

Joe Capello
City Market—Luling, Texas

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&
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[BEGIN INTERVIEW]

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Gavin Benke: All right. Hi, this is Gavin Benke on July 9, 2007. We are in Luling, Texas at City Market interviewing Mr. Joseph Capello. Mr. Joseph Capello, for the record, could you please give your birthday and then we'll get started.

Joe Capello: April 4, 1947.

GB: OK, excellent. The first couple questions we wanted to ask were about your own involvement in barbecue. And then we'll start from there and then move on to Luling and the City Market in general. So, if you could, start out by telling us how you first became involved in barbecuing.

JC: Let's see. Started out there in the parking lot hauling watermelons and I decided it was kind of hard work. So, I came into the barbecue business and started cleaning out, cleaning tables and then ended up running the place. So—

GB: So, I take it to mean that you learned how to barbecue at the City Market?

JC: I learned the trade here at the market, just started as a table cleaner.

GB: And who here taught you how to make barbecue?

JC: It was Howard Ellis. He was a—he started at Kreuz and he came down here and opened the place with Mr. Ellis, his uncle.

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GB: So this place has a sort of a connected history with Lockhart barbecue?

JC: Yeah, with Kreuz Market.

GB: OK, great. So, has—so, I guess the City Market has always been in the Ellis family?

JC: They started, and they still own it.

GB: OK, great. I guess the next question with that is, um, how would you say City Market barbecue is prepared? I can rephrase the question if you—

JC: You mean, how do we fix our food or? Well, it's a—it's not a—hmmmm. First of all, we got to start real early in the morning. And the meat's already seasoned, and we get our pits going, and then we just throw it on the pit and make sure it has a consistent fire and—hmmmm [pauses]. That's tough. Has a consistent fire and a [pauses]—and—[laughs].

00:03:52

GB: Maybe that question was a bit too broad. What—do you use a certain type of wood?

JC: Yeah, we use post oak. And it's a—we prefer that—post oak to mesquite, because it doesn't burn as hot as mesquite. Mesquite burns real hot. So, so, post oak has more consist—it's more consistent with post oak.

00:04:20

GB: OK. And then is there a special way you all season the meat?

JC: No, we just use salt and pepper and that's it. We got—we season it over night. So, maybe that's part of the secret.

GB: OK. And I know City Market's known for meat that's so tender that you don't need a fork to eat it. Is that—do you get that by cooking, cooking it for a long time or seasoning it a certain way?

JC: No, that a, that has nothing to do with the seasoning, that's just the way you cook it. You got to, you just got to know when to, to you know, when to move it away from the fire.

GB: So, you sort of pay a lot of attention to how long things have been on there and sort of constantly checking up on your meats?

JC: Well, see, what you do is you start it out on the, on the hot part of the pit, which is the front of the pit. And then once, from there you move to the back of the pit and just let it sit there and that's how it, that's how it becomes tender.

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GB: OK, great. And then is that for the brisket or do you, do you have that same method for cooking other types of meat like the sausage that you all serve here?

JC: No, just for the brisket and ribs. The sausage we just—it's cooked with oak also, but we use it on a rotisserie. We cook it on a rotisserie.

GB: OK. And you make the sausage here yourselves?

JC: We make our own sausage.

GB: Could you tell us something a little bit about that process? Or—

JC: Well, the sausage is kind of tricky because of a, you know, it's kind of like a guessing game. You got a formula for it, but the meat's always changing on you so you just have to look at the meat and decide, "Well, is this cut too fat or too lean?" And then, from there, you just decide what your formula's going to be. But it's really, it's a, it's kind of hard to be consistent on the sausage because your cuts of meat are always changing. But usually we get it pretty close, so.

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GB: Thank you. And then if we could talk about the sides for a minute. Do you all make your own sides here?

JC: We cook our own beans, but, uh, we order our potato salad. We don't make our own potato salad. So—

GB: All right. And then with the sauce, do you have a secret recipe for the sauce? Or how is that made?

