

FRANK & ERIC VERNON

BB Shop – Memphis, TN

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Interviewer: Rien Fertel for the Southern Foodways Alliance

Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs

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Project: Southern Barbecue Trail – Tennessee

[Begin Frank & Eric Vernon-BBQ Shop Interview]

00:00:02

Rien Fertel: This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is July 31, 2008; just about 2 o'clock on a Thursday afternoon. I'm here with the--the owners of the BBQ Shop, two members of the Vernon family--Mr. Frank Vernon and his son, Eric Vernon. I'm going to have them introduce themselves and we're going to talk about barbecue. And--and we're--just to--to let the listener or reader know we are not at the BBQ Shop; we are at a restaurant just down the street. So your name, please?

00:00:42

Frank Vernon: Frank Vernon and I was born April 25, 1946.

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Eric Vernon: And I'm Eric Vernon and I was born July 27, 1974.

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RF: Okay; so you are the--the owners of the BBQ Shop or you--you are the owner?

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FV: Yes; yes I am the owner of the BBQ Shop and he's the--I guess the upcoming owner of the BBQ Shop.

00:01:04

EV: And there's also Hazel Vernon and she's kind of behind the scenes and she handles our www.dancingpigs.com which is our barbecue sauce line.

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RF: And is that your--your wife and mother?

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EV: Yes; yes.

00:01:17

RF: Okay; so let's talk about the beginnings of the BBQ Shop. When did you open the restaurant?

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FV: Well the BBQ Shop was actually opened back in 1973. Yeah; hold on a second, please.

00:01:39

EV: I just wanted to know where he was going with this.

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RF: Okay; we had--we had to pause for a second 'cause we were getting the dates straight.

00:01:46

FV: And then go with this separate--you ready?

00:01:47

RF: Yeah; yeah so okay give us--when did you start working in the barbecue industry? Let me ask that question.

00:01:55

FV: Okay; it was in 1983.

00:01:58

RF: Okay.

00:02:00

FV: And we opened Brady & Lil's BBQ which was already opened and they had been around anywhere from 40 to 50 years before we even took over. So we've been in business now probably close to 30 years and--and 20 years ago we changed the name from Brady & Lil's to the BBQ Shop. And so we still are fixing everything pretty much the same; we just changed the name, and--anything else?

00:02:29

RF: Okay; well let's--let me ask a few question about Brady & Lil's. So they--so they were a long-time business barbecue shop--or they were a long-time barbecue restaurant for 40--50 years before you took over one of their locations?

00:02:42

FV: Yeah--yeah; go ahead.

00:02:44

EV: Well it was an old school kind of style diner and basically there was a house on top of the diner and Mr. Brady and his wife, Brady Vincent--lived upstairs. And every day they would come downstairs and open the gate and come into the restaurant and do their thing and then at the end of the night they'd go back up. And they had been doing this for years, you know and Mr. Brady came up with the idea of--of a certain type of sauce and--and a good hot sauce, and that's the way we do everything now. We make everything from scratch. And it's kind of what our pigs represent on our tee-shirt, the two pigs, Brady & Lil's which is now you know the BBQ Shop.

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RF: Were Brady & Lil were they a husband and wife team?

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FV: Yes; they was husband and wife and they worked together and--and the unique thing about Brady and Lil, they--they pretty much--. Okay; they pretty much made pretty much everything. They made their mild sauce; they made their hot sauce and during the time that we bought the business they was only selling ribs, rib tips, Boston butt, and barbecue spaghetti and slaw and quite--when we got it, we kind of grown it a little bit. We sell a little bit way more than what they were selling during that time. But they was well known in--in the City; they actually had their own pit in the back and--and when I came in, he taught me. I was in another restaurant and I got out of that and actually I'm going to go back and just pretty much let you know that I used to eat there all the time. And one day I came in and I told Mr. Brady, I said if you ever decide to

retire let me know. And one day I came in there to get some ribs one day, didn't think--wasn't thinking anything about buying it and he said you know what? I want to talk to you. And so I said okay and we got over in the corner and he said well I'm thinking about getting out this summer. And so when that summer came we made arrangements to buy his place and got into it and he trained us. He came down every day and matter of fact, we stayed there at that location. It was 601 South Parkway East and actually we--actually stayed there I guess what--about I guess about eight years before we left there and they still lived upstairs. And he would always come down and make sure I'm doing this right.

