

CRAIG BLONDIS
Central BBQ – Memphis, TN

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Interviewer: Rien Fertel for the Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
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[Begin Craig Blondis-Central Interview]

00:00:01

Rien Fertel: Test; okay I am here with Craig Blondis at Central Barbecue. This is Rien Fertel from the Southern Foodways Alliance. We are at 2249 Central Avenue in Memphis, Tennessee. Mr. Blondis, will you please introduce yourself; tell me your name and your birth date?

00:00:19

Craig Blondis: Yes; my name is Craig Blondis. I was born September 18, 1962.

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RF: And what is your role here at Central Barbecue in Memphis?

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CB: I am Managing Partner. I oversee day-to-day operations.

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RF: And when was Central Barbecue opened or founded?

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CB: It was April 1, 2001.

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RF: Okay; so—

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CB: I'm struggling when it was; it was '01.

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RF: So—

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CB: Seven years this April, so yeah—no; '02—'02. *[Laughs]*

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RF: Okay; so it's '02. We've established '02. April 1st that's a funny day to open a restaurant.

Was that a—?

00:01:05

CB: To be honest with you it was on Good Friday which was like March 28th, so we just say April 1st to make it easy, but you know it's kind of like a running joke because the gentleman I used to work for said I was crazy for going into the barbecue business and so that's the—the whole crux of April 1st. It's fool—show them who the fool really is. *[Laughs]*

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RF: So what did you do before you went into the barbecue business?

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CB: Pretty much when I dropped out of college I decided, you know, whatever I'm going to do I'm going to be successful at it and it was—I started out busing tables at TGI Friday's here in

Memphis, so I've been in the restaurant and bar business ever since the early '80s. And my last job before this I was managing Garibaldi's Pizza for Mike Garibaldi over on Yates.

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RF: But this was the first that you owned and kind of—?

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CB: Yes, yes; this is the first restaurant that I've owned and started from the ground up, and then it was a money experience to say the least.

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RF: Okay; well let's—let's talk about—I guess your learning experience in—in Memphis and with barbecue. You—you're not originally from here; tell us where you're originally from and when you moved to Memphis and about your early years in Memphis.

00:02:18

CB: Okay; I was born in Oakland, California and grew up in the Bay Area and moved to Memphis in 1971. I went to school here in Memphis and went to UT for a couple years and came back and went to U of M and decided college wasn't my strong point. So I started off in the restaurant business and been going to TGI Friday's busing tables, washing dishes, worked my way up through that organization and worked for corporate, private—a little bit of everything.

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RF: So you have your own restaurant now; what—let’s talk about what you remember about barbecue in Memphis. Do you remember eating at any restaurants as—as a teenager, any favorite places, places that your—your family would go to or maybe you cooked in your backyard or with other families?

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CB: Well the first barbecue restaurant I ever went to in Memphis when we got here was Leonard’s Barbecue on Bellevue. And there was another place my dad used to take us to a lot which is Baratta’s, which used to be on the corner of Park and Highland. Other than that I mean my—as a kid growing up my favorite place to eat barbecue is the Cozy Corner over on North Parkway and you know that’s the place where I ate barbecue. I didn’t eat anywhere else just because that was the first I ever had and I thought that was what barbecue was and nobody else’s was any good, so—. Now it’s Central Barbecue. [*Laughs*]

00:03:47

RF: Okay; can I ask just one question about Baretta’s ‘cause I’m unfamiliar with it. I know the other two. Do you remember anything about it besides the location, like who owned it or—?

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CB: I don’t remember who owned it, but Baretta’s was a—a car hop, drive up kind of like a Sonic is now. You know not—minus the roller skates, but they would bring the food out to you; they also had a dine-in area. It just—it was a part of old Memphis you know from the ‘40s, ‘50s, ‘60s, kind of like Coletta’s.

00:04:14

RF: But you would eat the barbecue in your car?

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CB: Yeah; uh-hm, kind of just like going to Sonic but they'd bring it out to you.

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RF: Well okay; well you opened this in 2002. You have a—a founding partner in the business?

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CB: Yes; Roger Sapp is my founding partner. When we first opened he was employed at Wurzburg as the Chief Comptroller. He recently is retired and taken on a management position at the—our second location over on Summer Avenue but the first three years—four years it was pretty much all on my own, you know as far as that. The way we came about was both Roger and I had been cooking competitively on barbecue teams and he had sold one of his rental properties and didn't want to pay any capital gains taxes, so he bought the property that we're at here on Central and asked me if I wanted to go in with him and open the restaurant. I'm like okay; no problem. What kind of restaurant do you want to try? He said, well why don't we try our hand at barbecue? I go okay; that's not a bad idea 'cause John Wells used to be right down the street here by CBU and he had a goldmine. So we said well we'll take the chance and see what happens. And that's where we're at, you know. The barbecue we serve here is what I tell everybody is—it's competition style barbecue. It's what I serve to a judge at a cooking contest and that's what sets us apart—apart excuse me—from most other barbecue restaurants is we are serving more of

a competitive style barbecue. And that's how we became a restaurant and we're going to keep true to our roots and go from there.

