. It's a lot of mementos in here. Gifts, you know, from people and I was able to fashion them and hang them here in a way that I would not only appreciate the gift but, you know, for memory's sake it will always be in here. So that's a lot of what you might see, you know, in here now.

**00:08:23**

The long table generated a lot of reunion kind of feeling for a lot of those guys. Because if they didn't come every week, eventually, you know, all those guys knew that their group would be here, you know, on—on that specific day, so you know if they got to come once every two or three months on that day, they'd know that the group was here.

**00:08:50**

And during that era there was another group that began to build and they had their own table, which is the round table just beyond the long table. The round table—the long table seated anywhere really from eight to twelve and the round table would seat anywhere from six to ten. So the round table though—were all working people, even though they would come almost every day. That number would fluctuate depending on what people's work schedules were. And so we had some very colorful people at that table as well. But I have to say that—that round table got to be a group that I would open for business at six o'clock in the morning—and I already told the story that I would allow for people to come through my kitchen—so on most mornings at 5:40, no later than 5:45 I had the roundtable crew already here that would come through the kitchen. They would come in, sit down, drink coffee if it was ready, and if it wasn't ready, they would push me out of the way and make their own coffee. But those were people that I had gotten to know. They were like family and they felt like this was their home.

**00:10:08**

So my environment was not only me, it was them. It was my house. And they felt comfortable and I—you know, and I felt comfortable with it being my house and they could come into my house and just put their feet up and that's, you know, the kind of environment that I enjoyed having. So they're all lovely people and I think for the most part the fellows that were at this long table, many of them are deceased now. And I know that I've lost several from the round table, but you know they live on, you know, and they'll never be gone.

**00:10:46**

**RL:** Okay; you've got over twenty years in this building and you've described beginning with local customers from the factories and the industrial area here, and then you've added in the clientele has changed and more women have come. It's obviously a mixed race clientele, black and white together. I'm guessing you probably get people from downtown, business people. Who are—who is your clientele now? How does—particularly compared to the beginning and where does this—does Dan's go in the future?

**00:11:26**

**DR:** Well the clientele base is similar. Of course, our industrial environment for the most part has changed, you know, with the growth of the city moving south. It's—it's in that footprint from Broadway to Lafayette, in that footprint to—to make it a rectangle from Broadway to Lafayette and from—from Eighth Avenue to First Avenue, going back toward the river. And that—and that rectangle, the industrial environment, has changed tremendously. But what has grown in that footprint would be the—on the other side of the river, the Titans, the football, the NFL football stadium. We've got a—which is now the AT&T building downtown. We—we watched that grow. We watched what is now the Bridgestone Arena, you know, take part of that

footprint downtown. We've certainly witnessed over the last two years the growth of the new Convention Center, which is taking a huge part of the footprint behind us. So the—the growth of the area has changed our customer base. From that footprint we lost many, many small businesses over the years, but you know we're certainly looking forward to a time when, as this Convention Center, you know, opens, it will also open the streets up fully. As this Convention Center is being built right now there's also an 800-room hotel going right next to it. So that construction is in, you know, it's in that phase right now.

**00:13:21**

There will be other hotels to—to rise around this Convention Center and I'm sure there will be a retail base or an entertainment base in this—in that same general vicinity that's going to grow, you know, out of that—out of that foot—or in that footprint.

**00:13:42**

We—I see the fact that this kind of food is very popular with conventioners and travelers. They want local flavor, not just the franchise name, you know, when they are out and about. They—they, you know, certainly will see the various type restaurants, same names in big cities, you know all around Convention Centers and such. So I've always felt even though we've gone through some tough times, you know, volume-wise now, that as the center opens and the business district continues to push south, if I'm fortunate to still be here then, we should benefit from, you know, just a—an improved number of people that's actually looking for something different.

**00:14:30**

We've certainly proven ourselves, you know, locally as far as the dining public, you know, and now we look forward to capturing, you know, visitors, you know, as they arrive. So I can't say that my future is really—is—is doubtful, but not being the property owner, you know, I

can't speak for, you know, my existence beyond, you know, whatever timeframe. And I just say, "Well it's not in—really in my hands fully and if it works out it works out." I'd still love to be here. You know, it wouldn't change—being here wouldn't too much change how I'm able to think about what I'm doing on any given day. I'm much older today compared to when I started so my energy level is down. I always see myself working at something, but I would like to start thinking more seriously about being on my feet less hours.

**00:15:28**

And so, you know, that's—that's the—the—the brightness for the future I see as one, I would love to be around for, and I'm looking at it, you know—I'm going to go down that road and not the other. You know, so [*Laughs*]—

**00:15:50**

**RL:** Good plan. [*Laughs*]

**00:15:51**

**DR:** Yeah, it is.

**00:15:51**

**RL:** You've been so gracious and you've given me such a huge amount of time in—in a really busy day and I thank you for it. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you feel like we need to talk about? Is there something—?

**00:16:03**

**DR:** I think for the most part we’ve covered it all. You know there were—there was—there was one item. [*Phone Rings*] There’s one item on my menu.

