

CHARLIE ROBERTSON
Three Little Pigs Bar-B-Q – Memphis, TN

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Date: August 3, 2008
Location: Three Little Pigs Bar-B-Q – Memphis, TN
Interviewer: Rien Fertel for the Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 35 minutes
Project: Southern Barbecue Trail – Tennessee

[Begin Charlie Robertson-Three Little Pigs Interview]

00:00:02

Rien Fertel: This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is August 3, 2008 around 11:15 in the morning just after breakfast at Three Little Pigs Bar-B-Q at Quince Road in Memphis, Tennessee. I am on the Barbecue Trail; I am here with Mr. Charlie Robertson. I'm going to have him introduce himself.

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Charlie Robertson: I'm Charlie Robertson.

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RF: And your birth date please?

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CR: Oh I'm sorry; October 9, 1949.

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RF: And are you the owner of Three Little Pigs?

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CR: I am the Owner/Operator.

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RF: And how long have you been the owner of this barbecue restaurant?

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CR: For—it will be 20 years in March.

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RF: So 20 years in March, coming up on the anniversary; do you have a celebration or special plans?

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CR: We're—we're working on something. We're trying to figure out what we are going to do. We're going to do something special. We haven't figured it out yet but we're going to do something special.

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RF: So I mean I've—I've interviewed a lot of restaurants in Memphis and—and not many last 20 years. It's—it's—I guess it's a milestone. It's—it's hard to get there. *[Laughs]* Let's—let's start with the history.

00:01:11

CR: Well the restaurant has been here since '68, so the restaurant has been here longer than that. And it's just a good little neighborhood place and that's all—and—and we've got good food, we treat people right, the prices are reasonable, and that's all it takes. I mean you know that's—that's what the secret is. Mainly just treat customers right; make them feel like you appreciate their business.

00:01:34

RF: And you said 1968; was it always Three Little Pigs or—?

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CR: No; it was originally a Loeb's. Memphis had a franchise in—in here at one time named Loeb's Barbecue and there were quite a few of them. There's a bunch of these buildings still around town and it was a Loeb's up until about '82 and a man bought it by the name of Jack Whitaker and he did a little research and found out no one had that name registered, so he picked up the name Three Little Pigs. And then in '89 when I bought it we—we registered the name then and that's what it's been ever since.

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RF: And—and tell me about Loeb's. They were I guess a—a chain?

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CR: Well it was a local chain. It was actually the brother of the man who was the Mayor of Memphis. Henry Loeb was the Mayor and this was his brother that started these barbecue—and they were all just local. I don't think they ever got out of Memphis even; he might have had a few in South Haven, a little close area, but they were mostly in Memphis. And he went from barbecue places to laundry mats to convenience stores and [*Laughs*] so forth. But mainly the barbecue—they had a barbecue place everywhere.

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RF: Did you have a chance to eat at Loeb's or at this location specifically?

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CR: Oh yeah; I ate—I ate at Loeb's when I was in high school.

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RF: Oh okay.

00:02:56

CR: There was like I said, there were on just about every corner so I could eat—eat at one when I'd maybe be waiting on the school bus or something, so yeah I ate at Loeb's quite often.

00:03:05

RF: So were you born and raised in Memphis?

00:03:07

CR: Born and raised here my whole life.

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RF: And where did you grow up in Memphis?

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CR: In Northeast Memphis, area they call—refer to as Nut Bush.

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RF: Nut Bush—why is it called Nut Bush?

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CR: Well I'm not really sure; it's—it's a pretty rough area. It's over around the National Cemetery, just a rather middle-income working class of people. My dad was just a carpenter but—yeah; that's—I don't know why. I don't know it got the name Nut Bush really.

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RF: What barbecue restaurants or—or joints do you remember eating as—as a teenager, as a kid with your family or by yourself besides Loeb's?