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But the history of Brady & Lil's was--actually it was something that was unique because the way he did his product, he cooked it on the old-fashioned pit; he pretty much hands-on everything and I just really enjoyed that about that so that's what made me really interested in owning part of Brady & Lil.

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EV: And then I want to interject one thing; when you asked about were they a married couple? As far as Mr. and Mrs. Brady what I can remember as a child is Mr. Brady was running the show and Mrs. Brady did help out, but what her job was--was to run that register and made sure she got that money. **[Laughs]** She was definitely in charge; you knew who the boss was on the side, so--she ran the front of the house. **[Laughs]**

00:06:06

RF: What kind of man was he personally? Was he a--?

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FV: Well Mr. Brady was--he was a very straight man. He wanted things to run--be run a certain way. Even the service that he did have they was limited on certain things because he had hands-on everything. He didn't let them do one thing at all; the only thing they had to do is get the bread out of the sack. He didn't use any buns and they--he put the meat on; he put the slaw on; the only thing they did was wrap the sandwich. And then as far as people out in the restaurant area, he better not even see a person lowering their drink glass to half-full, he'd be ready to-- He sold the old drinks like Cokes, the Nehi drinks, and all that kind of thing but he was--he was a really nice guy but I think he run a tough and tight business. And you know he was--he was--and he was a good man; you know me and him, even got into it a couple of times even after I bought it but we was fine. *[Laughs]*

00:07:21

RF: What--what were you--you said you would eat lunch before you--you bought the place from him. What were you doing at that time; what was your profession?

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FV: Well actually I had another restaurant called Frank's Restaurant. It was sort of like the tollhouses of the steak and egg place where they sold breakfast pretty much all day, sandwiches, plus I had another profession. I was a truck driver for UPS and I worked there for like 14 years and I guess I had a restaurant eight years out of the fourteen, so I was kind of doing both of them. *[Laughs]*

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RF: So you'd do the restaurant at night--that breakfast restaurant?

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FV: Well that--well we had my wife's sister worked for us so she was kind of running it in the daytime and my wife; she taught school so when evening time she would come over there at the evening. I would come over there after school. Eric was over there; of course he was little. He just kind of grew up in the business--both of them, so--we just kind of like I mean it was a tough way but we did it.

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RF: Those first--that first restaurant and then eventually the barbecue restaurant, what made you want to get into the restaurant business? Was your family in the restaurant business before?

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FV: No; exactly the thing that got me into the restaurant business I was like I said I was a driver for UPS and I used to deliver at this place called Salk & Tate Restaurant Supply. And they did a whole lot of business with the restaurants and for some reason over the years I kind of wanted to be in the restaurant business. And I've talked to one of the owners and he knew one of the guys that had the Holland House which is the business I bought that was called Frank's Restaurant. And he knew some people there and he got me hooked up with the guy that owns that building and told me pretty much how to go about doing the menus and my wife and I--we kind of like worked real close with them, and then we just decided to go into the business. But always my first choice was the barbecue restaurant. So after I got in this we kept it about I guess about four years or so and then 'til Mr. Brady decided he wanted to sell, but that was my passion and I got

in there and I just you know--. After he trained me pretty much how to do it--and it took a little while; it wasn't nothing over night. I mean I messed up a whole lot of ribs. **[Laughs]** But he was very patient and he wanted--even when I was there trying to and things that I did wrong he would just bring it to my attention, so--. But I finally got it down right; so I'm trying to pass this all down to Eric now.

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RF: Are you originally from Memphis?

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FV: Yes.

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RF: And what part of Memphis did you grow up in?

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FV: Orange Mound which is East Memphis, yeah but Orange Mound and I went to school in Melrose, so that's where I grew up in Orange Mound, the heart of Memphis.

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RF: What barbecue restaurants or shops do you remember eating at as young--?