JC: Yeah, the sauce, that belongs to, uh, Thelma Ellis, and that, uh, that was my boss man's mother. She's the one that had the recipe and, uh, I don't know where she got it from, but it goes back fifty years. That's how long we've been in business and that's how long we've had it. So, everybody's crazy about the sauce. I don't know what—it's just something about putting the sauce on your sausage. It just gives it a certain taste to it. So, we sell a lot of sauce.

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GB: And you mention that it's a recipe that goes back fifty years or so. Have all the recipes and the seasonings and the way the sausage is made—does all that go back or has it changed over the years?

JC: It's still the same recipes. We haven't changed anything.

GB: All right. Great. So, you mentioned that you start cooking really early. Is there a specific time you all start cooking your meats?

JC: Oh, we usually start about five in the morning during the week and Saturdays we start about three-thirty, four o'clock.

GB: OK, and then if we could talk maybe a little bit how—what kind of a role City Market plays in Luling. It's been here for a long time. It's been in this specific building since 1958. Is that about right?

JC: Well, no. It started—we been here in this building about the mid-sixties. They started in the middle of the next block, so. And then they moved down here in the larger place. So, but altogether we been here like fifty years.

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GB: And when did you come to work for them?

JC: I started like in 1964. I guess when I was like twelve, fourteen years old.

GB: And it really is a staple of the community. What kind of a role do you think it plays in the community? How many—what—who comes to eat here?

JC: We get all the locals and then we get a lot of people that are traveling to the coast and the people that are traveling from Houston to San Antonio and then San Antonio to Houston because they're on I-10. We get a lot of traffic off the I-10 highway—interstate highway.

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GB: And you mentioned a lot of traffic from Houston, which brings us to a specific sort of a connection with Houston which would be the Luling City Market in Houston. Could you maybe tell us a little bit about the, uh, this restaurant's sort of connection or lack of a connection to that in Houston?

JC: The only connection we have with City Market in Houston is that Mr. Ellis had a nephew that worked here. And he went up there with some partners and they opened it up, but, uh, other than that, we don't have any connection with them at all. It's, it—they use the same—how do you call it—I guess, same format, but it's different. And actually I think they, they, by him doing that, it helped business because more people became aware that we were in Luling. And so, on the way to San Antonio they stopped here to eat. So, they did us a favor, I guess, by doing that.

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GB: Do you sometimes have people coming in from Houston who think they're stopping at the same place or do they seem to—does it help with Houston as well?

JC: Yeah, we get customers who stop in here and think that we're connected to them, but we tell them, “No, that they just took the same name we have.” So—

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GB: OK, I guess talking about Luling and other places, you also mentioned that you were from Lockhart and that, that the Ellis family was originally from Lockhart and learned how to barbecue from Kreuz Market there. What's—does Luling City Market, I'm sorry, City Market in Luling have—how does it still remain connected to Lockhart?

JC: How are we connected to Lockhart? *[Pauses]* I guess the only connect I can see is that we're *[Pauses]*—they been around longer than have, but we're mentioned when they talk about barbecue, we're mentioned in, uh, how can I say this? *[Pauses]* I guess I can—we're in the same

class as they are. They talk about Lockhart and Elgin and Taylor and they also mention Luling. So, I think we've come a long way.

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GB: Do you feel that Luling has had to work a little bit harder to make a name for itself in terms of barbecue or has it, being this close to Lockhart, has it helped things out a little bit?

JC: Yeah, I think what helps Lockhart a lot is that they're closer to Austin and we're more, uh, just kind of, like, out of their reach. But over the years we've gotten a lot of more trade out of Austin and so, I feel that they'll, they, the people from Austin will drive a few more miles to, uh, get our barbecue. So we feel pretty good about that.

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GB: OK, thank you very much for that question. I guess another question would be more with Luling, is certainly known for watermelon, and then there's the big Watermelon Thump every year. Could you talk about how City Market is involved in the Watermelon Thump?