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CR: Well Loeb's; there's Tops. Tops has got some barbecue places here in Memphis. He's got quite a few and he's been around for a long time. And there was a restaurant over on Highland called Little Pigs. Now we got mixed up with them a lot; now they're gone now. They finally sold that location and closed up but it was called Little Pigs and it was a franchise. It was Little Pigs of America actually. But they only had that one store here but those three places primarily—of course there were Leonard's. We've had a Leonard's in Memphis for a long time. Gridley's was real big here at one time. Of course Corky's is here; I've—I've eaten there a few times; the world-famous Rendezvous, which to me is the biggest rip-off in town. **[Laughs]** But you know hey how am I to criticize them; they do about 20-times what I do, so—.

00:04:37

RF: So your—were your parents ever in the restaurant business or did they cook?

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CR: No, no; they—of course my mother cooked. But no; they weren't in the restaurant business. I started working in fast-food places when I was 14. Well let me back up; now I started working in a bakery actually when I was 14—a little donut and bakery shop, and then from there I went into the fast-food places and managed Sandy's. Probably not many people remember Sandy's. Sandy's was a hamburger chain and Hardees and they finally merged but they dropped the Sandy's name. And I managed a Dairy Queen for a while, Whataburger, and then got out of it and went to work for Colonial Bakery and was delivering bread here when I found out the guy wanted to sell the place. Of course I had always thought I'd like to own a little restaurant but didn't think I ever would. But anyway the opportunity came about so we worked out the details and I ended up with a barbecue place.

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RF: What was the name of the owner who—who you bought it from?

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CR: Lynn Hobson.

00:05:42

RF: So he just—it went through a series of owners?

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CR: Always had a bunch of owners—bunch of owners. Lynn actually—the man I bought it from bought it from a young couple that had—had it and had done real well with it. Well he came in thinking that all you had to do was buy it and it'll just keep running and make you all kinds of money and you don't have to show up or do anything, which is wrong. **[Laughs]** The restaurant business is very hard and one reason I think we have been successful is because I do stay here. I stay here and watch it. If I'm not here one of my family is here, so—. It's just—that's—that's my opinion anyway.

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RF: How—you—you—well you're open seven days a week, for one, which is rare in the barbecue business in Memphis and you—you're open relatively late. Do you—how—how much do you work?

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CR: Me personally?

00:06:34

RF: Uh-hm.

00:06:37

CR: Well I'm generally here by no later than 5:00. Sometimes I'm here as early as 4:00 and can stay as late as 4:00. I always stay as late as 4:00 or 5:00 and sometimes stay 'til closing which is 9:00. So 15—16-hour days are not unusual for me. I try to get a couple days off a week which I do if everybody shows up for work. Doing breakfast makes our days long. And we do a good

breakfast. We have a really good breakfast. We do cook to order eggs; we do biscuits, gravy, country ham, it's a real southern style breakfast; it's fast but it's not a fast-food breakfast. It's priced reasonable.

00:07:18

RF: What allows you to stay open seven days and all those hours?

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CR: Well just the business is here. I mean you know we're right—I mean we're in a neighborhood and we're not up on the main drag. I mean we're not up there on Poplar Avenue but still people know we're here. I think this would be an ideal location be open 24-hours a day, but I don't want to do it. I can't find the people. It's too hard to find enough people.

00:07:42

RF: Right.

00:07:43

CR: But you know we're feeding the same neighborhood people day in and day out, day in and day out. So you know like I say—there was a time when we considered closing on Sunday 'cause Sunday was a very slow day but over the years it started picking up and picking up, so now it's the third biggest day of the week.

00:08:04

RF: Right; and it's busy—it's busy this morning.

00:08:07

CR: Oh yeah; yeah. Saturday morning—yesterday morning if you had gotten here about the same time you did you couldn't get in here. You couldn't hardly get in the door. I mean right at the last as breakfast is fixing to end it's like we've got to run; we got to hurry. **[Laughs]** Got to get breakfast.

00:08:21

RF: Yeah; you mentioned family and family works and helps you out here. What—well I was speaking with a barbecue owner outside of the city yesterday and he said—I asked him if his family members work here and he said don't ever hire family at a restaurant. **[Laughs]** What do you think about that?