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FV: Actually when I was in school and high school I worked at Ruffin's Barbecue Pit and that was right there on Deadrick and Keating. And I used to work after school; I used to go there and help out, wash dishes, and then I got where I helped him in the pit room and I did a little bit of everything. I made--at that particular time he was delivering sandwiches in the neighborhood and I used to ride the bike with these big baskets on it and making these deliveries. So I did a pretty much--a little of everything, but that's where I really got into the barbecue. But at that particular time I didn't have no idea that I was going to go into the barbecue business. But I love barbecue.

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RF: Did--did your father or any other family members barbecue?

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FV: No; I didn't have anybody in my family that--other than me barbecuing in the backyard. And I thought I did a great job in the backyard, but it's a whole new different tale when you go and try to do that barbecue on a commercial pit. It's a little bit different and it takes time and it's something that you got to want to do, because anybody just can't go on and cook. It's so hard to find somebody to train to cook on the open pit because it's so difficult. Timing is important and you just got to know exactly what to do because if you don't, you can't have a fire, you can burn up a whole lot of meat, so you know it's--but I didn't have anybody. I was just taught pretty much how to do it.

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RF: And--and Mr. Brady, he--he taught you? You were the Pit Man? You were the new Pit Man? There was no one else?

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FV: Nobody else and he, I mean he really got in there and then also you know like the barbecue spaghetti that we're well known for; he worked with my wife Hazel. She--days while I was at UPS, school was out, because we bought it in the middle of the summer, so school was out and he taught her how to make that spaghetti and then she passed it on down to me. So it--it was a whole lot of teamwork right there, yeah.

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RF: I want to ask one question about that barbecue spaghetti. I have heard from another source that Brady & Lil's was the originator of Memphis barbecue spaghetti. Is that true?

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FV: That's exactly right; it's the original way. Nobody else probably can come close to this barbecue spaghetti because it's--we make a base that nobody else--everybody else probably takes barbecue spaghetti and puts barbecue sauce in it, chop meat up; we got a base that we actually cook on the pit and this base right here is the secret. We had Bobby Flay here that came to our shop about three or four years ago and they did a thing on the barbecue spaghetti and even he wanted to find out exactly what we put in there. Well we--it's a long--the recipe is over 50 years old.

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EV: You really didn't start seeing barbecue spaghetti in the other barbecue restaurants until like the late '80s. You know we were the originators of--of that. We were one of the few people that

had a hot barbecue sauce like we did. You know most people just had one sauce and if they did have a hot it wasn't like ours. You know so no one else can say that they had that barbecue spaghetti before Mr. Brady or the BBQ Shop, so--.

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RF: Let's--let's--I mean we're on the subject of food; let's--let's talk about food. The--let's talk about the sauce. The sauce comes from Brady's? Was it changed at all?

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FV: Well it was re-modified just a little bit--the mild and hot, but pretty much the recipe is still there. We've changed up a little bit of it but not a whole lot; we just did enough to enhance the flavor just a little bit more but primarily it's there. I mean the same recipe we--we didn't change in our recipe. We added a little something to it; that's all.

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RF: So you still--you have two sauces today?

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FV: Right; those same two sauces that we've gotten from him--the hot and the original. But since then we've come up with a dry seasoning and we came up with that ourselves.

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RF: What do you do with the dry seasoning?

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FV: Excuse me--we put that dry seasoning over ribs, you know. We season with it; you know sometimes people don't want the wet sauce, so we--else--put the dry seasoning on it and people eat it like that. And Eric came up with the half and half.

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EV: He used to fuss at me about this half and half.

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RF: All right; tell me about--tell me about the invention of the half and half and what is it?

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EV: In the beginning it's so funny now because people get dry all the time, but no one would order it. And we had this great seasoning and I had--I was in high school and I started waiting tables and I just started convincing people to get it half and half 'cause I knew eventually they would get it all dry. And eventually people really did start ordering half and half but it was driving the kitchen crazy 'cause they didn't want to do sauce and seasoning on this rib. And I used to get fussed at every day about it, but see I was just looking to--to figure out a new way to get people to try ribs.