JC: Uh, that's a—*[Laughs]*. Watermelon Thump, that's something that we are glad when it's over with. It's, it's really a lot of preparation for that one day, and, uh, and we get people from all over. And, uh, and I kind of sometimes feel that, are people really coming for the Watermelon Thump or are they coming for City Market barbecue? And, uh, and it just goes hand-in-hand with the watermelon. People come in the get the watermelon and get the barbecue at the same time.

GB: When I stopped at a farmer's market a few weeks ago here someone told me that that Watermelon Thump was coming up that the line would just be down the block and around the block. Is that usually the case when it's the Watermelon Thump?

JC: Yes, it's, uh, once we open at seven that morning, and at six thirty, seven we still have a line all day long and it's just a lot of people to serve.

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GB: And then when we talked on the phone, it also seemed like the Fourth of July was also going to be busy. Is that usually a busy time of year for City Market as well?

JC: Yes, it's, uh, Fourth of July is also real busy because, uh, people having a lot of reunions and everybody wants to, uh, take sausage home when they go back. So, we're just busy making sausage. And, uh, as it is, we're just trying to catch up from the Watermelon Thump and the Fourth of July's come right around the corner. So, we're just real busy trying to keep up.

GB: You mentioned that people take sausage away, and earlier you also mentioned people like to buy the sauce as well. Does City Market do a lot of that, basically selling materials for outside the store as opposed to selling meals in the restaurant?

JC: OK, how is that again now?

GB: Sorry. In terms of selling things that people can take out of the restaurant, like sausage to cook at home or sauce to cook at home, is that a big part of City Market's business?

JC: In the summertime, it's a big business. It's people coming in just to, uh, take sausage and their sauce to barbecue to fix for their families at home during the holiday.

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GB: You said that happens a lot more during the summer than opposed to other times of year?

JC: Yes, it, it's—usually summer's like bad, and then the next big sausage—when we sell a lot of sausage is during Thanksgiving and Christmas. We sell a lot of sausage during that time too.

GB: Is it just the sausage you guys sell or do you end up selling beef as well and ribs?

JC: Beef and ribs also. But it's, that's, it's not very hard to do, but having to make sausage, that's, uh, major labor intense. As far as the brisket and ribs, they're already cut and everything. All we have to do is season them and cook them. But the sausage, we actually have to put it all together and grind them and, uh, cook them, chill them, and then have to box them up. So, that's one of the main things is having to have sausage on hand for the customers.

GB: And then, I guess, would you say then that sausage is what the City Market's known for or is it the brisket?

JC: Hmmmm, I'll probably say it's fifty-fifty between sausage and brisket and ribs. But, uh, we have a harder time keeping up with the sausage than we do the rest. So, it seems that we're selling too many sausage, but it's really not that. It's just that it's a lot of labor in it.

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GB: And about how many people does it take to keep the City Market running, say during the busy season?

JC: We have like, uh, twenty employees. But I guess fifteen full-time and five part-time.

GB: And you mention you've been here a while. Has, uh, has the City Market, has the Ellis family been able to keep people for a long time, working for City Market?

JC: Yeah, most of the people that are working here right now are people are, I would say, long-timers. I have two that have been here thirty years apiece and one who's been here twenty-five. I have two ladies who have been here thirty years apiece. So, yeah, we have employees that, uh, that are loyal and they've been here a long time.

GB: There's sort of a lot of City Market that hasn't changed over the years. The building, you guys have been here since the sixties, and the recipes haven't changed, and a lot the employees have been here for a long time. What about the actual pits themselves? Is it the same pit that's been used continuously or did you update the way in which you all—the actual pits?

JC: The actual pits that we started off with are now used for – for keeping things warm. We no longer cook in them, but we have built newer pits where most of the cooking's done now. We've just outgrown the pits that were originally built.

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GB: They were too small? They couldn't handle all the volume, basically?

JC: They're just too small.

GB: And that's—was that about the time when, uh, when City Market moved to this location to, I guess, accommodate more people?