00:08:36

CR: Well that can be a problem. I had my mother work for me years ago; that didn't work. That was not a good situation you know. You—you can't tell your mother what to do. I don't care if you're right—I don't care if you're signing her check or not. But when I say family it was my three boys. My grandson, who is 11 now comes over; of course he just plays and piddles, but he's still a lot of help to me. My sister and my brother both have worked for me at different times. Yeah; we get a little touchy with each other sometimes and you know mouth off and you know—but when we leave here it doesn't make any difference. We—you know they love me and I love them and they're a lot of help to me and I know I can trust them. That's a big part of it.

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RF: Right; well let's talk about the food. Do—have the recipes and the cooking processes, have they carried over from Loeb's? Have they been changed?

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CR: Basically the recipes for beans and slaw and sauce are the same recipes that were here when this was a Loeb's. I never—I never changed one recipe when I came in. I've always thought the slaw was an excellent slaw; before I ever bought this place I would come down here and buy slaw. If I needed slaw for anything I'd buy it here. The beans—the same way; the beans were really good. The sauce is not my favorite sauce. Personally I would do a different sauce but I didn't do it to suit me. You know sauce is a real controversial thing; what you think is a good sauce and I think is a good sauce, and these other 20 barbecue places and they're all good sauces, but everybody has some—wants something a little different. But the sauce was here and it was working and I left it alone.

RF: Did you ever try to change it or tweak it?

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CR: No, no; never have.

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RF: Did you ever tell customers that you—that you didn't like your sauce?

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CR: Well I didn't tell—I don't really say I don't like it. It's just not my favorite.

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RF: Not your favorite?

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CR: Yeah; like I—I want a heavier, thicker, sweeter sauce. Now what I'm fixing to tell you is what has been told to me by these barbecue geniuses. I'm not telling you this is what's right. But they say a barbecue sauce should enhance the flavor of the smoked meat. It shouldn't just be heavy and thick and smothered, like what I'm saying I like. You know they say if you get these heavy thick sauces you could basically put it on anything and you don't know whether it's a smoked piece of pork or not. So the sauce is supposed to be enhancing the smoked flavor of the meat. Evidently it works 'cause we've never had any complaints on it—never. It—like I say I just didn't think—I wasn't about to change it to suit my taste.

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RF: How would you describe the sauce here?

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CR: Little bit tart, little bit vinegary—not real vinegary and not real sour or nothing but just not—it's not real thick; it's kind of thin. We make it you know—make it here; so it's not made from scratch. We use a concentrate that we start with and then we add stuff to it, but it's not a heavy, thick, sweet sauce. Corky's is—in my opinion is a heavy, thick, sweet sauce which I actually like. It's a little hotter than I like. Our sauce is not hot either; now we have a hot sauce.

We have a hot sauce we make that's really good and it's hot. But now I'm not a hot sauce eater, so—. But our mild sauce is very mild; whereas, in my opinion, Corky's, even their mild has got a little bit of a bite to it.

00:12:06

RF: Yeah; and—and you told me you always loved the—the Loeb's slaw. Can you tell me about this—the coleslaw?

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CR: Well it's—it's a mayonnaise based slaw which a lot of barbecue places use a vinegar based slaw. It's a mayonnaise base; it's sweet. It's got a sweet flavor to it. It's just a good coleslaw. It was—we—we originally ground our own cabbage each day and did it from scratch but it got to the point where we were doing so much we couldn't do it. We're very small. If you walk back in that back room there's not room to turn around hardly so grinding cabbage was a big deal. It took up half the room, so we eventually had to start buying our cabbage already ground, which that changed the flavor of the slaw slightly. But it's still a good slaw, but it's kind of a sweet slaw.

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RF: Right; and—and these recipes that we've been talking about for the past couple minutes come from Loeb's you said. Are there any other barbecue restaurants that carry over from Loeb's? I know some other barbecue restaurants operated in old Loeb's locations, but do any continue that Loeb's tradition like you do?