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RF: So is it one rack of ribs--half and--?

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FV: Yeah; not necessarily. It could be an order which is a half of slab. Either you get the slab-- so what we would do even on an order that could be anywhere from six to seven ribs we would still make half of that dry and the other half wet. So and then a slab we would just do one half wet and one half dry and you know now people call me and say well I want them half and half you know, so he was right.

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EV: [*Laughs*]

00:16:32

FV: [*Laughs*] It worked.

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RF: So people can do a taste test at their own; okay.

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FV: Yeah; well you know people now call you know 'cause if you get a family of say a party of two--just two people and they order a slab and they want to split it and one said well I don't want all that wet on mine. I don't want that wet sauce and the other person might just want dry so right now they are very happy. And now probably the family will probably--some of them is probably getting some dry; some is getting a little wet you know, so--. I think he came up with a good idea there, so--but it--it was kind of tough at first 'cause we wanted to do one or--or the other, you know. We wanted to do wet or either dry and so he came up with the half and half and--well it just worked out real well.

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RF: Have you brought any other changes to the restaurant?

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EV: We--we're not going--[*Laughs*]; we--we fuss about my changes all the time but you know like I was a big driver for the half and half and you know I just try to think of things to keep the restaurant young, you know. You for instance we have like 30 different beers but we don't have a full bar, you know and we're in a college district but we're also in a bar district. And one reason I try to keep all the new beers in there but I don't want to go to liquor 'cause I got my college kids and let's be frankly honest. They've got some of the best fake IDs on this earth and--and they can handle their beer but they can't handle their liquor. And then I got now the 30-somethings with their babies coming in one and two, so I can't have it too rowdy in here. But I just try to think of ways to keep it kind of young and fresh and keep it good enough for our older customers to come but hip enough for the younger people to say hey it's cool hanging out here. So that's kind of my deal with the restaurant; so I come up with all these things and then I have to kind of fuss with him to say hey just--just go with this. I promise you it'll pan out. [*Laughs*]

00:18:37

FV: But I think sometimes you know he might try some things and like it himself but it's like he does our barbecue bologna. He might say well you know you need--everybody says, oh yeah I love that bologna and then the next time they come in he says oh you need to try it with cheese on it, you know with cheese.

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EV: And half the restaurant is ordering this bologna with cheese and they're getting it burnt. Or I might people to get our chicken drumettes with the dry seasoning on them which it's excellent, but you know you just got to tell people kind of like hey this is a great thing; why don't you try it. And usually whatever I start it just spreads throughout the restaurant, so--. And then they have their running jokes about me. Well you know Eric probably did that 'cause after a while everybody is ordering this one thing and--and they know it's just no coincidence, so--.

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RF: You said you grew up--or your father said you grew up in the restaurant. How--how long did you or when did you really start working there?

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EV: I started working there probably in 1990. I was probably in the tenth grade and I started working weekends there. You know and just I went to Undergraduate at U of M on a scholarship and then years later I actually went back and got my MBA with an emphasis in Marketing. But I think if you--if you had met me in Undergraduate and asked me would I work for the BBQ Shop, I would have told you no. You know it's--it's kind of the deal where you grow up with something you know like--like you know at 5 o'clock when everybody is outside playing kickball I got to get in the car and go to the restaurant or on the weekends we're over there while everybody else is outside at home. So it just was kind of those deals like I had to go do what the adults did and part of me was like I don't want to do this the rest of my life. But things change and time changes and you just kind of realize. I think it was my first internship; I interned at Delta Beverage of America, which is a Pepsi subsidiary, and now Pepsi actually owns that. But I

would get there at 6:00 a.m. and I would leave a little bit after 5:00 and I thought if I'm going to work this hard at Pepsi I might as well work this hard for myself. But the real reason I think that I stayed in it is when I was graduating maybe a little bit right after that he came to me and said I'm tired and I'm going to close it up. And as--as much of the time--I think it was a combination of he just really needed someone in there to come in there and help him and kind of like keep him motivated. But you know at the time as much as I--I probably thought that I hated it that's when you realize do you really want to lose this or not, and I told him I would help him out for what--two or three years? I gave you a year limit; whatever it was I said I would come in there for a couple years and I would work with him. And then if the business hadn't improved we would close it. And--and at the end of the two or three years we were doing pretty good, so--. And then since then business has doubled since that time.