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RF: When did you start doing competitions and with whom and what teams?

00:06:02

CB: Okay; when I—the first team I was a member of and helped on was Red Eyed Smokers back, I think it was 1981 or '82 was the first contest I was in down at Memphis in May back when there was no running water, no electricity; you had to bring generators in and bring your own water in and I've watched that grow from the first contest they had was inside a tent.

00:06:29

RF: Those were the early years, the early '80s?

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CB: The very early years; I think '79 or '80 was the first year for Memphis in May. Don't quote me on the exact year but—and I know Roger, he cooked on a team for years called the Hog-a-Holics which they are—they were a group of professionals—doctors, lawyers, that type—they cooked all over. They gave and went with Fed Ex over to China or Bangkok or somewhere in a competition they had over there, so you know they—they—as far as the old school I mean you mention their name and a lot of the older people that have been on the barbecue circuit would know exactly who you're talking about. So between the two of us you know you—you're talking 30 to 50 years of barbecue experience between the two of us in competition. So it's—that—that

helps out a lot too. So you know that's where you hone your skills, come up with your rubs, your spices, your sauces—that type stuff.

00:07:25

RF: I haven't spoken to anyone yet who—who was on a competition team. How—how does it work; is there a—is there a leader and—and a bunch of people working for the leader?

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CB: Yeah; you would have—well you want to call them your Pit Boss or your Head Cook and then you have subordinates underneath him and you know everybody has assigned duties. You know you might have—one person's job may be staying up all night keeping the fire going, you know; another person might be prepping the meat; another, you know—and then when you're actually cooking for the contest that's when the Head Cook steps in and/or supervises or does it himself.

00:08:02

RF: So it's like a restaurant kitchen; there is a Head Chef that makes the calls?

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CB: Yes; there is and it's his way is *the* way so you know it's pretty much—I know with our cooking teams in the past it's usually been myself, Roger or one or two other people and we'll—we'll take turns who is going to be in charge but for the most part, yeah; it's just—it operates just like a kitchen in a restaurant.

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RF: And you competed at Memphis in May for a few years—for a long time?

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CB: Memphis in May you know they have their entire circuit of contests all over the—the region. I know that we've cooked in like Tunica. We go down to Helena for the what I still call King Biscuit Blues Festival, but thanks to a certain entrepreneur here in Memphis ruined that so you can't use that name anymore, but the Arkansas Heritage and Blues Festival. We've traveled to Missouri, you know Kentucky—anywhere—Alabama, Knoxville, you know wherever there's a contest. If people want to cook in it we'll go, so—. You know pretty much everywhere, and like I said, like Roger went to Hog-a-Holics. They had a little more travel because of the fact that they had been around a lot longer than the team I was on. And I think for the last—before we opened the restaurant we—Roger's team had disbanded and we started a Dutch international team, which basically it's a bunch of our soccer buddies.

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RF: With—with you and Roger were on that team?

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CB: Uh-hm; running the team and it was an easy way to get into Memphis in May was because if you became an international team you pretty much got in automatically and we didn't cook in that many contests like a lot of people that cook 20—30 contests a year and then once you open the restaurant you don't have time for that. This is my contest.

00:09:49

RF: Right; where did you get that name—the Dutch?

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CB: Actually the name of the team was *Cujis Van Dordenburg* which was Pigs from Holland or Dordenburg which is a city in Holland where one of our friends and one of the founders of the team was born and raised before he came to Memphis and—I think in the ‘70s. So we just used that and made it easy.

00:10:13

RF: Okay; and does—does he cook barbecue at home? Does he—is he in barbecue culture—besides the competitions, besides the—?

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CB: I—I don't know if—I wouldn't say Hans is exactly what you would call a barbecue aficionado. You know he was more of the social director if you know what I mean. *[Laughs]* But I mean everybody has their role so you know entertainment, this—you know so I've never seen him cook.

00:10:41

RF: *[Laughs]*

00:10:41

CB: Let's put it that way. *[Laughs]* Now he does make a mean sauté if you like that but you know—.

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RF: But there's no award for that at the Barbecue Fest?

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CB: Well there might be in the *Anything But Category*, so they have a lot of different categories. Like in Memphis in May in the big one down on the River you can only cook in one category. You either do ribs, shoulder, or whole hog. Then they have all the other contests like sauce—anything but seafood, anything but beef, so they have other categories to allow more people to be creative with their cooking skills to—I guess to show off their cooking skills is what I would say.

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RF: Do you remember any interesting stories from the competition circuit—any important wins or tragedies or—?

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CB: I can remember one; the first time we cooked a whole hog we were cooking out at the Lakeland Cooking Contest and I was pulling the rack out of the grill to pull the hog out and the middle two grates dropped so my pig fell into the pit and split in half. And I was like oh great; this is just going to be par for the course. But the guys that were trying to tell me how to cook a hog, I beat them, so to me that was a personal victory. I was—it was better than coming in first place because they came in dead last.