JC: No. That was, uh, probably, the mid-eighties. After that, we started—business started increasing and we had to build newer pits to keep up with the volume.

GB: And did you all build the pits yourselves or is there someone who built the pits for you all?

JC: No, we had somebody build the pits for us. It's, uh, they're what we call portable pits. If you have to move them, you can actually just pick them up and move them out of the building. They're not surrounded by brick or anything.

GB: OK. That sounds good. I guess could we also ask about the sign out front that said "Bar E" right above City Market. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

JC: OK, the Ellis's have always been in the cattle business. And we used to slaughter our own meat when we first started. And the name of the ranch was Bar E. So they incorporated and used that name as the corporation, doing business as City Market.

00:24:44

GB: So, you all used to slaughter your own cattle. About how long did that go on for? When did you stop doing that?

JC: Let's see. We did—I don't quite remember, but we did it up until the slaughterhouse burned down. It used to be in the, right in back of our business and, uh, the slaughterhouse burned down and, uh, the city wouldn't, uh—well, I don't know if the city wouldn't let them rebuild it because it was inside the city limits. So, that was kind of like, the end of that. So, no more slaughterhouses and—

GB: Was the slaughterhouse right in back of this restaurant or the other one?

JC: The other one. But it's right in the back alley there.

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GB: And so, do the Ellis's still own where the beef comes from or is there a different supplier for the beef now?

JC: No. We no longer slaughter any of our cattle. And it's all prepackaged and bought from different vendors.

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GB: And could you give us a time frame of when that, when that fire occurred and when the slaughterhouse burned down?

JC: I don't know. Time goes by so fast. But I think it was probably in the late eighties. Yeah, it's, uh, but I'm really not sure. It just—

GB: All right. Next we could talk about other aspects to City Market—is one the no forks. Has that always been the case or have there ever been forks used to eat the meat here?

JC: No. The no forks, I don't know why, but it's always been just knives. Actually, when we started out, we used to have knives that were chained to the tables. But we had to do away with that, and we just started using plastic knives.

GB: Why were the knives chained to the tables and why did you guys have to stop doing that?

JC: Well, the knives were chained to the tables to keep customers from walking off with them, probably. But why we had to get rid of them, I really don't know. I think it's just the convenience of using throw-away knives and not having to worry about anybody cutting themselves with the knives because they were pretty sharp. So that way, we're on the safe side, using the plastic knives. That's the only thing I can think of.

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GB: And then, I see people walking here back with butcher paper. And I guess that's always been the case is you've always served with butcher paper?

JC: It's always been butcher paper. There was a time when for some reason there was a shortage of the butcher paper. And we actually used paper plates, but it didn't last too long, maybe four or five months. Until they got the supply back online for whatever it was.

GB: What about your own preferences for barbecue? What do you think is the best way to eat barbecue?

JC: OK, you say that again now?

GB: What's your favorite barbecue to eat: the brisket, or the ribs, or the sausage?

JC: I'm a sausage man. I just, I like sausage with crackers and a piece of onion, a piece of cheese and that's, that just—I've always been a sausage man.

00:29:30

GB: And that's just pork sausage all across or other kinds of sausage?

JC: No. Just the beef sausage.

GB: And then in terms of what to serve it with. You guys obviously have the sides. But in terms of drinks, what would you say is the best to drink with barbecue? Or what do your customers seem to prefer?

JC: Our customers prefer Big Red. It's, uh, I would say strawberry flavored. And why they like that with barbecue, I don't know. But we sell a lot of Big Red. And you come in here on a typical day and almost everybody has a bottle of Big Red on the table with their food.

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GB: And I guess we could also talk about the barbecue restaurant across the street, across [US Highway] 183 there. How has that affected City Market, having the barbecue right next door?

JC: Uh, it, it really has no effect on our business. They, they, kind of, it's more like a cafeteria style. And they have customers that like that, but it really doesn't affect our business in anyway.