**00:16:15**

**RL:** We’re going to pause again.

**00:16:17**

**[End Dandgures-2 Interview]**

**[Begin Dandgure’s-3 Interview]**

**00:00:02**

**Ronni Lundy:** All right, you’re going to tell me now about your fried cabbage.

**00:00:06**

**Dandgure Robinson:** Interesting—interesting item. I—I have always loved to create, and vegetables per se, fresh vegetables, have always been foods that I enjoy working with because you can get so much flavor out of them. And I love to stir-fry. And so while I’ve stir-fried here many years it’s difficult to really maintain food items to the line if you’re just stir-frying because first of all, it’s hard to determine, you know, what amount and whether or not it’s going to run and they don’t hold well under the heat.

**00:00:51**

And so somewhere in my travels I can remember tasting something that had a very strong cabbage base to it and I thought to myself in my travels that it would be nice—it would be a nice

item to work with in my business. And so I decided somewhere after those travels years ago that I would create a dish out of cabbage and—and I would call it a—a fried cabbage. And so it is not *the* healthiest vegetable dish by any means on the line, but it's served every Wednesday and just the name fried cabbage draws, you know—you know, many—you know, people to ask, "Well, what is it?" You know. "I've never heard of fried cabbage." So without seeing it, you know, what do you think of when you think of fried—? You think of something as being breaded and—or coated in some kind of way.

**00:01:49**

And so this particular dish of course is not—doesn't have any—any bread content in it but it is for the most part stir-fried. And so I did it all the early years myself until gradually I taught, you know, at least two people. The first lady is gone already. That was the first cook, and then I've trained my second cook and she's been doing it for, you know, quite a few years now herself. And so the flavor hasn't changed. The ingredients, you know, portions might change a little bit in it depending on, you know, the day that it's being done. But I can still taste it and get the flavor that I'm looking for with it.

**00:02:32**

So basically I shred the cabbage and within that dish I'm using, you know, peppers and onions. And I use a—a raw bacon. I use—and it's all diced down real small because I don't want the meats to be very, very prominent in it. It's the flavor I'm looking for. I—I use meat, being raw bacon. I use a smoked sausage and ham. You know, just any kind of ham. And they're all diced down real small so when they're stir-fried and you'll see the cabbage, but you can taste the meats and, you know, with the onions and, of course, the seasonings that I use. It's got to have enough garlic in it, you know, to really get the flavor there.

**00:03:19**

But I didn't have to tweak it much from day one to now. I use a little crushed red pepper in it to give it some kick. So I've had to tame my cook's hand from time to time to make sure that it's not too hot. You know, but I've got people that love very, very hot food and then some that can't take much heat at all. So I'm conscious of that and try to prepare—and try to prepare any dishes that I serve that we use any hot peppers in it, you know, to where it's tolerable, you know, if you like spice. If you want it hotter, then you can add either more sauce to it, you know, like a Tabasco or Louisiana or you—if you realize that you can, you know, ask for, you know, hot peppers from the kitchen. We always have jalapenos here, but they are, you know, the prepared jalapenos. They're not fresh. But I always have crushed red pepper or cayenne. I mean, it's just part of our spice rack.

00:04:18

But the fried cabbage was—it's been interesting from day one. You know it's—it's kind of on the same line of—of a specialty item like lemonade, you know, so I've had great success with it and many calls for it. If I served it every day I'd probably, you know, [*Phone Rings*] be successful with it still. But knowing that it's a one-day a week item, you know, that's served on—that's served on Wednesday, people know it's there.

00:04:44

**RL:** I'm coming back on a Wednesday. Okay. Do you serve cornbread with that?

00:04:49

**DR:** Cornbread is served every day.

00:04:51

**RL:** Now how do you make your cornbread?

**00:04:54**

**DR:** We are—I make two versions of cornbread. I have my regular cornbread batter. I use self-rising meal, buttermilk, eggs, and—and oil. And I mix it accordingly. You know, I'm looking for a texture where it will not only bake but fry. So I bake—I bake muffins and I fry the bread. I do fry bread, too. Now in this town people have a—a type of cornbread in a lot of these meat-and-threes that's called hot water cornbread. I don't serve the hot water cornbread, but I do serve a fried bread. So you know mine is—is—is skillet-top-fried. It looks more like a pancake and it cooks like a pancake, but it uses less grease. And so that's the—on any given day you get a—you can get a round muffin or a flatbread or whatever your choice is with that.

**00:05:52**

Twice a week I make a jalapeno cornbread and I believe, if I'm not mistaken, I believe I was the first meat-and-three to really serve a jalapeno cornbread in—in this town. I'm not going to say that with, you know, with all—all knowing of that, but I believe that I was the first one to do it and do it successfully anyway. And our batter has not changed from then to now with the way we make it. I make basically the same batter, but with the other ingredients I'm putting into it, you know, makes it to be that.

**00:06:26**

I do make my own corn mix which is a mix of corn and jalapenos that have been processed down and that's a batch that I make to go into the batter and then I add, you know, some other items, like cheese and such, to, you know, to give it the moisture that I'm looking for and the bite, so—.

