

JOE JOYNER
Jack's Creek Bar-B-Q – Jack's Creek, TN

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Date: July 9, 2008
Location: Jack's Creek Bar-B-Q – Jack's Creek, TN
Interviewer: Rien Fertel for the Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 29 minutes
Project: Southern Barbecue Trail – Tennessee

[Begin Joe Joyner-Jack's Creek-1 Interview]

00:00:01

Rien Fertel: This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is just after 1:30 on July 9, 2008. I'm at Jack's Creek Bar-B-Q with Joe Joyner. This restaurant is at the crossroads of Highway 122A in Jack's Creek, Tennessee just a couple miles east of Henderson.

00:00:26

Joe Joyner: Seven miles.

00:00:27

RF: Seven miles east of Henderson; I'm going to introduce Mr. Joyner. Please state your name and birth date.

00:00:32

JJ: Okay; my name is Joe Joyner. My birthday is March 6, 1961.

00:00:39

RF: Okay; and you—can you just describe your position here at the restaurant?

00:00:43

JJ: Well I'm presently Manager, responsible for day-to-day operations and making sure it runs smoothly and responsible for the cooking and just everyday operations from—from here to there.

We open five—six days a week, Tuesday through Sunday. We offer barbecue all—every day that we're open; chicken and ribs are Wednesday through Saturday.

00:01:15

RF: You—you recently—we interviewed you back in 2003 when you owned the place, and you recently sold it. Can you—can you tell who—who you sold it to?

00:01:27

JJ: Sure; we—we sold the barbecue pit the first part of May of—of this year '08. My wife was to the point of wanting to do something different, so we—we made the decision to let her get out and enjoy her life a little bit you know [*Laughs*]. And I stayed with it but we—we did it for 11 years and she felt like it was time for her to do something else. So far it's been good for me. It's cut a few hours back; I don't have the—all of the burden of the everyday things that—that go on along with keeping up with the books and things of that nature associated with running a—a sole proprietor small business. So it's been good for me.

00:02:23

RF: And tell us the name of who you sold it to please.

00:02:24

JJ: Jo—Jo Hilton; her and her husband, Jo mainly—Jeff is actually a Pharmaceutical Salesman, so he's in and out occasionally but it's Jo and myself. She's the boss; I'm—I help manage.

00:02:43

RF: Okay; well tell—I know we interviewed your wife too back in '03. Can—can you—does she get to cook at home now? Does she get to enjoy working [*Laughs*]—I know when—I've had family members when they've left the restaurant business they—they get to go home and cook.

00:02:56

JJ: Uh-hm; well she—she—she yeah she cooks some at home, not—not often. She's taking care of grandkids so it's a pretty good time consuming thing for her you know. It's—but yeah she cooks occasionally. I'll have to get onto her every once and a while and ask for a home cooked meal every once in a while. When you work in the barbecue business food is readily available but then sometimes it's not exactly what—what you want every day of the week you know. But she's good to me.

00:03:38

RF: Well tell me—you bought the place in '97 I believe.

00:03:42

JJ: Yes.

00:03:42

RF: Okay '97 and—and from what I understand it was a long-time barbecue restaurant at this location at the crossroads of the two highways?

00:03:53

JJ: Right, right; there's been barbecue sold here for many, many years. My grandfather—this is where he used to come whenever we were little kids so there's probably been barbecue—I'm not for sure the number of years but we're—we're at least looking at 60 years-plus.

00:04:12

RF: Do you remember the name of the restaurant that your grandfather took you to?

00:04:13

JJ: No, no; not really. But it's always been known as Jack's Creek Bar-B-Q. The prior owners to us, it was World Famous Jack's Creek Bar-B-Q was the prior name and of course when we bought it we added our last name to it and I think Jo and Jeff decided to just—.

00:04:35

[End Joe Joyner - Jack's Creek-1 Interview]

[Begin Joe Joyner - Jack's Creek-2 Interview]

00:00:00

Rien Fertel: Okay; we're back. And do you remember the place that you ate at—at this location that your grandfather would take you to?