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RF: Were you able to save that hog or you had to start a new hog?

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CB: No; we saved it. It was already cooked. It was at the end—at the end when you were presenting your meat to the judge, like for example, like when you cook—when you're judge—at Memphis in May you have two criteria. You have on-site judging and blind judging. The blind—you put it in a box; you don't know who is going to judge it—that's pretty much self explanatory. Onsite you actually present to a judge—you have to communicate with them, tell them how you cooked—basically you BS.

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RF: And they come to your site, your tent or—?

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CB: Yes; uh-hm, they come to each booth. They—they are allowed I believe it's 15 minutes per booth. Basically you give them a tour and show them your cooking and explain to them what process you use and then you serve them. And they—you know there are different criteria they look for, the—how well the meat is cooked, the tenderness of the meat, does it fall off the bone, etcetera and those are all stuff that they learn in judging school which there's actually a school that you have to go to—to be certified to be able to be a judge for a cooking contest.

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There is another circuit called the Kansas City Circuit which is all blind judging. There is no onsite judging in Kansas City and those are the two main circuits—that's it. Memphis in May which according to—if I'm—if I've been told correctly; this past year was the last year that Memphis in May Cooking Society is in. It has been disbanded and they've reformed as the Memphis Barbecue Network, so—and you'll notice there will be a lot of changes next year in the cooking contest to the point that they're cutting the number of teams down. They want to make it more of a true international cooking contest. They're going to do a by-invitation only which is like the Jack Daniels Cook-Off in Lynchburg, Tennessee is that way. You have to win a KCB Contest to even get your name put in the hat to be able to cook in those. So you know it's—it's—it's evolving. Every—every time you turn around there's something new.

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RF: One more question about this; what—you no longer to compete? You don't have time in May or do you still?

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CB: No, no; we've cut down. There's probably two contests we do every year no matter what and that's Memphis in May and the Arkansas Heritage and Blues Festival. Without a doubt we do those. We used to do probably about eight or ten a year but with two restaurants you know it's just—I don't have time to cook. You know my partner and I both talked about possibly sponsoring some other people to do it and carrying on the tradition so there's,, you know that option, but no—nothing like we used to do.

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RF: And so do you still do them under the Central Barbecue name? Can you do that?

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CB: Yes; well we call it Central Smokers is the name of our team but yeah you can. I mean when you go to like Memphis in May you're going to see like Big Bob Gibson which is a very well known barbecue chain. You've got—I mean I'm trying to think of some of the other guys that all have restaurants that—that basically they've retired from running their restaurants and this is what they do so they promote their restaurant through competitive cooking, which that's the main reason we still do it because it is promoting your—your business and staying true to the reason why you started in the first place.

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RF: Well let's talk about the competition style barbecue that you do here at Central Barbecue. How would you describe the—the pork that you serve? What kinds of cuts do you do; how would you describe it?

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CB: Well, we use a whole shoulder bone-in, shank bone-in. As far as the ribs we use a loin back rib which is probably what I would call—I tell people it's the Cadillac of ribs, because it's—it's the best cut as far as ribs. You—your St. Louis cut is from the belly side of the pig and the loin back is from the backside—less fat and more meat. We use whole turkey breast; we'll use whole chickens, brisket you know—we—we cook a variety of meats. All of our meats we rub with spices and let them marinade overnight so we use a dry cooking process as opposed to a wet cooking process. That's more the competitive side as opposed to most restaurants which cook

wet style—and my personal opinion on that is, if you're cooking wet style it's basically to cover up the fact that you're not cooking in a true barbecue style. You know you can always just take some ribs and parboil them and put sauce on them and throw them in the oven and call it barbecue but there's no true smoking or slow cooking involved in it. Whereas ours, you know like the ribs take about five hours to cook and about 225—250 degrees. Shoulders, we usually put them in about 4:00 or 5:00 in the afternoon and take them off about 6:00 or 7:00 in the morning. So you know that's a lengthy process; the type of cookers we use and that is a gas rotisserie convection style that has a wood chamber in the back so as it heats up the pit it burns wood to fill it with smoke throughout the cooking process.

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RF: And it's rotisserie; it actually turns the meat?

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CB: Yeah; uh-hm, a giant rotisserie.

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RF: Who is the maker of this—this—?

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CB: It's Southern Pride and they're out of Cape Girardeau, Missouri and I would say the other big company that does rotisserie style is, oh excuse me—Southern Pride is in Illinois; we use Old Hickory out of Cape Girardeau—am I bad, but those are the two main companies that provide gas type smokers and rotisserie. You have other ones. There's like in Texas there's a company

called JR's and they're basically a rotisserie convection but it is not a gas-fired. It is strictly wood charcoal but the same principle, the same rotating process, smoke—so pretty much aside from the heat source it's the same.