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FV: It wasn't that it wasn't doing good; I think it was just that sometimes you just get tired of the--the--the getting up every day, the hassle and--

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EV: Working on the weekends.

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FV: Yeah; and all that and you know just dealing with the employees but getting back to Eric growing up in the restaurant. What I meant was regardless whether he worked in there or not we had to take him with us 'cause he was so small. So actually when he was four or five years old he was sleeping in the back and running around in front and some of the people that come in there

now, some of the attorneys that knew him when he was like four years old, you know--. I had one in there the other day, I was telling him Eric's birthday was--he was 34 and he said man we're getting old you know. But he actually was there--my wife picked him up, took him over to the shop, so yeah, he spent a whole lot of time. But it was just like me; I mean I grew up in church. You know even though everybody--all my friends was at movies and they used to go to the WC Handy that used to be on Park Avenue in the Orange Mound, my grandmother kept me at church. I mean I couldn't even come home; they would tell me they were watching--going to the movie and all that. But it made me a better person; I didn't get into a whole lot and so it was all good. But I'm glad that he's decided to come on in and stay and I think it will be real beneficial and we got a legacy. I mean this has been around a long time and Brady & Lil, the BBQ Shop which is the same--the name that it's got now is doing real well.

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RF: So I want to ask a few more questions about you know the--what's going on now and the future, but when did you move to this Madison location?

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EV: It was November 1987.

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RF: Okay.

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EV: Yes.

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RF: And so it--it was--you've only had two locations?

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EV: We've had three locations.

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FV: Actually we've had three locations. The original location that was on Parkway and then we went to Knight Arnold. We was there for about what six year?

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EV: No; we--we were only there for three 'cause see we moved there in '83--'84 and then we moved to the BBQ Shop in '87--three to four years.

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FV: Well I think it was four--four years.

00:24:00

EV: We actually moved next door to the original East End Grill. If--if a lot of Memphians will know where the original East End Grill is. It's still there now and at the time we just decided to try to get a little bit closer to our--our original clientele and we moved back this way and that's when we actually changed the name to the BBQ Shop itself, so--.

00:24:22

RF: What is your earliest memory of growing up in--in a restaurant, in the barbecue restaurant?

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EV: Being in the pit room in the back when I was like four or five and also sitting on a barstool next to Mr. Brady and I was playing Connect Four and I wasn't nowhere near as tall as the barstool and I used to have to climb up there. But I can remember all that; I can remember going and doing all that and being probably out and up late, which is probably why I'm--I'm a night owl now and I'm--I got that honest, so--.

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RF: You--you're going to be--I mean when you take over the restaurant you're going to be maybe the only barbecue restaurant owner in the country with a Masters Degree. You know that's pretty impressive. **[Laughs]** What--no that's awesome; how do you plan and you talk about changes and you know I know you're marketing some sauces now--what--how do you think that degree might help or--?

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EV: Well I had to realize a long time ago that I wanted--I wanted to do what my father does but I still can't be my father. You know and when I get it--we're going to always focus on the restaurant and keep it going but you know I would use my degree more and to kind of like branch out with the sauce and getting it in different areas and then maybe a little bit later down the line we've always planned to kind of do the vacuum packed rib thing, so we could do that. And you know I'll always be involved with the BBQ Shop because that's where everything starts but I still--I don't think I'm going to be what he was like--like he is every day and hand-in-hand,

you know. I'd have to try to you know get someone in there to help me run it and then I'd be able to do things further 'cause I personally would rather grow this on the sauce level you know. You know I want the Dancing Pigs Barbecue Sauce to be known around the country or at least in this--this region. You know we're already in four to five States but maybe you know we can go even further, as far as a lot of these other Southern States that we haven't gotten into. And just kind of focusing on that, you know and we'll see about as far as branching the restaurant out but, you know, I just kind of want to stick on the sauce side a little bit. And don't get me wrong; the BBQ Shop will always be up and running--the way it's supposed to be; yeah.