00:00:08

Joe Joyner: Yeah; this is the place. It's always been across from the 22A and 100 where—where he would come. As far as the name of the place I don't really actually remember it 'cause I

was relatively young. But it's—it's always been known as Jack's Creek Bar-B-Q. I think the prior owners it was called World's Famous Jack's Creek Bar-B-Q and it may have actually been—been called Crow's prior to that but I'm really not sure. But of course when my wife and I bought it we called it Joyner's and now it's reverted back to being called Jack's Creek Bar-B-Q.

00:00:47

RF: And—and the—the businesses before or the owners before you came in—in '97, did they use—there's a certain building in the back where they cooked. Did—and I know you don't use that now; did they use that?

00:01:04

JJ: I'm not sure if those owners did; they may have started using those pits in the back but they converted to what we're using now, which is hickory creek cookers. They're—they're—they're electrically, the—the heat is generated through electricity but it does have smoking capabilities where you put your wood in smoke tubes and it'll—it'll just smoke overnight. But the heat is generated electrically. It's—it's a lot cleaner, safer, more efficient; the temperature is always steady. It—it doesn't fluctuate like you get from—from the fire and—with coals.

00:01:54

RF: Does it have a dial where you could set the temperature?

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JJ: Yeah; it has a thermostat with a percentage input, which will—you will have heat at an x-amount of time within an hour period. But it has a thermostat that helps regulate the temperature.

00:02:12

RF: And you—you can still use hickory sticks?

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JJ: Correct, correct; it's smoked tubes where you put three by three blocks in it and it sits on elements similar to what you'd see in a hot water heater. It sits on there and it'll—it'll just slowly burn down through the embers and there's no flame associated with it other than the fact that the smoke is coming off of the embers when they deplete.

00:02:45

RF: And so talking about fuel, does it keep the electricity still low or is it—?

00:02:52

JJ: Honestly I don't know the percentage to say how much money you would invest in the electricity going through one but I know it's a whole lot cheaper than labor costs and wood costs and—

00:03:06

RF: And—and cheaper than a fire; I'm guessing the fire hazard is—is low or—or nil.

00:03:13

JJ: If you take care of your equipment and keep it clean, the fire liability is limited.

00:03:19

RF: Okay; well tell me a bit—I'd like to ask about where are you from exactly in Tennessee—you're from Tennessee?

00:03:28

JJ: Well I was born in Kentucky. My—my dad was in the military and I was born on a military base but since I were approximately, I'm going to say seven years-old, we've lived in Chester County, which is—we actually live in Mifflin which is where we're from, and it's about eight miles north of Henderson.

00:03:51

RF: Where in Chester County now?

00:03:55

JJ: I live—I live in Henderson, which is sort of central Chester County.

00:04:02

RF: And—and were your parents or any of your family members in the restaurant business?

00:04:05

JJ: Oh no, no; my dad was in the military and my mother took care of us kids. There was four of us, but my dad was in the military. We—I had never had any kind of prior restaurant experience until my wife and I bought this in '97.

00:04:24

RF: Did your father or—or mother perhaps barbecue or cook pig?

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JJ: Well yeah our exposure to it was family get-togethers, community get-togethers. We would cook three to four hogs a summer and it was just a community type thing. We'd get together, about five—six families and—.

00:04:46

RF: Was it for holidays like the 4th?

00:04:49

JJ: Basically holidays; sometimes we just—if they'd get a whim and say wow, let's cook a hog you know we—we always had access to pork. And my dad raised feeder pigs some when he retired. And we always had access to—to a hog when we wanted to do it.

00:05:07

RF: So he would slaughter his hogs that he raised?

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JJ: Yeah; well generally that's the way it is. It would be one of my dad's or one of our neighbors would have one. Back then it was fairly common to have a few hogs running around you know.

00:05:23

RF: And how would he cook them?

00:05:23

JJ: Well we would—we would do a makeshift type pit. We would use chicken wire or just anything we could use to make a rack to lay the hogs on and—.

00:05:35

RF: Would you dig a hole in the ground?