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RF: So you—you say it's a gas-fired rotisserie. There's a lot of wood outside; can you explain how it works and what kind of wood that is and how it works?

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CB: Right; on the outside of the pit you've got a door—obviously it opens up. That's your wood chamber or smoke chamber—what I call it. You have a giant igniter furnace that comes across that chamber and ignites the wood as it's heating the pit. And the top of it—it's a round cylinder about 18 inches in diameter and the top there's holes cut in it for the smoke to come out. So basically the wood is strictly for smoke; it's not for heat. So the gas is what you're using to keep the—the pit at a constant temperature; the wood is strictly for smoking.

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RF: And what type of wood is it?

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CB: We use predominantly hickory or pecan; those are the two that we use. They're very similar; pecan is a little lighter as far as smoke. It doesn't have quite as much of a bite to it as a hickory does, but you know there are some people that swear by using fruit woods, like apple, cherry, peach—they're a lot subtler and they don't have as much flavor in the smoke. It's—so

that—for that reason alone that’s why we choose to use hickory and pecan. I know that if you go to other regions like Texas they use a lot of white oak mixed in with hickory. It’s just—it gives it a whole different flavor to the meat, so it’s—pecan, hickory—that’s the way to go.

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RF: Uh-hm; the—the dry rub that you use here on the meat is it something that you developed specifically when you opened the restaurant? Was it something you had been working on for a while and that carried over?

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CB: Yeah; well the rib rub is one that Roger’s cooking team had created probably 20-some years ago. The rest of the rubs were—I developed when we were getting ready to open the restaurant just by, you know, researching different recipes and stuff and trying to figure out what works, so aside from the rib rub it was all created when we opened the restaurant or right before. Nothing that I had been playing with, you know, ‘cause most of them it just—most rubs are pretty simple—chili powder, cayenne pepper, salt, brown sugar and then whatever—ever excuse me—what other ingredients you want to put in there. I like using a lot of earthy spices like cumin, coriander, allspice, stuff that gives it a distinct flavor.

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RF: And you—you said this is kind of the true style of barbecue doing this rub and—and the smoking. Is that—do you mean Memphis or do you mean southern barbecue? What makes it—what—what’s true here? Is it—is it local true; is it old-style barbecue true?

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CB: That's—

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RF: Start an argument if you want—.

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CB: Well no; that's—I mean—as a matter of fact it's—it's funny because there the big argument is Memphis style barbecue is supposedly dry style barbecue. Throughout the world that's what we know—are known for. Now when you come to Memphis you're going to have people that are going to argue both ways. They're going to say no; wet style is it. Dry style is it. To be honest; there is—it's—and I don't know how to say this without it sounding racist but I'm not—black barbecue is wet—white style, dry; that's the way it's been forever and that—that is the difference between barbecue in my opinion. It's not regional. It's—were you brought up cooking meat with sauce. You know I mean you think about the early days of barbecue. What was it? It was the worst piece of meat that anybody could possibly eat and they had to determine a way to be able to cook it and make it edible. So they slow cooked it and, you know, I mean I've seen articles on it describing the difference between ethnic background and—and how it relates to the different styles of barbecue that there are. I don't think there is any wrong barbecue; I think barbecue in general is good—wet or dry if you cook it properly. That's the main thing.

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But I will argue that dry—dry style is Memphis style barbecue. I mean I will hold true to it; that's—that's how I feel and that's what it is in my opinion. That's what sets us apart from most of the other barbecue restaurants in town as well. You know a lot of them will say they'll

serve you dry ribs and basically all it is—is a rib that they cooked and they take a mop with some water and sprinkle paprika on top of it and call it dry. No; that’s not our style. You know we do strict spices and everything and marinade overnight and slow cook them. You don’t need sauce with my barbecue—with any of my meat. You’re going to taste the smoke and you’re going to taste the spices. It’s going to have good flavor all the way through. My whole opinion is sauce is meant to be an accompaniment and I’ve—I’ve said to that and I’ll stick to that ‘til the day I die.

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RF: Well I want to ask some questions about your sauces here but first is—is there—is there one central person or figure that you consider taught you barbecue or was it a long process?

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CB: It was a long, long process—trial and error. I would say as far as you know different recipes and—and stuff of that nature, I would say Stephen Raichlen, I believe that’s how he pronounces his name—he’s had three or four books out, you know, and when I was getting ready to open it’s where I kind of embellished some of his recipes out of his books and that’s—the—I would say out of all of them he would probably be the one—not necessarily the actual cooking but everything else involved in it, the spices, the sauces, the fact that you know like what we use—Schreiber’s Spices which is probably one of the more expensive spices but it’s a quality spice. You can you know the—everything about what I’m doing is more about quality than it is trying to cut corners and save money by using an inferior product just to keep the profitability there. I’m not about that.

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RF: How do you spell the name of that spice company and where is it?