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RF: Mr. Vernon do you still do the cooking?

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FV: Somewhat; I got somebody doing it--just kind of overlooking somebody else doing it now but still have hands on. Getting back to some of the things that he just--well he just was talking about before this, I think probably it would be a good idea--I don't know; and that's what I'm trying to get him to do before I do get out is to branch out, maybe try to open something somewhere else. The sauce I think will probably be good but with the competition out there I think it will be a little bit tough to do but I think this would--if he could get into another--or even open another location before I just decide to get out of it completely I think he will do real well, because what we could do for him is go out and help and make sure that both shops is running pretty much the same to keep the consistency right there. And I think that's important.

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I think you know it's a whole lot of responsibility to get out there and open another shop but to me I think money wise I think it would put him where he needs to be. So you know it's something he'll just have--he'll just have to make up his mind that it's what he wants to do because I think the sauce business is--it'll be great to do if you can get out there, but I mean you get your--you really got to really get probably in pretty much every State and the competition is just really tight. But I don't think it would be tight if he decided to go into the restaurant business and open another one up--even maybe in the future franchise 'cause the key to it is--is if he opens another location here I wouldn't want nobody to say: "well, you know what? The best location is Midtown; got one out there in Collierville but it's not doing real well because it doesn't taste the same," you know. But I--I think what we can do to play a big part in there is help him to make it consistent. And if you got two places that either one you can go to is just as good 'cause we got some real unique--we got a unique product. We got our sauce; we got the slaw and the way we cook our ribs and shoulders, Boston butt, and beef, all that really--when we put our slaw and sauce on the sandwich it really enhances everything. And so you really just kind of--the slaw enhances the sauce; the sauce enhances the meat. I mean you know it all works--and don't nobody else have anything like that 'cause we got a sauce that nobody has got.

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EV: And the biggest thing we're known for is consistency and that's--that's the only reason I wouldn't--that I would hesitate a little bit for opening up something else because no matter what day of the week or what month you come and eat that sandwich or Texas toast down there it's going to always taste the same, and that's something I want to keep up with and we want--like you said, we don't want to be one like--like one of our competitors where oh that location is good

but that one is not and that one has issues and you know we want it to be the same across the board, so--.

00:30:23

RF: I want to ask a few more questions about the food. What makes--or you know in your minds what--what makes the--the meat, the butts especially and the ribs great? What makes it good?

00:30:33

FV: Well the biggest thing is we are pretty much consistent. We don't try to cook anything less than on the Boston butts--we try to cook them anywhere from 12 to 15 hours. The beef--the same thing, and ribs we try to cook them three to three and a half--maybe four hours but the key to it is doing this consistently, you know not rushing. We don't put any frozen meat on; we--all our meat that's put on is fresh and--and then even after it's fixed like I was saying earlier, when we put our sauce on and mix it with our slaw and the meat I mean it's just a great sandwich.

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EV: And then not only that; it's also the type of meats that we're using, you know like--like again we use the Boston butt. A lot of people use shoulders but the Boston butt really has only one layer of fat that--that runs through it and then the shoulder has fat all on the top and then that means your meat is going to be a lot more greasier. And then the thing about our ribs, we use you know anywhere from a two and a half down to a three and a half down. Well that's a leaner cut of rib; you know it's just about using a lot more lean meat and you just get a better product anyway.

00:31:53

RF: Tell me about the Texas toast; do you call it Texas toast? Well you did just call it Texas toast and--and why do you use that on the sandwich which is very good I--I might say. **[Laughs]**

00:32:01

FV: Actually the reason--when we bought Brady & Lil's they was using just regular standard white bread. And we had so many people complain about when they'd get where they were going you know they got something to go it would be soggy. If they were sitting there eating it over a period of time it would get soggy. So we came up with the Texas toast. Well we didn't actually come up with it; we was making it all the time. And we got it and we tried it before we started toasting it and we was having pretty much the same problem. So we started toasting it a little bit and now it holds a little bit better and doesn't get quite as soggy. But we do more Texas toast sandwiches than we do on the bun and we give them the choice--bun or either Texas toast. So but--

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EV: We're the only place in town that gives you that kind of option for your bread anyway for a barbecue sandwich.