**00:06:47**

**RL:** Now when you were talking about the self-rising I didn't hear you mention sugar. Where do you fall on that line?

**00:06:54**

**DR:** I don't use sugar in my cornbread. I—I grew up loving cornbread as a kid and I believe mama always put sugar in it—at least I can remember tasting cornbread that tasted kind of sweet. And then I can—having worked in the South for many years, I want to say North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, I can remember cornbread being baked, you know, by, you know, ladies that—that used more sugar. And when—and since we're talking about sugar, I also want to mention that many home-style operations, depending on the background and seasoned cooks, they use sugar in their vegetables and I don't use any sugar.

**00:07:40**

I don't like to taste green beans or turnip greens or various types of greens or cabbage or whatever have you that's got sugar in it. So I figure if you want sugar you can get sugar and add it to it. I even see people get dried beans like pinto beans or whatever and then they add sugar to it. I've watched many cooks in years past put sugar in those dishes when they're cooking them, but I prefer not to and never have. So my cornbread is sugarless. [*Laughs*]

**00:08:10**

**RL:** Good. All right. Do you use a lot of fresh vegetables here?

**00:08:14**

**DR:** I use a fair amount. Of course I mean it—it really depends on my staffing as to, you know, like during the season of squashes and, you know, the zucchinis and—and yellows, I make a regular squash casserole, you know, weekly. But as I move through the seasons, oftentimes my staff might not be to where I can bring those, you know, those bushels in and actually stand there and wash and slice and—and do that when I can buy the exact product that's already been processed, you know, but it's already been cleaned and sliced. And so I'm just basically taking that product and then I'm turning it into a squash dish or, you know, whether it's a buttered squash or whether it's a casserole.

**00:09:02**

I use a lot of green peppers, a lot of onions, a fair amount of tomatoes. All the cabbage is fresh, fresh celery, carrots. The—the—the vegetables that are—that are very popular here, like green beans and—and it seems like that's it for the most part. Corn, we don't use fresh corn. But the corn that we serve every day is what I call a country style corn which is similar to what a—maybe some of the more successful home-style meat-and-three type operations use—may term as a fried corn. And I don't serve a fried corn because it's not a fresh corn that creates it. It has the starch in it and all that. I use a whole kernel corn but I do bring it in—in twenty-pound bulks; from that I pull, you know, what I need to prepare what I'm looking for. And that corn is just as fresh as fresh can be. It's just lacking—it's lacking the—it's lacking the cutting it from the cob. That's, you know—so it's a labor, you know, decision.

**00:10:25**

We serve a fair amount of mashed potatoes every day and those are all fresh potatoes. My potatoes, of course, it's an iffy thing. I don't like to run out of potatoes, but I can't do anything with the potatoes when they're left, so I end up, you know, losing, you know, a—a fair amount of potatoes every day.

00:10:45

**RL:** So you have to come early for mashed potatoes?

00:10:47

**DR:** Well I think for the most part we've gotten beyond running out. But like I just mentioned, we end up throwing away, so I don't like to—you know, I mentioned much earlier in the conversation I don't like to waste food, but it does come down to being able to keep your food fresh. So it's not a whole lot I can do with leftover mashed potatoes, so—

00:11:08

**RL:** [*Laughs*]

00:11:09

**DR:** And I'm very creative. In my early years I could take mashed potatoes and—and do great things with them for breakfast, you know. I mean, and that's what a lot of home-style operations do. You learn how to turn your food and produce items, you know, like I say, you'll find some of the very intelligent twenty-four-hour operations, like truck stops, they can take food that, you know—they can put food in categories that you got your fresh food and then you got your remake. And you can take mashed potatoes and make all kinds of casseroles or fried potatoes out of them and do things on the grill.

00:11:44

I've even done it in here for my employees. I'll take the mashed potatoes and chill them and get them cold and bring them back the next morning and I can take those potatoes out and

throw some lard on the grill or something with, you know, with some onions and—and cheese and—and create like a—you know, like a fried potato casserole or something. But I've—I've never served it. I've just, you know, treated with the staff. But the potato peelings, we'll—I even take the potato peelings and fry the potato peelings on the grill with onions just like potatoes, like fried potatoes, but I'll just take the peelings that we peeled the potatoes. And I'll—I'll fry the potato peelings and with onions and I'll throw the peelings into the leftover mashed potatoes and create a—a dish that the employees love, so—.

00:12:31

**RL:** That sounds great. I want to come—I want to come for employee breakfast. *[Laughs]*

00:12:35

**DR:** *[Laughs]*

00:12:37

**RL:** Again, I want to thank you again so much. You have been so generous with your time. I really appreciate it. Anything else or are we done?

00:12:45

**DR:** I think we're done. I enjoyed it too and I am certainly thankful that I've been considered, you know, for this particular interview and would love to, at some point in time, you know, hear the end-result.

00:12:58

**RL:** I'll give you—I'll send you a copy.

**00:13:00**

**[End Dandgure's-3 Interview]**