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CR: I don't know; I—I really can't—I don't know—I don't know of one that does. A place that was out in Raleigh and I think they're gone now; it was called Mr. P-I-G, he was in one of the old Loeb's buildings. I think he basically used the same recipe for sauce, but seems like everybody else eventually got away from the bean recipe and the slaw recipe, which to me I thought they were both very good. We got—there's nobody that can beat us with beans. We've got one of the finest barbecue beans you'll find, because they are made from scratch. They are made from scratch with pork and beans and most of your barbecue places have gone to using Allen's Baked Bean and then they just add a little bit of stuff to it and go on, which it's okay.

00:14:00

RF: What do you do?

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CR: Well we use pork and beans. We start with pork and beans but we add sugar, brown sugar, barbecue sauce, chili powder, salt, this, that, and the other [*Laughs*] and—and—and the secret is brown meat, the brown meat from the barbecue. The outside brown, we grind it up and get it not fine but get it where it's chewable and once it gets into the beans of course the brown meat is kind of tough and chewy. A lot of people can't eat it but once it sits in those beans it soaks up that juice and that—it thickens the beans, plus it softens that—and that brown meat just gives them real good flavor.

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RF: I mean the Loeb's family is still a prominent family here. Do they ever—has anyone ever come in?

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CR: Not that I know of; not that I know of. Now there's still some of the Loeb's here in Memphis, Loeb's people but now—as a matter of fact, they're big into real estate now. If you've been around—yeah; I think—since they—if you've been around that's—they've branched out into commercial real estate—is their big thing now. They own the shopping center straight down the street. See, there's a barbecue place sitting down there that didn't even last—lasted just a little over a year, big chain—came in here from Little Rock and bought a huge building, spent a ton of money, made a nice deal out of it, but a little after a year they're gone.

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RF: Can you describe the neighborhood that we're in right now?

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CR: Well—

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RF: A part of Memphis?

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CR: Well it's just a middle class neighborhood; it's not a real big fancy neighborhood. People that live in this area, most of them have been here for years and years. It's not an area where there's a lot of turnover in housing out here. I don't have any idea what the demographics are—the income and all but you know I've—I describe our clientele as an older clientele. Like these

last few days, when the weather has been so hot and the TV people are saying stay in; stay in, well see they scare the elderly people. The elderly people get scared. You let it get snowy, we won't have anybody [*Laughs*] because they're not going to get out and take a chance on falling. So like I say, I describe our basic clientele as an older clientele say from the 50s on up.

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RF: And—and you say some people eat her every day, seven days a week?

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CR: Oh yeah a lot of them do; yeah, breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

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RF: And some people come in for three meals a day?

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CR: Oh yeah; we've got people that do that—yeah.

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RF: So we have to talk about the pork. I mean that's why I'm here. So tell me what you do; I—I understand you do shoulders.

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CR: That's all we do is shoulders. We've never—never done ribs. I say we never—we do ribs for catering; we do chicken for catering and we do spaghetti for catering, but on the menu we

basically are chopped or pulled pork. We cook nothing but shoulders; I don't cook butts. That's another controversy between barbecue people is which is better, which will yield you the best? Well in my tests and in my studies, shoulders yield better than butts do. Of course butts are going to cost you more money per pound, but we just buy a basic shoulder, put in the cooker and leave it alone. It cooks 24-hours which is an unusually long time; you don't find many people that cook that long. But what that does is melts a lot of that fat out of the middle of the meat. But now you're losing what they call yield by doing that too. Well the longer you cook it the more you melt out, the smaller and less in weight you've got. So that's another reason a lot of people won't cook that long. They don't want to lose that volume, but you've also got a greasier product. I hear people tell me the big difference they see in our barbecue and—and all the others which they're all good; you know I'm not going to sit here and knock anybody—is the fact that ours is a leaner product. It's not as greasy. And that's from cooking a long time at a low temperature.