00:32:54

RF: And we've talked about brisket; you've mentioned brisket right. Not too many places sell beef here in Memphis at least. Who--who--who is ordering the beef? Is it a local thing, non-local thing?

00:33:09

FV: Well I think it's more people now is getting into beef. When we first started we hardly didn't even sell any beef. And now we are selling quite a bit of beef right now. When we started we was probably--we were lucky to go through two whole beefs a week, you know. So now you know we go through cases a week, you know so it's--it's a big difference. And then about what he was talking about--about the Boston butt, we was kind of the first barbecue place--one of the first that uses Boston butts. Everybody else was using shoulders and the reason that Mr. Brady used it--the Boston butt 'cause it was the center cut of the shoulder which is where the heart of the lean meat was at. And it just got that one shank bone right there and doesn't have the skin on it and he--he pretty much could chop the whole thing up. But we just found it would work and didn't take long to cook. We just--it worked out real well; now the majority of the barbecue places are using Boston butts now.

00:34:26

RF: Just a few more questions; can you tell me about the pit, how--how is it designed and--and how does it work?

00:34:31

FV: Well we got two pits; we have the regular open pit which is you have to use the charcoal and then you put wood in it, and--but when we got that pit we had that pit built at the shop that we're in now and we actually went in a couple of days and mopped it with fat meat and cooked on it and put wood in it and got it seasoned just right before we started cooking on it. But that pit takes actually when we was cooking Boston butts on it, it takes 24 hours to cook 'cause we cook

them real slow. And also we have another pit called Southern Pride and the Southern Pride cooker, it's--it saves us a whole lot because you burn hickory in it but at the same time we don't have to worry about anymore fires 'cause we was having problems you know you'd cook and you get busy and the next thing you know the pit is on fire. And then you got to start all over again. But the Southern Pride does a real good job; at one time we didn't think--I bought this cooker--I kept it three years before I even put it in because I just wasn't sure that it was something that I wanted to do but it was one of my best investments. And we don't have to worry about it; you know we put it on at 7:30 at night and take it off at 7:00--7:30 the next morning and everything is right on key you know; so we don't have any problems.

00:36:07

EV: But I don't really think there is any barbecue restaurant in Memphis that if you're doing a good mainstream business that you don't have one of those cookers 'cause you just can't cook on that all day and put out the meat you're putting out for--if you got a restaurant that seats 120 people at lunchtime, I mean that--you have to have one of--a Southern Pride to kind of help you and then you get these big catering orders. You--you would have to have it to cook that meat like that you know. So I think it's--it's just a trend that everybody has gone to and it's a little bit more efficient as well.

00:36:37

RF: Do you cook any meat or the ribs maybe on the original pit?

00:36:41

FV: Yes; we switch up occasionally. We do them on both and you know the--the thing about the Southern Pride is that you can't find anybody just to come in that you can train overnight because it--it takes a special person, somebody that's skillful, somebody that's got to want to do it to learn how to cook on those open pits. And it was just so--even if something happened to me, it would--Eric, I don't know; he's not even--he don't even cook on it.

00:37:16

RF: On the pit?

00:37:18

FV: Open pit, no; but he does the other one 'cause it really takes a whole lot of time and you know and another thing too you know he probably could because he--he's not--he's probably a little bit leery to a whole lot of smoke because he got sinus problems.

00:37:31

EV: I actually went to an allergist the other day and I'm--I'm largely allergic to any type of dust or--I mean so when I am on the pit I mean you can tell. You can look at me and literally tell yeah so that would be another reason that I probably would never just you know spend all my days on it 'cause I'd be sick all the time. *[Laughs]* So--

00:37:57

RF: So just one or two more questions; how do you--you know you've--you're born and raised in Memphis. You've been in the barbecue business for a couple decades and--and before that you

knew the barbecue business it sounds like. How has the barbecue business changed in the past you know in the past 50 years or so?