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JJ: No; we didn't actually put a hog in the ground. When you went from slaughtering the hog, you had to de—de-hair it and a lot of times you'd put a barrel in the ground and heat the water to scald the hair off the hog. And but as far as cooking the hog in the ground it wasn't cooked in the ground; it was—it was put on a pit and covered with tin. The walls—a lot of times the walls were made of tin. When you'd—you'd put your blocks up to get it—x-amount off the ground so you'd have room to put your coals under it and of course you'd fence the inside—fence the pit up with tin, and I mean it was all makeshift. We—it was backyard barbecuing. [*Laughs*]

00:06:25

RF: And would you make sausage with the intestines or—or ground meat?

00:06:30

JJ: No, no; what was used—everything was used for the hog; the innards were disposed of. Of course the liver, you'd do the liver—some people would—would save the intestines but you know certain parts of the innards were saved; some were discarded.

00:06:47

RF: And what was the atmosphere like? Was it—was it entirely family; was it family and friends? Was there music or—or other things happening?

00:06:54

JJ: No; we didn't—we didn't go as far as having any kind of music or anything like that. It was just fellowship for the community. A lot of family basically is what it was; it was fellowship for the community.

00:07:10

RF: Okay; and when you opened you—you did whole hog, correct?

00:07:13

JJ: Yeah.

00:07:15

RF: And—and you don't now?

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JJ: No, no; we—we have gotten away from the whole hog. We have probably been two—two and a half years since we've done the whole hog, the reason being the economy—economic—we'd have to go pick our hogs up you know. There's a lot more things involved in—in a whole hog; besides I was getting older and it was sort of harder for me to handle them by myself so we went to the—the hams and shoulders. That's what we cook now.

00:07:46

RF: I'd—I'd like to ask about the economics of—of hogs. When did prices really you know noticeably change or—or get a little too high? When did you know—was there a point—a turning point, do you remember in the sense—in the past 11 years?

00:08:10

JJ: Well the—the fluctuation of prices for barbecue hogs has not varied tremendously. I think I can remember when we first started we were about 47—47-cents a pound plus your kill fee associated with it. Now I think I saw an advertisement in the paper for—for one of the local slaughter companies that runs about \$1.19 a pound which included the kill fee and everything, so the variation in prices hasn't been that great when you compare it to what we were paying for gas 10 years ago and what it is now. You know it's very little difference as far as the—the cost in—in the pork. But where the expense comes is you know labor costs, waste associated with a whole hog comparing it with shoulders and hams; you—you really cut your throwaway stuff out a lot with hams and shoulders, so it's a lot more cost-effective for us to—to use those.

00:09:32

RF: Right; I mean the price increase that you described isn't as high as I would—I would guess in a decade. But tell me about—tell me about this area. You grew up here; you've lived most of your life here. We're on Highway 100, which I understand was the original route between Memphis and Nashville. Was it the main route before they built the interstate, Interstate 40? And does—does that have to do with why this restaurant might be located where it's at?

00:10:05

JJ: It's a good question and I don't have an answer for it. [*Laughs*] I really can't tell you for sure if this was a travel route from—from Memphis to Nashville. But I doubt that it had anything to do with this being the specific location for—for a huge amount of travel. It's—there used to be quite a few things as far as businesses in Jack's Creek at one time or another. It's actually an area where they had something to do with an airport around here during World War II I think. But you know as far as it being centrally located for travel from here to Memphis or here to Nashville no; I think it was just an ideal location for whoever wanted to start a business is basically what I assumed.

00:11:08

RF: Well how—how have you see the—the town or the area change in the past 10 years?

00:11:13

JJ: Well the past 10 years there hasn't been a lot of change here. I know industry in Henderson has sort of fell off. There used to be quite a few garment factories—just because of the economy. There's—there hasn't been a lot of growth in my opinion to—to benefit a small corner business

like what we have you know. It's lost a lot of industry. A lot of them go to Lexington now and a lot of it's gone to Jackson.

00:11:47

RF: So has the restaurant or barbecue industry changed?

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JJ: For us no, no, other than trying to utilize your money—you know extending it the best you can and one of those avenues was going to cooking hams and shoulders, in relation to whole hog.

00:12:08

RF: Tell me a few more things about the—well I'd like to hear about the negatives of whole hog. I mean we're talking about a 200—300 pound animal, the—the carcass before you cook it. You're doing half a dozen of those a week you know or more—a typical restaurant. That seems like a—a headache.