00:18:00

RF: The—the 24-hours does it start in the morning, do you put them on, or at night?

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CR: In the morning. I loaded it this morning and I was through by about 8:30, and they won't come off 'til about 8:30 in the morning.

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RF: And how many shoulders did you put on this morning?

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CR: Thirty.

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RF: Thirty?

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CR: Thirty.

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RF: Wow.

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CR: We basically cook 30 at time. Depending on you know business and how slow it is we might cook half a batch but not very often will we do that. We pretty much can cook 30 oh five or six days a week. We'll get into peak times, we can cook 30 seven days a week and I've got an auxiliary cooker on a trailer that I have had to bring up here and cook outside on it, so—

00:18:42

RF: What—what kind of pit do you use here?

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CR: The pit we're using is manufactured by a company called Old Hickory. They're in Cape Gerardo, Missouri. It's a gas-fired pit that uses hickory wood or charcoal. We use hickory wood, which gives you your smoked flavor. We cooked on an open pit with charcoal for years and

years and years but we just outgrew it. Our pit was small and cooking on an open pit you've got deviations in temperature; it's up and down and—with this thing, this thing stays an even constant temperature so you get a more consistent product and still get a good smoked flavor in it.

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RF: Were—were you the Pit Master then; did you watch the—that charcoal pit I should say?

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CR: Well I was one of them. I mean when you got a charcoal pit everybody has got to watch it—everybody that walks by it has got to watch it, because that sucker will be fine one minute and the next minute it will flash and it will be on fire. A lot of pit fires—lot of pit fires.

00:19:43

RF: You had a lot of pit fires?

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CR: Anybody that cooks over open—open charcoal will have pit fires. You know most of the time they're real minor, don't hurt anything but if it gets out of hand then you singe that meat and then you've got that burned singe flavor that, even though you try to pick it off the outside, it's still there.

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RF: How long have you been using the old hickory?

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CR: We've had our old hickory cooker I want to say probably 12—14 years, yeah; yeah.

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RF: And did you—back then did you notice a—a change in the flavor?

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CR: Yes; there is a change in the favor. In other words, the shoulder that's cooked on an open pit over charcoal will have a different flavor. Which one is the best I'm not exactly—I'd say if you're cooking over charcoal and you do it absolutely perfect, the charcoal is probably the better way. But how many times do we do it absolutely perfect and you've got to do it day in and day out seven days—you know it's like these guys that do the barbecue contests, you know. If you haven't got anything to do but sit there and watch that pit and play with one or two shoulders for 24 hours you can cook a great shoulder. But when you're cooking 30 a day, seven days a week, and got to run another—all the other business and can't—you know you just can't do it. You can't get the consistency and the even cooking. We can load that thing and walk away pretty much and not have to worry about it. Add the wood to it periodically to keep the smoke in there and that's about all—about all we've got to do.

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RF: And it's—it's consistent and it's always—?

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CR: Oh yeah always unless the thing fails—unless for some reason the mechanical trouble which that—that’s a problem too. You do have—if it’s a piece of machinery it’ll fail sooner or later. So, but before you leave I want you to walk back there and look at it too.

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RF: Well I’ll look at it. Do you have to flip the shoulders at any point in that thing?

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CR: That’s—that’s another thing that people think you’ve got to do a lot of strange stuff. You don’t; you just lay them in there and leave them alone. You’re going to let them soak up the smoke; that’s what the flavor comes from. We don’t season them; we don’t rub them; we don’t put anything on them. We don’t baste them—just leave them alone. That’s—that’s the whole secret; put them in there and shut the door and leave them alone.

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RF: Do you cook or barbecue at home or did you before you got into this business?

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CR: I did before I did this, but never again. *[Laughs]*

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RF: What—what would you do at home? Was it on a kind of a backyard grill?

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CR: Kind of a backyard grill type thing, yeah, yeah. But see that's another thing; to cook a shoulder on a little grill is not easy to do because you—you're going to burn the outside before you get the inside done. So the piece of equipment you're cooking on has a lot to do with it.