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CB: It's—there out of Pompano Beach, Florida and I believe is S-c-h-r-i-e-b-e-r-s [sic]; most restaurants—most that have a chef who knows what he's doing, if you walk in their kitchen you're going to see Schreiber's Spices in it. I mean it's—they—they're national but you know they—they do all my blends for me, you know. I used to do it in-house and then I had problems with consistency because somebody might not know how to read a measuring cup properly so I just said okay instead of buying all the spices and mixing it myself here's my recipes; please you know—and we go through a lot of spice. That's a—a large expense that we have is spices. I mean it's probably about \$2,000—\$3,000 a month in spices alone between the two restaurants yeah.

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RF: Well let's talk about your sauces. What kinds of sauces do you have—a hot and a mild?

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CB: We have a hot, a mild, a mustard base, a vinegar base, and the whole idea behind that is barbecue is regional. People are used to different sauces. I didn't want to alienate everybody and say—because when you go into most barbecue restaurants you have one or two choices and that's it. It's my sauce and—or nothing. I didn't want to be that kind of a person, so that's why I have four different sauces because somebody from Carolina wants a vinegar or mustard base—I've got it for them.

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RF: Do you get—well here's kind of a—a question that's coming from personal experience. My—my friend took me here and he said you'll like this place when he took me here three or four years ago 'cause you could try all the different southern sauces—even the sauces that traditionally aren't served in Memphis or Western Tennessee. And I enjoyed them; I tried the—the mustard and the vinegar based but he wouldn't do it 'cause he's a traditionalist. **[Laughs]** He just wanted me to eat them. Do you find that Memphis people are apt to try those sauces or want to or that they—they will only stay with those kind of tomato(ey) Memphis sauces?

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CB: Traditional—the—it was very hard for me to get people to try different sauces. I had to basically beg them to do it and tell them they are—especially the mustard and the vinegar you know. And like you say a lot of people are traditionalist; they're either going to do a mild or a hot. You know for example, my mild sauce is more of—I would call it a traditional across the board barbecue sauce. It—it's something that you would find in Kansas City; you'd find it in the South—not necessarily out West—Texas, Arizona, Oklahoma; they're more of a—a lighter vinegar based sauce. So you know and my hot sauce is a bourbon and Tabasco® based barbecue sauce. You get the taste of the bourbon and you get the heat form the Tabasco® afterwards which is not a traditional hot style barbecue sauce. Most people would just take their mild sauce and spice—doctor it up to make it hot. So and then the vinegar is just that; it's a vinegar based sauce. We use apple cider vinegar and apple cider are the two main ingredients in it and then the mustard base is just what it sounds like. It's a sauce made with mustard instead of ketchup. And you know I finally have educated people like my smoked turkey; the mustard sauce on smoked turkey is out of this world. So you know as—as time has gone on people have started to learn

that there—you know sauces are just like anything else in a restaurant you know. If you have a good saucier guy you're going to have good—you know that's—that's what people tell me that if I were in a kitchen that's what I would be—a saucier guy 'cause I like making sauces to put on top of meats, you know or to the side. And it's like anything from a cilantro based sauce for a brisket to you know the—I've done—one I used guava and roasted habaneras and made a Caribbean style. So you know it's—it's—to me that's what makes it.

00:28:20

RF: Is this at home these—these other sauces or—or here?

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CB: I've done them at home and here. I've done them where I tried for a while—I wanted to do a sauce of the month but it just gets—trying to keep up with it, it's really hard and then I don't have anywhere to put it out in the dining room 'cause I only have room for my four main sauces. So you know it's playing around; I do it more—more during contests as you know like I was explaining about the *Anything But Category*. I'll do some exotic sauces to go on stuff like a smoked sea bass with a—with like that cilantro—cilantro on top or even the guava.

00:28:59

RF: Do—do you think the—the reason that you have these non-traditional Memphis—non-Memphis traditional sauces is because of your travels?

00:29:09

CB: Well partially travels and the fact that people aren't—didn't grow up here—transplants you know. I mean people grow up in different regions; they get like me you know I'm born in Oakland and came to Memphis. That was a big culture shock you know, so it—travels yes give you ideas but for the most part it was just because I didn't want people—I know not everybody is a Memphian so they're going to have their idea of what barbecue is. You can get it here, kind of like Central Barbecue. We were tossing it around calling it Barbecue Central, so you know it was—I—I just say it's travels, yes to an extent, like the hot sauce. When I was in Texas I had some that was you know—and I was like man, I got to find this recipe. So yeah, 'cause then any time I travel I—I got to stop at least one or two barbecue places. And my wife is sick of it.

[Laughs]

00:30:07

RF: Do you still go out and eat barbecue here in Memphis or—or maybe do you cook barbecue or smoked meat at home?

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CB: Well I'll—I'll cook at home and I do go out occasionally and if I do I go one place—Cozy Corner and that's it. Like the 4th of July I cooked some beef ribs in the backyard. I don't mind it; it's just it's—unless you're you know—to me barbecue is about social. You slowly cook a meat hanging out and having a good time with family and friends and drinking beer or whatever; that's what barbecuing is all about.