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GB: OK. And I guess just one, a couple more questions. One is sort of looking for background information and I found an article by Robb Walsh, who said he had managed to hold a little party here when he published his book. Does that kind of thing happen a lot? Do you find that City Market is sort of taken as representative of Texas barbecue or central Texas barbecue?

JC: It's, he's one of our, I guess, we're one of his favorite places to eat because he's always recommended us. He even had the, I don't know what they call it, but they have some kind of wine festival in Austin. I don't know what the name of it is, but he had them invite me over there to represent the barbecue. I don't even remember what they—so, he thinks of us very highly, I assume, and he had his book signing here at the market. So, we thought that was great.

00:33:06

GB: Have there been other events like that in the past or has it been just the one?

JC: Well, we had—*Texas Monthly*'s always writing about us. And they do a big layout every—well, I don't know, it seems like maybe every few years. And we've had people who are doing cookbooks and they're always talking about us. So, I think that speaks very highly of us.

GB: OK, great.

Eric Covey: I have some follow up questions when you're done.

GB: Yeah, absolutely. Is that OK if Eric asks some questions?

EC: OK. So the Ellis's, they've had this cattle business and the slaughterhouse. Has City Market always operated just as a barbecue restaurant or did ever also operate as a meat market or anything like that?

GB: It was a meat market and a grocery store, and then the barbecue was served in the back.

00:34:24

EC: How long has it been pretty much exclusively a restaurant for?

JC: I would say probably twenty-five years.

EC: So quite a while. Now the Ellis family, do they still live here in Luling?

JC: Some of them do, but their ranch is in McMahan, so that's where Mr. Ellis stays.

EC: And do you see any of them in here very often?

JC: Oh, they're here all the time.

EC: OK, and you said you've worked here since 1964. When did you become the manager of the market?

JC: I started to manage when I got out of the service in '69. And he just said, "OK, it's yours to manage. So take care of it."

EC: And have you lived your whole life in Luling? I mean, were you born here and grew up here?

JC: No. Actually I live in Lockhart.

EC: Oh, I see, you live in Lockhart. OK. Well, I guess then, you spend a lot of time in Luling, so I guess maybe you can answer from your perspective how things in Luling have changed since you first came to City Market.

JC: Actually, Luling hasn't changed much, but gotten smaller instead of larger because when I started, kind of, the oil boom was going on. And when that dried up, a lot of the companies

moved out. So, when the companies went, the people went with them. So the population actually has gone down since then.

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EC: And what about this little downtown strip that City Market's on. Has that always kind of been like it is now? Or has it been busier with more tenants and businesses?

JC: Yes, it used to be real busy. But like I say, when the oil companies started leaving, the department stores start closing down. And now it's just thrift shops in there, antique shops.

EC: OK. And just a couple of questions about the stuff here. How is the sausage? Sausage is really big in Texas, in Elgin, Lockhart, and here in Luling also. How's the sausage here in City Market different than or maybe the same as other places?

JC: I think the sausage is the same, except, uh, I figure the ingredients are the same also. It's just I think how you prepare it. People like one or the other.

EC: OK. And what about shipping your products? Do you ship products to places in the US or abroad or anywhere?

JC: No, we don't do any shipping.

00:37:33

EC: I guess my final question, unless Gavin has any others, as far as you know, what's the farthest that anyone's come to eat barbecue here at City Market?

JC: I guess I would say Russia. Yeah, we get people from Russia and Germany. And we had some Chinese people also, so.

EC: All right. Do you have any other questions, Gavin?

GB: I guess is there any—are there any things we forgot to ask or any final things you'd like to say about City Market, or barbecue, or Luling?

JC: I guess, you know. I've been here a long time and I've seen a lot of people come and go. But some of the customers that I started out with when I was younger are still coming. So that just makes me feel like we're doing a great job, and they haven't forgotten about us. So, it's just a great feeling to see them coming back to where they originally started eating barbecue.

GB: OK. Thank you very much.

[END]

00:39:04