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RF: And—and you mentioned that you don't do ribs. Can you explain why?

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CR: Well they weren't doing them when I bought it. Because of the fact of the space we have, we're limited in space; the equipment we cook on is full most of the time now. I don't know when I would cook them. And ribs fluctuate really bad in price. They're extremely high right now. I mean shoulders fluctuate some but not like ribs do. And—and I had a guy tell me who had been in the barbecue business for quite some years, we were talking about it one day and I asked him, I said you know what would you do if you were in my spot? Would you start ribs? He said let me tell you something; he said if I was in your spot and I was making good—making it a go without ribs he said I'd stay out of the ribs. He said because—he says they're just—they're expensive, you—you cook 15 slabs today and you've sold 12 of them. What are you going to do with them three slabs? Well you got to try to heat them up and sell them to somebody tomorrow? You can tell the difference. I can't sell you a fresh slab today and a day-old slab tomorrow and you not know the difference. So anyway, just—but the space is probably the main problem, the cooking space, and then you've got to have another piece of equipment to hold them in. And it's just—we're just limited back there to what we can do. So I've tried to keep the whole menu simple for that reason.

00:23:44

RF: You just mentioned the price of ribs and before we turned the tape recorder on you were talking about the—the local economy this summer and this year. How has the price of shoulders changed over the past decade or—or—?

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CR: Well believe it or not, over the last decade they're—they're about the same until the last two or three months. I'm paying more for shoulders right now than I have in years and years. Now there are—there have always been peaks; at certain times of the year pork goes up and goes right back down. It goes up—this time it's gone up, but it has not come back down. It went up around the first of May and it has stayed up there this time, so they're higher right now than they've ever been. But the average over the last decade has been pretty close to the same. It's amazing how—how close it has stayed.

00:24:35

RF: Well is the price fluctuating—or has it risen now because of gas surcharges or the price per pound has risen?

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CR: I think it's—it's—gas has got something to do with it but they say there's a bigger demand for pork right now. Chicken is high; I don't know if you—I don't know what you know about shopping or grocery store but chicken has got really high, so a lot of people have gone to eating pork. Well when they start eating pork it causes it to go up. Beef is real high, so they started

eating more pork. It's the old supply and demand; there seems to be a bigger demand for pork right now and that's driving the price up.

00:25:08

RF: And—and do you see—has your business risen this summer or kind of stayed the same?

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CR: Compared to last year we're ahead of last year. We were doing—until gas really got to jumping so fast, you know got up close to that \$4.00 range we were running pretty good, pretty—pretty well ahead of last year. But now since the gas deal it's sort of leveled off and—and that's what I attribute it to is the gas because that's just one—this is just one thing they can cut back on is eating out.

00:25:38

RF: And—and—well I mean people in Memphis love barbecue. Why do you think barbecue is so tied into Memphis?

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CR: That's a good question. That's an excellent question. I don't have an answer for that. I don't know. I mean you know it's just like why do people in the South like turnip greens and cornbread? Go to Dayton, Ohio and they look at you like you're crazy if you wanted to eat that stuff. **[Laughs]** I don't know; it just is.

00:26:01

RF: But when you were young did people eat as much barbecue as they do now in the City?

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CR: Well I don't know about in the City but I know we always ate a lot of barbecue. My mother would do barbecue—even in the winter when she couldn't get outside and cook a shoulder, she'd cook one in the oven. She just baked it in the oven at a low temperature and then make a—there again; now she'd make a heavy thick sweet sauce which is probably why I like a heavy thick sweet sauce. And once you put it on that baked shoulder it's as good a barbecue I ever eat in my life. You know you didn't know the difference.

00:26:35

RF: Yeah; I like asking what—what people's mothers and fathers used to cook and no one told me that their mother would cook shoulders. That's interesting.

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CR: Oh yeah, yeah; she always cooked shoulders. In the summer, she'd get out and cook—I mean it was a big ordeal. She'd stay up all night long watching a pit.