00:30:41

RF: Well you—you brought up beef ribs. How hard or easy it to find beef—beef ribs in Memphis, Tennessee? I've never seen them and never heard of them here?

00:30:48

CB: There's one restaurant here in town that does beef ribs and they do a good job. I will give them their props and that's the Barbecue Shop on Madison. They're the only people that really do beef ribs. I've played around with it; it's just by the time you're done cooking them there's no meat on them. It's—it's labor intensive and you don't get a lot of product for your money and they you know—a slab of beef ribs is going to cost exactly the same as a slab of pork ribs and you're going to have mostly bone. Unless you want it for your dogs I don't recommend it. You know and it's just—that's—you're in the Pork Capital of America. You're going to get much beef here you know and that's—that's something like my brisket. I had never cooked a beef brisket 'til I opened this restaurant. I took me almost a year to perfect cooking a brisket to make it come out right and that was just trial and error just like anything else.

00:31:41

RF: What sauce do you suggest go with the brisket if any at all of your four sauces?

00:31:46

CB: I like—I personally like the hot sauce with the brisket and then if you want something a little sweeter I recommend the vinegar base. Now any of them I recommend on the side; don't put it on your meat. Try it without and, you know, I have to spend half my time when I get out of town people coming in—which quite a bit the last couple years as I've become more known through internet; most people that have been coming in say you know I put it in my GPS and it

sends me to you guys. I'm like Garmin; thank you, you know. **[Laughs]** I appreciate the free advertising. So, you know, and you have—you have to take the time to explain to them you know the whole principle and thought process behind our style of cooking and everything. And once they do, they—they love it you know the fact they can try different sauces and—and different meats.

00:32:36

RF: Well I mean you're—for a recent store you've gotten a lot of acclaim both in the City and outside. A lot of people I talk to you name you as—as a favorite restaurant here in the City; why do you think that is?

00:32:48

CB: Well **[Laughs]** it's the competition style barbecue for one. It sets me apart from everybody else. Two, the consistency and the quality—those three things right there will make you know ten-fold; that's one of you know—that's the main thing I've learned through being in the restaurant business—if you can control, well let's just say consistency and quality, if you can control that, you will have repeat customers. That's like I've always told anybody. If I get you in the door one time I know you're coming back. It's kind of like Curtis Mayfield Pusher-Man. I'll give you a free taste the first time and then—then I'm—then I got you hooked. So you know and I joke with people; I tell them that. But that to me—that's what sets us apart from anybody else in town is you know most restaurants—barbecue restaurants you go to they do one thing right. The rest of it's—shew you go there for that one thing. My restaurant—everything is done right; there is nothing you're going to get out of my restaurant that isn't consistent. And if it is my customers know they've got—I give them my business card, my cell phone number on there;

they call me and tell me which is good too because they enjoy it enough to let me know. You know, most people are afraid to tell somebody when something is wrong. You can't rectify a situation if you don't know; so you know I'm—I'm blessed in that area because my customers really are looking out for me and I couldn't tell you why. From day one it's been that way.

00:34:21

RF: How would you describe your customer base, your clientele?

00:34:25

CB: It's across the board. You've got everything from high school kids, senior citizens, black, white, Hispanic; you know it's—it's all the way across the board. I mean you can't nail it down and say okay well my—my target market is 30 to 45 because that's not true. I mean I'm—I do a lot of caterings for drug reps that take food to doctors' offices and once they've done that then the doctors start saying well if you're bringing me food I want—I want Central Barbecue. And I think a lot of it is just—also community involvement has a lot to do with it. I give back to the community a lot more than most restaurants will, you know. I do a lot of free stuff; volunteer—I volunteer. I do stuff for St. Jude, the community radio station, I do volunteer for them on their events; I raise money for them by vending for them and give them all the profits. You know it's—I believe that you have to give back to the community you know and it will come back. It's kind of like do unto others as you want them to do unto you—the Golden Rule. That's kind of how I run my business.

00:35:34

RF: Can—can I ask a few more questions? I want to talk about the local—local community; this neighborhood Central Avenue; I believe it's called Cooper Young and from what I understand of the history of this neighborhood which is about five miles east of downtown Memphis—is that it's newly revitalized. There's a bunch of new shops and restaurants and bars and you're kind of—.