00:12:30

JJ: Well it—it can be; the—the negative part of it is the way we used to do it, we'd have to go pick our hogs up. You'd have to order hogs; of course you'd still have to order—order your hams and shoulders, but go pick your hogs up. The throwaway aspect of it, the whole hog has a lot of—lot of excess material that you cannot put in your barbecue and—and keep your customers. That's the biggest thing; that's how you stay in business—you keep your customers and the—one of the things about the whole hog it's extremely greasy. With the hams and shoulders you can—you can regulate the fatty type material that there is in—naturally in the

meat. Hams are lean; shoulders are a little more fattier, so if you have a mixture of hams and shoulder you can pretty well do a pretty good job of keeping the meat palatable, not dry, and not greasy. Whole hog is extremely greasy along with all the throwaway that you have—the bones, the skin, the fat. There's just a lot of advantages doing it the way we do it.

00:13:44

RF: On a—on a whole hog can you use the ribs or do you mostly use butchered ribs to give a customer a plate of ribs?

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JJ: Right; yeah we use butchered ribs. Actually when you cook a whole hog it's well done and it's sort of hard to pick your ribs out of a hog and still be able to serve meat on them because when you pull the bone out of—out of the hog the meat stays in the hog. But that's the—the thing about barbecue is it's well done and that's how you can just pull it apart. A lot of places slice it and it's sort of a rare cook when they slice their barbecue. This is hand-pulled and the only way to be able to do that is if you get it well done without getting it too well done; you know what I mean. It has to be—still have a lot of moisture in it in order to—for your customers to be satisfied. But as far as pulling ribs out of a hog the meat comes completely off of it, so it's sort of hard to serve a rib plate out of a hog. Not only that the ribs are you know 12 to 14-inches long and it's sort of hard to put them on a plate. But we do use butchered ribs; we use baby back ribs is what we use and they're extremely good. They're the small bone, real—a lot of meat. They're extremely good. We have some of the best ribs around.

00:15:21

RF: And how—what—what—how do you sauce or—or spice your ribs?

00:15:23

JJ: Well I have a dry rub that I put on our ribs to start with. When they get to within 45 minutes within ready to serve I'll start sautéing—or I marinade them or I'll sauce them on the backside once and turn them over and put about three—three rounds of sauce in a 15-minute period on the—the meat side and put a little bit of dry rub again. They're extremely good.

00:15:58

RF: And how long do they cook for?

00:16:02

JJ: Roughly three and a half hours.

00:16:05

RF: And with your shoulders and hams which you serve also do you—how do you—do you spice those before you cook them?

00:16:14

JJ: Yeah; we have a dry rub that we put on but all—most of it is just completely natural. It's just the pork itself, but I do put a little bit of seasoning with them. We try and avoid putting sauce on them because you have some people that just can't tolerate the vinegar and the ketchup and the things that's in your sauce, so we—we refrain from cooking with sauce on the meat. That's an added after the meat is done.

00:16:43

RF: Do—do you encourage customers to put sauce on their sandwiches?

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JJ: Oh yeah; I've—I've always said that it's—there's not any bad barbecue. There's some—some—some is better than others but sauce goes a long way in being good or great.

00:17:06

RF: Okay; and can you—I mean without giving away secrets, can you describe your sauces? Do you have a mild and a hot?

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JJ: Yeah; we have—we have a mild and a hot and we have an extremely hot that—that like the hot, the really hot stuff. But it's—it's a tomato-vinegar based style sauce; it's got sugar in it, so it's—we try and sweeten it up to the point where it's more attractive. It has a little bit of a vinegar twang to it, but it's very good on the barbecue. We even have people that—that buy the sauce and cook meatloaf with it; you know there's so many things you can do with this type of barbecue sauce.

00:17:51

RF: Okay; and do—do you think a lot of sauces in this part of—this Henderson, Lexington, kind of Jackson corridor are they—are they similar? How would you describe you know the blanket of sauces in this area?

00:18:15

JJ: Yeah; honestly—

00:18:17

RF: Or—or is—does everyone have an individual kind of taste?