00:26:49

RF: What kind of pit did y'all have?

00:26:49

CR: Made out of just blocks—concrete blocks stacked up with a grate on it. And she'd have to keep the fire just right under it, and of course now she would try to roll her shoulder around—

turn it and move it but it was a big deal for—for her to cook a shoulder. But like I say, in the winter time, she'd just put it in a roasting pan and roast it in the oven and then baste it real good with that sauce and put it back in there and turn the temperature up enough to kind of brown it you know. Shoot; it was good to me. **[Laughs]**

00:27:19

RF: Did—how often did she do this in the summer—the one outside?

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CR: Oh you know over a summer we'd probably do it three or four different times, you know just depending on what was, you know for holidays and birthdays or family get-togethers. My mother cooked a lot you know. Unlike women today who don't cook very much, I mean my generation—my mother's generation cooked every day. I mean she knew she had to cook a meal every day.

00:27:44

RF: Where was this pit; was it in the backyard? It was—it was legal to have an open fire like that?

00:27:48

CR: Oh yeah; oh yeah. Yeah; you could have—whether—now you said was it legal? I don't know if it was legal. We did it. **[Laughs]** Nobody ever—I mean if you're cooking barbecue you think they're going to come arrest you? All you got to do is—is give them a barbecue. You'd be

surprised what a barbecue will get you. You can trade a barbecue for things where a \$20 would insult you, you know but you offer them a barbecue and they jump at the chance for to get that.

00:28:14

RF: You—I want—I want to ask a question. Last time that the Southern Foodways Alliance visited this restaurant back in 2002, we interviewed a woman named Helen McClendon. Is she still around?

00:28:29

CR: She has retired.

00:28:29

RF: But she is still alive?

00:28:31

CR: She is still alive and does very well. Her picture is over there on the wall. Let me think; this is '08—'07—in '06 she slipped and broke her hip on Thanksgiving Day. She got over—excuse me—she got over it fine, but she was just ready to retire. She has real bad knees; she couldn't walk very well anyway and she just decided to go ahead and retire, but she's in good health. If you saw her you wouldn't think there was a thing in the world wrong with her, but that lady was wonderful—was here 38 years. And there was a time when she was the only one that was allowed to make beans and slaw and sauce—the only one. She's the only one that had—I didn't even have the recipes for a long time. But as business grew it got to where she couldn't do it; she just physically—she tried. She tried; she'd stay—I've had her stay here all night long doing stuff

and—and it wasn't that I told her to. She just thought she had to do this, you know. It's her responsibility. But yeah; she's—she's a wonderful person. But I've got a lot of people that have been with me a long time—nobody near as long as she did, but—.

00:29:37

RF: Did—who taught you how to cook the meat? Was it back in the—the—?

00:29:41

CR: Helen.

00:29:43

RF: Oh she did? So she was the—kind of Pit Cook too?

00:29:45

CR: Oh yeah; I mean I had worked in fast-food places, hamburger places, Dairy Queen, but never in a barbecue. I didn't know one flipping thing about cooking a shoulder. So Helen taught me; yeah she would determine—you know she would tell me when to put them off and when to take them off, when not to do this, and of course it's not rocket science. I mean it's pretty simple. Once you get started, and of course once we changed to that equipment we've got now, it's almost fool-proof. I mean you couldn't mess it up if you—well I ain't going to say you couldn't mess it up if you tried; you could but—anyway.

00:30:20

RF: How could you mess it up if—?

00:30:22

CR: Well by not making sure the temperature was set properly, making sure the timers are not on; it's got a timing mechanism where it's going to stay at this temperature so long and then drop to another temperature after a while, not turn the rotisserie on. With the rotisserie running this thing is constantly basting. The shoulder is dripping, so the shoulders are always nice and moist and wet.

00:30:45

RF: The shoulders actually drip on each other?