00:36:00

CB: A little off the beaten path for what is called Cooper Young which is maybe a mile from here. We're on the edge of it; Central Avenue is the cutoff on the north side for Cooper Young and I would say southern on the Southside Parkway and I would go as far as McLean and maybe a little further west, and yeah 15 years ago you wouldn't be caught dead in this neighborhood. I mean it was—all the houses were getting run down you know, and then you'd have Orange Mound, you know everybody is going to make excuses about demographics, but, you know, you look at—you've got Central Gardens to the west of me; you've got Chickasaw Gardens to the east of me—two of the richest neighborhoods in the City of Memphis within a mile of my restaurant, so you—you—you know. Cooper Young and it's—and it's coming back because people—there are no houses in Central Gardens, so if there's no houses there what do you do? You move to the next neighborhood right that—that butts up to it. But yeah, but Cooper Young is the—the restaurants; you've got a lot of stuff going on. It's like Overton Square used to be in the '70s and early '80s. It was the place to go before you had all the corporate restaurants, bars—that type stuff; it was all centrally located in one area and that's what Cooper Young is now. You have I would say one—probably a dozen restaurants within a half-mile radius of each other. You have shops, so and—and it's a young progressive type part of town. It's more—I don't want to say beat but you know—.

00:37:39

RF: But it's hipper?

00:37:40

CB: Yeah; it's—young people want to live in Midtown. It's always been that way. Even when I moved back in the '80s when I dropped out of school you know, housing was cheaper in Midtown and it was just a lot more—you didn't have the suburbia thinking process in Midtown and you still don't. You know, you see people walking their dogs with their kids out walking—going down the sidewalk. You don't see that out in suburbia, so, you know, it's—it's—. Economically it's come a long way and it's still growing. You know they have their Festival every year. There's always something going on, so it's—it's—and as a matter of fact, I live—I bought my house in Cooper Young. I, you know, when I opened the restaurant, a year later I bought my house. I'm a mile and a half from work. I can walk if I had to, you know, and that's another—you know the thought process it's more liberal thinkers in Midtown as opposed to other parts of town.

00:38:36

RF: And does the—the kind of the employee uniform work into that? I see they're all wearing tie-dye. Are they encouraged to wear tie-dye? Are—are all the Central Barbecue—?

00:38:48

CB: That is their uniform.

00:38:49

RF: Okay; that is their uniform and I see when you walk in the door here it says *welcome; have a pork-er-ific day; love the hippies*. Is that—does that—that tie-in?

00:38:58

CB: That ties into it; yeah. There again we—we have fun here and—and people you know some people go well what—what’s up with the tie-dyes and stuff you know and I’ve kind of played it off two ways. I tell them one, I’m from California originally—born in the early ‘60s. Two, the real reason is because it hides the barbecue sauce. You can have a filthy shirt and nobody will know you’re dirty. But it—and it does tie into it; it’s the whole Midtown deal you know the tie-dyes, the hippies, you know. My brother when we first opened, he’s a die-hard hippie, you know, and moved out to Santa Fe to give you an idea of what kind of a hippie he is. He—he was also instrumental in the tie-dye part of it ‘cause you know he followed Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead around for years and, you know, always wore tie-dyes and long hair, but at least he bathed, you know, and didn’t wear patchouli oil, so that was a plus. But yeah; it’s—it’s a Midtown attitude and it’s—it’s played very well. People know it because—you know they go there’s the tie-dye barbecue, you know—liberal.

00:40:06

RF: And tell me about your second location; you’ve just opened a second?

00:40:10

CB: The second location in November will be two years and we purchased an old Red Lobster, so that gives you an idea of how big it is. I mean this one here on Central seats about 50 people;

you can take this building and put it inside the kitchen at my location at Summer—that's how big it is. So we have a lot more room over there; we do a lot more catering out of there. You've got a 200-seat dining room so, you know, it's—it's the same—the atmosphere is not quite the same because you know it was setup as a Red Lobster. You can't see the guys in the kitchen. You know when you come in here that's half of it; my employees entertain the people while they're waiting in line, so you know we—we have concessions. Over there you don't have that. But you have more parking and you get in and out and you can actually sit there for an hour and not having somebody standing over your shoulder wanting a table.

00:40:58

RF: What—what are your future plans?

00:41:01

CB: [*Laughs*]

00:41:02

RF: Do you want more growth, franchising—?

00:41:04

CB: Well, we of course, I always want to grow. I want to have more control over it; as a matter of fact I had a gentleman the other day from Chicago come down and say I really want to open a Central Barbecue in Chicago. Well now, I have to start really coming with a—with a package I guess you know—prospectus or whatever you want to call it on franchising. I don't really want to franchise. I want somebody if they're going to do this they have to be an owner/operator and I

don't want some doctor to buy up 15 franchises and slap them up like Corky's and then it be, you know—then you lose everything that you've strived for. So, you know, yes; I'd like to—my personal goals were within 10 years to be on a beach somewhere and have a barbecue place whether it be in America or South America I don't care; I want somewhere where the cruise ships dumps off 3,000 people twice a week and I work two days and that's it. That's my ideal goal—blues, brew, and barbecue. What more could you ask for.

00:42:09

RF: Do you—I'm guessing you get quite a bit of foreign tourists 'cause I see more and more of them in Memphis. I hear they travel here more and more; they weren't maybe 10—20 years ago.

00:42:19

CB: Right.

00:42:20

RF: Do foreigners enjoy barbecue or is it strictly an American thing?