00:18:23

JJ: They're all individual. There's probably a lot of similarities in all of them but each one has its own little niche. But honestly though [*Laughs*] I haven't eaten anyone else's barbecue in 12 years. So I couldn't tell you. [*Laughs*]

00:18:41

RF: Did you—did you eat a lot of barbecue before you opened your restaurant?

00:18:46

JJ: Sure did; sure did. We had a fellow that had a place where we used to live that was within a couple of miles. He's—he's known around the area for—for serving really good barbecue and we always visited him. And his name was Bobby Sales, is who it was, and we always went up and got our barbecue from him. And it's one of those things, I—I felt like I could eat barbecue three days a week—sometimes more if I had it you know. But now I sort of—the availability doesn't match the desire to eat it any longer. [*Laughs*]

00:19:18

RF: Why—why do you think barbecue is so important to this area of Tennessee? What does it mean to this—the people?

00:19:31

JJ: I think West Tennessee has always been known for some of the best barbecue you can ever put in your mouth. And I—we have people that travel through all the time that—that always say there's—you can't find it any—anywhere—any better than what it is in West Tennessee, and these are people from South Carolina and Kentucky, just all of the adjoining States, you know. It's just—they—they all say that you can't beat what you find in West Tennessee.

00:20:01

RF: Do you think being a rural area—we're surrounded by farms; does that come into play? Does barbecue come from—?

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JJ: Maybe—maybe it did 15—20 years ago but now there's just not a lot of hog raisers around here. I think there was probably an eight—eight-year period, about eight years ago—six to eight years ago there was a period where the price of pork just got so dirt cheap that it run so many of the little people out you know and it's all big corporations now and some of these big time hog farmers. That's the only ones you see that have them now.

00:20:50

RF: And now families, like your father, don't have two or three pigs?

00:20:52

JJ: Oh no, no; it's—it's a thing of the past.

00:20:55

RF: Yeah; okay just one or two more questions. Let's say I'm—I'm a young guy, I'm in Henderson, and I want to get into the barbecue business. I have barbecue experience working at another place; would you advise me to get into the whole hog business or would you try to—try to talk me out of it?

00:21:17

JJ: I would definitely try and talk you out of the whole hog. I've been there and done that.

00:21:22

RF: And what would you say to me?

00:21:24

JJ: I would say keep it simple; hams and shoulders—the way to go. If you're—if you're wanting to get into it you're obviously going to try and make a living out of it. So you have to look at the economics of it and weigh what's the pros and cons of it and through—talk to people like myself that have done it and listen—listen to what they tell you.

00:22:03

RF: Do—do you think there's always going to be one or two you know hard-headed guys cooking the whole hog or do you think it's going to go away completely in this area?

00:22:09

JJ: No; there—there will always be someone that will do it the old-fashioned way but economically it's not the best way—best way to go in my opinion. And someone is going to have a different opinion but when you're doing it the way we do it it's—it's relatively simple and not as hard on you physically as what whole hog would be. But yeah; it—in my opinion I would definitely try and talk someone out of comparing hog—whole hogs to hams and shoulders. I would definitely go the way we do it.

00:22:55

RF: And how about the restaurant business; would—would you encourage someone to do that?

00:23:00

JJ: Be ready to invest your whole life into it is what it amounts to. The restaurant business is not easy, extremely time-consuming; it is confining. It's—it's difficult sometimes; it really is.

00:23:20

RF: And—and how long do you plan on—on being the Manager or Pit Master here at—at Jack's Creek?

00:23:26

JJ: Indefinitely. I like the idea of being able to take a little bit more time than what I've been accustomed to in the last 11 years and Jo and Jeff are extremely good to me, so I'm—I'm happy with what I'm doing. So indefinitely I would say—until something better comes a long; I'm—

I'm getting old. I'm getting older and right now I've got the best of both worlds, so we'll—we'll see.

00:24:01

RF: Okay; so—well that's a good note to end on and I want to thank you and is there anything you'd like to add?

00:24:07

JJ: No; just I've enjoyed the interview and I hope you do well with it.

00:24:11

RF: Okay; all right well thank you very much.

00:24:13

JJ: Thanks.

00:24:13

[End Joe Joyner - Jack's Creek-2 Interview]

[END]