00:38:14

FV: Well I think--I hope--well I'll tell you what; a whole lot of people--I'm pretty much going by pretty much the old regular standard way of doing certain things, and I think a whole lot of other people is taking a whole lot of shortcuts. But really the--you have to stay within the mainstream. And you really can't change a whole lot from cooking the old way; you pretty much have to, you know, season your meat. We use the same seasoning, the same formula that I was ever taught to use and sometimes we might try to change it but I found out you just pretty much keep things the same way, you do the same thing, and you don't have any problem. But I don't--I don't see that--I think the new--a whole lot of the new way of--most of the people that go into the barbecue business now, a whole lot of them, if they--we've seen them go and come. And I think sometimes it's--sometimes people think because they can cook in the backyard they can easily do commercial cooking.

00:39:22

EV: And it's something to what he's saying about sticking to--to what you were taught because you know as you get busier and you get a demand for things you try to come up with quicker ways to do things. We tried different ways of cooking the ribs and in the end we go back to cooking them the way we were. We've come up with faster ways to make the barbecue spaghetti and in the end it wasn't as good doing it faster. So you just kind of have to learn how to go back to doing what you do and just deal with the fact that it's going to take longer but it's going to be better. So we've had our--our years of try and oh this is a better of way of doing it and in the

end--your customers who have been coming here for 20 years will tell you; hey it's--it's not the same. And when they tell you that you listen to them, and if you don't you won't be in business; you have to listen to them, and you--especially the ones you know that's been in there as long as you've been running it, so--.

00:40:14

RF: Mr. Vernon do you still love to eat barbecue? Do you still eat barbecue?

00:40:19

FV: Yeah; I do. I mean we sit at the bar some days and eat you know and then some days I don't want to be bothered with it, but yeah I love it. And then you pretty much have to kind of like taste your product and make sure that it's--it's right you know and you can taste it and say well oh something ain't right here. And then if you got somebody even cooking for you and they follow your instructions you've still got to go back there and check them out and make sure you know because you don't want anything. If you--if you don't like it then you know your customers aren't going to like it you know. So and the same thing about the sauce; we make all our sauce that we serve at the BBQ Shop, we make it there. The ones that we have manufactured that's the ones we sell in the stores. So we pretty much kind of like--

00:41:08

EV: Yeah; we're the only two people who make it in the whole shop, so--. He makes it and then a lot of times I'll make it and I'll make up to 30-gallons a week but only--it's just only me and him who makes it. And that's another thing; you don't want everybody's hand in everything. You know if you have somebody that's good at making the coleslaw and try to keep them on that as

long as you can and you know when you start letting everybody do everything that's when everything starts to taste different because just even watching your grandmother cook in the kitchen, you could try to go behind and follow her, but you're still probably not doing the exact thing that she's doing. So you know--you need to limit the amount of hands that's in everything too.

00:41:52

RF: All right; one--one more question then I'll let you go. What--if you could impart one--one piece of--or what advice do you give your son? I mean you told me before we turned on the recorder that you think you'll be around for a few more years.

00:42:06

FV: Yeah; well I--I just really want him to take this business and run with it. It's a good business. I think it needs him. I think he can probably do less work than I can but yet--yet he'll still run a tight business, but you got to get in there and then do some of the things that I do but I'm not looking for him to have hands-on but you don't have to. You just need to be there to make sure it's run right and he's doing a good job of that right now. But that I think if he does that then he'll just have a great thing. I think he can follow right--you know he--he might not follow in my footsteps but he can follow in my tracks. **[Laughs]**

00:42:49

EV: **[Laughs]**

00:42:53

FV: Okay.

00:42:56

RF: That was probably a good note to end, so unless you want to add anything else but I want--I want to thank ya'll. This was very good.

00:43:01

FV: My okay thank you. [*Laughs*]

00:43:03

RF: All right; thank ya'll.

00:43:06

[End Frank & Eric Vernon-BBQ Shop Interview]