00:42:24

CB: Well they're—funny you say that 'cause like the other there was a gentleman from Scotland in; he loved it. And then I've had guys from England. They just don't get barbecue; they don't understand it. They said it's dry, blah, blah, blah; so I mean we do get—I mean especially during Dead Elvis week you'll get a lot of out of town people and they all will eat barbecue and I think it's—more of the Asian tourists are really into barbecue. That's another one where I have a friend of mine who does import/export to China and there's—he's got some people over there

that want us to open one. So you know I mean there's—there's interest in it; you know the—the Europeans I think they can do with it and they could do without it you know. It's just—it's not their cup of tea but out—on the whole yeah. I think when they come to Memphis they know that's part of the deal. That's what you come to Memphis for—to see Elvis, to eat barbecue; what else is there—the zoo? *[Laughs]* Yeah; we have a world-renowned zoo.

00:43:30

RF: Do—do you have to—if you're from Memphis do you have to like barbecue? Does everyone here eat and love barbecue?

00:43:36

CB: Well I mean—

00:43:38

RF: Or what ties Memphis and barbecue together, maybe a little more abstract there?

00:43:41

CB: Wow; that's a good question. What ties Memphis and barbecue—aside from Memphis in May making it more renowned world-wide, it's a southern thing? I mean you get down in the Delta, you go down to Clarksdale, Cleveland, I mean you've probably been to some of the places down there. You know it's a whole—it's a way of life you know it's not just eating a product; it is a way of life. It's southern; you can't get more southern than barbecue—maybe cornbread and turnip greens but that's why I sell those here so you know it's the whole soul food southern experience.

00:44:20

RF: Just a last question; in—in your travels and you just mentioned the Delta and some rural areas—do you see a—a difference between urban barbecue and rural barbecue or as some people have suggested do you think barbecue comes from—from the country, from rural areas?

00:44:37

CB: Oh yeah; that's where it started. You think about it; the sharecroppers that—that was what they did on Sunday. They—that was their day; they cooked a hog and they had a feast at the end of the day, and it was families being brought together, spending time, socializing, and then eating. I mean that's—like I said that's what barbecue is all about and yes; it is a rural thing. It did come from the little Podunk towns in the country. And as it's made its way to the city, yeah; there are people that—that, you know, like tell me that I'm new school barbecue because of the type of cooker I use. Well I—that's fine but at least I've got—I know that my product is going to be consistent 'cause you know—whereas I don't have to pay somebody to be up all night tending a pit and stuff. That's old-school. You know the—the Pit Masters who pass it on from generation to generation and it's family secrets; that's more urban or rural. That's where it came from, you know, and that's the big thing with barbecue is people don't like divulging their secrets, you know. I'm the exact opposite; I'll tell you what I do. That doesn't mean you can do it, you know. It's like I got a cooker at home that I just got last year for my birthday. It's a Green Egg. I'm not—I don't if you're familiar but I've got the big one and it's probably one of the best grills/smokers you'll ever get 'cause it's made out of ceramic and it you know I cook a steak and it gets up to 700 degrees, cook pizzas in it, so you know—. And that, there again everybody has

a different style process—the end run is barbecue is good no matter what it is. I mean even the worst barbecue is better than no barbecue.

00:46:21

RF: Just one more question. There's a sign on the door that says you sell pork rinds. Do—do pork rinds go over well and—or do you call them pork skins here and do they go over well—

00:46:28

CB: Pork rinds.

00:46:30

RF: You call them pork rinds; do they go over well in Memphis? Another gentleman told me that people—the new generation will not eat them and he was—he was an elderly man.

00:46:36

CB: Well it is true; it's more old-school but you know it's something I just recently started doing 'cause I found a source where I can get the pellets. I cook them fresh myself every day so that makes a big difference but I mean there's—to me there's nothing better than some good pork rinds, fresh out of the grease, still hot. I'm even thinking about putting some brown sugar and cinnamon on them and a scoop of ice-cream and making it dessert.

00:47:01

RF: Do you put the barbecue rub on them or are they served just plain and fried?

00:47:05

CB: We put—we put spices on them. We've got and you know like our—our shake is what we would put on our homemade potato chips which people—I mean it's funny how the little things are what become really popular. My potato chips, my smoked hot wings; I never planned on selling six cases of wings a week. You know it was just something I did and now I—you know I got four different styles and everybody will swear that you know—there again that my wings are the best. That gets back to the quality and consistency.

00:47:34

RF: And I'd like to add your nachos, which are very good.

00:47:38

CB: Oh yeah; well like I say, everything is good. You know there is—you're not going to get anything—it's—it's—taste is personal or subjective but everything is—the quality is there and the consistency is there so no matter what you try here it's going to be good.

00:47:51

RF: Okay; well thank you. This is probably a good note to end on unless you'd like to add anything else and I would—I would just like to thank you.

00:47:59

CB: Thank you; I appreciate it. Thank you.

00:48:01

RF: Thank you.

00:48:02

[End Craig Blondis-Central Interview]