00:30:46

CR: On each other and if you want something really good you put you a turkey in there with them. Put one turkey in there and that pork grease is basting that—you know how a turkey tends to get dry anyway? But that pork grease tends to baste it and the outside gets this little crust on it to where the juice is stuck inside; it's great. It's really good.

00:31:08

RF: Before—just a few more questions; before you—when we started the interview you mentioned that one of the previous owners tried to do this restaurant on the whim and that the restaurant business is hard. What is the hardest part about running the restaurant?

00:31:20

CR: Well the long hours; there again this is my opinion. The way I run one I think you need to be there and you need to stay there. A lot of people don't, but there's a lot of them that are not successful at it either, so it's long hours and your help is your big problem. And that's everybody's problem. Any business you talk—anybody that owns any kind of business, the help is their problem—keeping enough help and keeping good help. But probably the worst part about it is the long hours especially when you're open seven days a week.

00:31:56

RF: So what makes your barbecue special? Why do people eat here every day and keep coming back?

00:32:01

CR: Well it's consistent; I hear that a lot. I hear people—you know I'll have people come in and say you know I lived here 25 years ago and that barbecue still tastes the same, still you know—. And—and that's I think consistency is important in any restaurant, anything—I mean you—. McDonald's—you can eat at McDonald's here in Memphis or you can go to Los Angeles, and you're going to basically get the same hamburger. I mean that's—and I think that's important. So I think the consistency; I think the way we treat people—that has—that's a big factor. We're—it's a neighborhood place; it's a friendly place. Yeah; I've got some—like everybody I've got a few employees that tend to get an attitude occasionally but I won't put up with it you know. It's just not part of the deal. And they just like it; they just like the atmosphere, so—. I don't know if you noticed that picture up there—see that's what the building originally looked like. That's the way all your Loeb's looked like. All of this—where these poles were that was all glass.

00:33:03

RF: It's like glass walls.

00:33:05

CR: Yeah; this blue tile was actually the sidewalk around the outside of the building. So you'd be sitting in here in this glass and this place was like an oven in the summertime and freeze you in the wintertime. So in '99 it's when we remodeled it and changed it; now see the other picture behind you over there—see? That's what it looks like now. But and it's—it's just—it's comfortable. You can come in any way you want to, dressed anyway reasonable. We've decorated it cute I think for a barbecue place—nothing big and fancy but cute, so—.

00:33:44

RF: And—and I mean we're surrounded by all these pigs. These come from customers as I understand?

00:33:48

CR: Almost all of them come from customers and I've got plenty of them. I've got boxes of them. I—I don't even know where to—

00:33:54

RF: You have them in storage too? [*Laughs*]

00:33:55

CR: I don't even have near enough room for all of them. As a matter of fact I gave a lady some this past week. She contacted me and she was wanting to buy those plates. Will you sell those plates over there? That's a collector edition I bought quite a few years ago. And she wanted to buy them. And I said no; they're not for sale. Well she went into this long story about she was a collector of pigs and she was doing her kitchen and she'd just love to have anything I had with pigs. I said well I can fix you up with some pigs. **[Laughs]** So I gave her a couple of boxes of stuff—whole set of dishes that were pigs. But no; most all of this stuff comes from customers. They'll take a vacation and they'll see something with a pig on it and they'll bring it to us.

00:34:34

RF: Right; so what do you see as the future for Three Little Pigs Bar-B-Q?

00:34:38

CR: Basically to—to stay like we are; just we're going to stay a neighborhood place. We're not going to become a nationwide chain I don't think. I have had people discuss the possibilities of franchising it out, but I mean if they did it would be up to them and not up to me. I'm not interested; I've reached a point in my life where I'm ready to slow down. I don't want to take on more headaches. But I—I think as long as we continue to serve good food, treat people right—I think we'll have a business here as long as we want one. That's my opinion.

00:35:16

RF: Good; well I want to thank you very much. That was very good.

00:35:20

CR: Thank you.

00:35:20

RF: Thank you, sir.

00:35:24

[End Charlie Robertson-Three Little Pigs Interview]